THE LAW OF MOSES:
MORAL, CEREMONIAL AND CIVIL

Billy Bland

Billy Bland is a native of Mississippi. He is married to the former Terry Collums. Bland is a graduate of the Memphis School of Preaching and Southern Christian University in Montgomery, Alabama. He is an Instructor and Administrative Dean at Memphis School of Preaching, in Tennessee. Bland is one of the elders at the Coldwater Church of Christ in Mississippi where he preached for twelve years. He is Chairman of the Board of Four Seas College of the Bible and Missions in Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

God, our Creator, in His great mercy has communicated with man, His creation. In time past, He communicated in various ways. “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). He used divers or diverse manners, such as audible voice, dreams, visions, et cetera, to communicate His Word to the prophets of old. He also has communicated with us today—“Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Heb. 1:2).

God has chosen to communicate His will to us by means of words. These words are recorded for us in the pages of the Bible. Words are vehicles of communication. Since God has chosen words as the method of communicating His will to us, we should study His book as we do other books. By that, it is meant that we should apply the same methods of study to God’s Word that we would do to any other book. We do not learn about History simply by opening the book at any page and beginning to read. There is a system, a rightly dividing of the book, to help us understand what is written.

Likewise, when one begins to read the Bible, he should make sure he rightly divides the Word of God. The Word of God, the Bible did not simply drop down out of the sky overnight. It was given over a period of many years, by many different writers dealing with many different subjects. Paul admonished Timothy: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly
dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Timothy was to rightly divide or handle aright the Word of God. Implied in this statement is the fact that the Word of God can be handled incorrectly. Truth seekers, however, do not wish to mishandle the Word of God; rather, they wish to come to a correct understanding and application of God’s Word. “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:31-32).

Our present study has to do with that section of God’s Word known as the Law of Moses. In this law given to Moses, there were laws pertaining to moral, ceremonial and civil matters. It is hoped that by the end of this section, one will have a better understanding of, and a greater appreciation for, the Word of God.

MORAL, CEREMONIAL AND CIVIL LAWS

In order to understand the moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Law of Moses, it is beneficial to define the meaning of these words. When used as an adjective, Oxford dictionary defines “moral” as “concerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character.” When used as a noun, it defines “morals” as “standards of behavior, or principles of right and wrong.”2 The words “ceremony” or “ceremonial” carry the idea of observing or celebrating a particular event. They come from the Latin word *caerimonia* which means “religious worship.”3 “Civil” comes from the Latin *civis*, which is derived from *civis*, meaning “citizen.”4 Consequently, when speaking of the moral law, one is describing the principles of right or wrong in a person’s behavior. When describing ceremony it has to do with the various acts of worship and/or service for a particular reason. The civil law has to do with the obligation one has toward others due to belonging to a particular group of people.

Interestingly, the Catholic Encyclopedia gives a fairly good definition (and distinction) of the moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Law of Moses. It states:

The Divine law of the Old Testament, or the Mosaic Law, is commonly divided into civil, ceremonial, and moral precepts. The civil legislation regulated the relations of the people of God among themselves and with their neighbours; the ceremonial regulated matters of religion and the worship of God; the moral was a Divine code of ethics.5
A problem, however, arises when people misunderstand the design and end of the law and think that some of these laws were “brought over” into the New Testament for Christian practice. One source observed:

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) divides the Mosaic laws into three categories: moral, civil, and ceremonial. In the view of the Westminster divines, only the moral laws of the Mosaic Law, which include the Ten Commandments and the commands repeated in the New Testament, directly apply to Christians today. Ceremonial laws, in this view, include the regulations pertaining to ceremonial cleanliness, festivals, diet, and the Levitical priesthood.6

In defining the moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Law of Moses, it is sometimes affirmed that the moral law, specifically the Ten Commandments are “brought over” into the New Testament. This matter will be dealt with in the next section.

God’s moral laws are necessary for man, because man is a moral being. He was created with morality. Man has always had moral laws from God, whether he lived during the Patriarchal, Mosaic, or Christian Dispensations. Moral laws are always binding upon man due to the nature of man. An example of this is the command not to murder. It has always been sinful for man to murder another human being. This law is stated in the Ten Commandments, not because it became sinful to murder after the Ten Commandments were given, but because it has always been wrong to murder. Consequently, it is given in the Ten Commandments. It was sinful for Cain to kill Abel long before the Ten Commandments were given.

An example of the Ceremonial law is the law God gave to Israel to observe the Passover Feast, Feast of Fruits and/or the Feast of Tabernacles. These all are described in the Book of Leviticus with special instructions relative to the animals which were to be sacrificed, and the manner in which they were to be offered.

