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## CHAPTER ONE

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# DOING THE RIGHT THING

Writing this book has been something like a Midwestern farmer drawing a map of downtown Manhattan—I feel not a little like the wrong person for the job. Nevertheless, this has been a burden of mine for some time, not because I think I’m particularly good at following the course we will discover in the following chapters, but because I hear two voices calling us to the task.

First, God’s voice is clear and unmistakable in the pages of Scripture. Having redeemed us from both the guilt and bondage of our sins, God now calls us to glorify and enjoy Him forever, beginning now, beginning here. But there is a second voice that makes a recovery of the Ten Commandments vital for our time. It is the voice of our neighbors: secular, not particularly given to religious justifications for what they do, but nevertheless searching for something that gives weight to their actions. *Newsweek* referred to the question over values as “a deep, vexing national anxiety . . . about the nagging sense that unlimited personal freedom and rampaging materialism yield only

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greater hungers and lonelier nights." Furthermore, "the acting out has been bipartisan. Self-actualizing liberals have been obsessed with personal freedom to the point of self-immolation; predatory conservatives have been obsessed with commercial freedom to the point of pillage." One thing is clear, according to *Newsweek's* Joe Klein: "Both these indulgences have run their course. The 30-year spree has caused a monster hang-over. There is a yearning for something more than the standard political analgesics."<sup>1</sup> The real question is whether evangelical Christians are, generally speaking, prepared for the larger spiritual issues or whether they will simply continue to align themselves with short-sighted, "standard political analgesics."

As we approach Christianity's third millennium, the mood of secular culture is clearly shifting from a disregard for religious, spiritual, and moral direction to a renewed willingness to listen. Of course, this means that they will listen to almost anyone and everyone, as the popularity of new-age mysticism, the mushrooming of Islam, and an expanding universalistic sentiment demonstrate. But, as demonstrated by the leading pollsters, there is one thing our secular neighbors will not put up with any longer, and that is what one writer called "The Bible Belt Inquisition." There must be answers, intelligently argued, defending the basis of core *beliefs*, not just assertions, slogans, and the rhetoric of power games. Although the central point of Christianity is not morality or direction in life (contrary to what most people expect religion to be about), the transcendent beliefs out of which the Christian life grows and matures, however feebly, give purpose, direction, and meaning to life that cannot be matched by mere sentiment and secular whim. Nor can it be matched by platitudes from the left-wing or from right-wing ideology, with occasional proof-texting from Scripture. What we really need is a massive reeducation in the basics. And the world is more ready for this now than it was just five years ago.

A striking example of this openness is an essay by *Time* magazine's former editor-in-chief and ambassador to Austria, Henry Grunwald:

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We are beset by a whole range of discontents and confusions. For a great many, the dunghill has become a natural habitat. Derain and other observers of depravity would, in fact, be stunned by the chaos of manners and speech, by the hellish ubiquity of crime and the easy—one might almost say the democratic—availability of drugs; by the new varieties of decadence—rock songs about rape and suicide, pornography at the corner newsstand, commercials for S&M clubs on your friendly cable channel, not to mention telephone sex. . . . We are witnessing the end, or at least the decline, of an age of unbelief and beginning what may be a new age of faith. . . . We will need a new sense of drive, less emphasis on “rights” and more on responsibility—in short, we must create a new psychological climate.

Of course, it was our own evangelical forebears—especially Luther and Calvin—who emphasized responsibilities over rights, the latter being the modern obsession. The Bible, particularly the Ten Commandments, calls us to discover our obligations to God and to our neighbor and society. It calls the people of God to their posts in society, not as a special interest group demanding its rights alongside everyone else, but as called-out men and women who have a heavy sense of moral duty—not to save their own souls, for that is by grace apart from works, but to bring glory and honor to that gracious King. What Grunwald calls for in terms of “a new psychological climate,” where responsibilities are emphasized over rights, was championed earlier in our history as evangelical Christians. How ironic that, in order to be relevant and on the cutting edge, we must retrieve beliefs from the past. Grunwald concludes:

One of the most remarkable things about the 20th century, more than technological progress and physical violence, has been the deconstruction of man (and woman). We are seeing a reaction to that phenomenon. Our view of man obviously depends on our view of God. The Age of Reason exalted humankind but still admitted God as a sort of supreme philosopher-king or chairman of the board who ultimately presided over the glories achieved by rea-

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son and science. The humanist 19th century voted him out. It increasingly saw reason and science irreconcilably opposed to religion, which would fade away. Secular humanism (a respectable term even though it became a right-wing swearword) stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed—the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing. The mainstream churches have tried in various ways to adapt themselves to a secular age. . . . The major Protestant denominations also increasingly emphasized social activism and tried to dilute dogma to accommodate 20th-century rationality and diversity.