The Civil laws describe the judicial and civil duties of the citizens of Israel as God’s people. Such laws dealt with what punishment was to be carried out on one if he was guilty of violating the Law of Moses. Other aspects of the civil law dealt with land inheritances, the year of Jubilee, et cetera. Basically, the civil law under the Mosaic Law was God governing His people under the government of the Law of Moses. Today, the church is not the civil law of God. If a person kills another
person, the church does not carry out the punishment (such as life in prison or capital punishment). Such punishment is to be carried out by the State or civil government, not the church (cf. Rom. 13). This is not to say that God does not have anything to say to civil government today, for He does! God has authorized three institutions over which He gives directions. They are the home (Gen. 2:21-25), the church (Eph. 1:22-23), and the government (Rom. 13). Government officials should realize they are acting as God’s servants in administering God’s civil laws (Rom. 13:4). Christians are admonished of God to obey the higher powers, the government. Paul wrote:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake (Rom. 13:1-5).

Although not actually a part of our study, it should be also noted that God at times gave what has been termed as a “positive law.” This is when God gave a specific commandment to a person or a group of persons which was not necessarily intended to be repeated in other persons or generations. An example of God’s “positive law” is when He commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14). Abraham was the only person so commanded and, today, it would be sinful for us to offer our children as a sacrifice.

**MISUSES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE**

Whether intentionally or unintentionally people at times misuse the Old Testament in order to establish “authority” for some practice they wish to perform. It should be clearly understood that people today are *not under the Law of Moses* as their law. The writer of Hebrews stated it succinctly when he wrote: “Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of
Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:9-10). One should take notice that Christ took away the first will (the Old Testament), that He might establish the second (the New Testament). If He did not take away the first, then, we are not under the second! However, if He took away the first (and he did!), then, we are under the second. Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote: “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4). Christians are “dead to the law.” We are married to another, that is to Jesus Christ, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

In spite of the fact that the Word of God says we are not under the Law of Moses (i.e., the Old Testament), some still will either go to the Old Testament to “prove” authorization for some practice today, or, they will simply misuse the Old Testament. The Sabbatarians have tried to make a distinction between “the Law of Moses” and the “Law of the Lord.” In an attempt to bind Sabbath keeping, i.e., the observance of the seventh day of the week (Saturday) as opposed to the first day of the week (Sunday), it has been argued that the Law of Moses was the ceremonial law and the Law of the Lord is the moral law, which included the Ten Commandments. Then it is affirmed that the law that was taken away was the Law of Moses (the ceremonial), and not the Law of the Lord (the moral law). Now, since the Ten Commandments are the law of the Lord and the command to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy is a part of the Ten Commandments, then (it is alleged) Sabbath keeping is binding for us today.

One of the major problems with such reasoning is that God does not make the distinction between the Law of the Lord and the Law of Moses. In fact, God proves there is no such distinction. Notice the following statement from Luke.

And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons (Lk. 2:21-24).
Attention is called to the fact that the “Law of Moses” (v. 22) is used interchangeably with “the Law of the Lord” (v. 23). Also, the sacrifices that are described above would come under the ceremonial aspect of God’s law. Yet, those sacrifices were to be offered in keeping with “the Law of the Lord” in verse 23. But, according to the Sabbatarians, this would have had to be the Law of Moses (since that is supposed to be the ceremonial law—the sacrifices). The point is the Sabbatarians are in error on the supposed distinction. The Law of Moses and the Law of the Lord are used interchangeably.

The New Testament specifically states the type of music Christians are to use in worship unto God. Paul wrote: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Likewise, to the Colossians, he wrote: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). One may search the rest of the New Testament and he will see that in every occasion where music is described in New Testament worship to God, God specifies “singing.” Singing (vocal music) is the only type of music God desires in New Testament worship. When confronted with this information, some will reply, but what about David? Did not David and others in the Old Testament use mechanical instruments of worship? The answer is: “Yes.” David and others did use mechanical instrumental music in worship to God. All one has to do is turn to such passages as Psalm 150 and read: “Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals” (Ps. 150:3-5). But, we ask: “Did not David and others offer animal sacrifices?” “Did not David and others under the Old Testament make three trips each year to Jerusalem to keep the feasts of unleavened bread, firstfruits, and Tabernacles?” The answer has to be: “Yes.” Why, then, do we not offer animal sacrifices, and make three trips to Jerusalem as commanded under the Law of Moses? It is because, we are not under the Law of Moses! Also, It is very revealing that one has to go to David and the others in the Old Testament to find instrumental music! If proponents of instrumental music could find it in the New Testament, they would readily point such out to us! By the very fact they must go to the Old Testament
proves that it is not in the New Testament! The very fact that I happen to like instrumental music is not authorization for its use in New Testament worship. I happen also to like steak, but such is no authorization for using it in New Testament worship. It is sinful to add any item God has not authorized into New Testament worship.

In reality, most people who misuse the Law of Moses (again either intentionally or unintentionally), do not wish to keep all the law. They want only whatever item from the Old Testament in which they wish to engage. This is not possible. In Paul’s day, the Judaizers wanted to bind circumcision on New Testament Christians. The apostle Paul wrote to countermand such actions. Some Christians in the region of Galatia were being carried away with this teaching. Paul wrote: “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). If people were going to go back to the Old Testament and attempt to bring over circumcision and bind it on New Testament Christians, they could not just bring over circumcision. Logically, they would be “debtors to do the whole law.” The same reasoning applies to today. If one is going to bring over Sabbath keeping, et cetera, then he is debtor to do the whole law. Paul shows the danger of trying to bind Old Testament practices on New Testament Christians. He wrote: “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4).

“But,” someone may ask, “were not some of the Old Testaments commandments brought over into the New Testament?” The answer is: “No!” No laws from the Old Testament were brought over to the New Testament. Someone may ask: “Is it okay then, for us to steal, kill, et cetera, today if we are not under the Ten Commandments?” Again, the answer is: “No, it is not okay to kill, steal, etc. today.” But the reason it is sinful is because the New Testament condemns these actions. It must be kept in mind that these things were sinful even before the Ten Commandments were given on Mount Sinai! An illustration might help in understanding this matter. At one time, the people occupying the land now known as the United States were under British rule. It was wrong, under British rule, to steal from the government. It is also wrong, under the constitution of the United States of America, to steal from the government. But we ask, was the law against stealing brought over from British law to our current law? Are we still under British law here in the United States? The answer is: “No!” We have a completely
separate set of laws. The Constitution of the United States is not simply an amendment of the law of England. The United States has its own law. So it is with the New Testament. The New Testament is "new." It is not an amendment of the Old Testament. Jeremiah prophesied the day was coming when God would make a new covenant that would not be according to the old covenant. He wrote:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

This passage is quoted twice in the Book of Hebrews with application made to the New Testament.

OLD TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT APPLICATIONS

The same apostle who so plainly teaches that we are not under the Law of Moses as our law, also teaches there are principles from the Old Testament that find application to us who are under the New Testament. Paul wrote: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). These that were written aforetime were written for our learning. We can learn great lessons from the Old Testament. New Testament writers often used Old Testament incidents to teach, as well as to warn, New Testament Christians. An illustration of this is seen in Paul’s writings to the Corinthians. He warned:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the
same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:1-12).

While we are not under the same law as those in the Old Testament, Paul stated: “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” He further admonished: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Likewise the writer of Hebrews used Old Testament happenings to exhort New Testament Christians. He exhorted:

Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end; While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that
had sinned, whose carcases fell in the wilderness? And to whom
swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that
believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of
unbelief (Heb. 3:5-19).

Example after example from the Old Testament is used in the New
Testament to exhort, warn and teach New Testament Christians. It has
been correctly observed that “the Old Testament is the New Testament
concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”
While we are not under the Old Testament as our law, there are many
reasons why we should study the Old Testament.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach us about the unchanging
nature of God. Malachi recorded God’s statement: “For I am the Lord,
I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6).
Likewise, the writer of Hebrews stated: “Jesus Christ the same
yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8). Although God has
dealt with different people in different ages in different ways, He
changes not.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach us that faith plus obedi-
ence has always been required of man. Hebrews 11 is filled with Old
Testament examples of the faith which is required of man.

We need to study the Old Testament because it is inspired history.
“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for
doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good
works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). To what better source can one go in order to
learn about various nations in olden times than an inspired source?
While the Bible is not written simply as a history book, it does record
much about Assyria, Babylon, Israel, et cetera, and their dealings with
other nations. Not only do we learn about the history of nations, but we
also learn of the history of the world itself (its origin, etc., Gen. 1:1).

The Old Testament is very useful in providing evidences of inspiration. One may turn to the pages of the Bible and see evidences
of Divine inspiration by means of prophecy and fulfilment (Isa. 7:14;
53:1-12), Science (Ps. 8:8), History, Geography, et cetera.

The Old Testament shows the great concern, love and provisions
that God provides for His children. This is illustrated in God delivering
Israel from Egyptian bondage, as well as providing for them in the
wilderness wandering and then giving them the land of Canaan.
We should study the Old Testament because *it will make us wise unto salvation through Christ Jesus*. Paul exhorted Timothy: “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

**CONCLUSION**

The Law of Moses contained moral, ceremony and civil laws. God was governing a group of people through whom He would bring the Messiah. “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). Even though we are not under the Law of Moses as our constitution in the New Testament age, it is a rich and rewarding work for the child of God. It provides many great lessons for us, and in fact, one cannot properly understand and/or appreciate the New Testament without some knowledge of the Old Testament. How could one appreciate the superiority of the priesthood of Christ over the Levitical priesthood without some knowledge of the books of Exodus and Leviticus?

Over a period of 1,600 years, using about forty different inspired writers, God has given us the Old and New Testaments. How grateful each one should be to have in his possession the very Word of God. May we demonstrate such appreciation by studying God’s Word and making application to our lives.

**ENDNOTES**

1 All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.
3 Ibid., s.v. “ceremony.”
4 Ibid., s.v. “civil.”
5 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Website: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09071a.htm
6 Answers.com, Website: http://www.answers.com/topic/old-testament.