But none of these reforms [is] arresting the sharp decline of the mainstream churches. Why not? The answer seems to be that while orthodox religion can be stifling, liberal religion can be empty. Many people seem to want a faith that is rigorous and demanding.<sup>2</sup>

Respected social commentators, such as Thomas Molnar, are increasingly open to intelligent religious options. Molnar explains:

The Ten Commandments, and many other biblical texts, used to be for me pious, nondescript, and rather gratuitous statements. That was youth. With maturity and age, they began to reveal (the right word) an immeasurable depth of wisdom, whose exploration occupied the life of a Pascal and a Chesterton. Our contemporary “culture” (various paganism, abortion/euthanasia, inclusive language, overall politization) has demoted those texts to the level of bored clichés or outright mystifications. Hence the need to focus on them again.<sup>3</sup>

But there is also a renewed interest in transcendent answers to real-life problems from the *popular* culture.

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Commenting on the 1992 tour of the band *U2*, *Rolling Stone* magazine concluded: "Their message? Thou shalt not worship false idols, but who else is there?"<sup>4</sup>

So, Grunwald concludes, "Where will all this lead? Just possibly, to a real new age of faith. Not a new universal religion, or the return of a medieval sort of Christianity overarching all of society—nor, one hopes, the resurgence of what might be called the Bible Belt Inquisition. But we may be heading into an age when faith will again be taken seriously, and when it will again play a major part in our existence."<sup>5</sup>

Tom Wolfe suggested that ours is not an age that is likely to produce great heroes. But biblical faith has always created heroes: nurses who devoted their lives to caring for the sick, parents who sacrificed for their children's education, businesspeople who know how to create wealth *and* use it for the benefit of the community, children who took care of their parents in their old age, employers who took care of their workers, and employees who threw in that extra bit to help the company become successful, people who helped their neighbor fix his roof. For the sake of our searching neighbors, for our own sake and, above all, for God's sake, let's prove Grunwald right and Wolfe wrong.

## GOD'S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE

Growing up in the church, I can remember the anxiety I used to have over God's will for my life. Whom shall I date? Where does God want me to go to college? With a horror at the possibility of missing out on God's best ("plan A") for my life, I sought God's will earnestly, not knowing exactly what it would sound or look like once I discovered "it." Since then, my basic understanding of what it means to discover God's will has been transformed. Let me explain briefly what I mean.

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). This verse distinguishes two categories:

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“secret things” and “revealed things.” It is fairly easy to determine what are the “revealed things”: the Ten Commandments are a good example. But what happens when we get to questions about marriage and education, whether we should pursue this calling or relocate to that city? Surely we would search our Bible concordance in vain to find a text informing us of God’s will for our life in these areas. That does not mean, of course, that God has not determined our future down to its most trivial details; what it does mean is that He has not decided to let us in on them. If God really is in charge, there is no “perfect will” we step in or out of, depending on how good we are at reading tea leaves or discerning “signs” of God’s leading. He even works sin, suffering, and evil out to our good (Romans 8:28), so that everything is a part of His plan to bring Himself glory.

What this does for those burdened with anxiety over knowing God’s will is amazing. It places our search for God’s will, not in the subjective hunches we often attribute to the Holy Spirit, but in the revealed will of God. We may not get an advance copy of God’s game plan as to the people, places, occupations, and moves He has in our future, but we already have more than we seem to have digested in God’s *revealed* Word concerning the direction of our lives as Christians. To those seeking God’s will for their life, the prophet Micah replies, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

But this search for God’s *revealed* will for our lives has not only been interrupted by the search for His *secret* will or plan, but by other factors as well, which we shall consider briefly.

### *Biblical Illiteracy*

According to George Gallup, “Americans revere the Bible—but by and large, they don’t read it. And because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.” In fact, although four out of five Americans be-

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lieve the Bible is “the literal or inspired word of God,” most of them cannot recall the Ten Commandments. “Three-quarters of Americans said they make at least some effort to follow Jesus’ example,” Gallup reports, but they evidently don’t have the slightest idea of what that example consists. Six in ten cited a personal relationship with Jesus Christ of some sort, but this evidently is a relationship of convenience, since they do not see it in terms of obligation.<sup>6</sup>

The authors of *The Day America Told The Truth* have this to say:

It’s the wild, wild West all over again in America, but it’s wilder and woollier this time. You are the law in this country. Who says so? You do, pardner. . . . There is absolutely no moral consensus at all in the 1990s. Everyone is making up their [sic] own personal moral codes—their own Ten Commandments. Here are ten extraordinary commandments for the 1990s. These are real commandments, the rules that many people actually live by.

1. I don’t see the point in observing the Sabbath (77 percent).
2. I will steal from those who won’t really miss it (74 percent).
3. I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn’t cause any real damage (64 percent).
4. I will drink and drive if I feel that I can handle it. I know my limit (56 percent).
5. I will cheat on my spouse—after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same (53 percent).
6. I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one full day in every five. It’s standard operating procedure (50 percent).
7. I will use recreational drugs (41 percent)
8. I will cheat on my taxes—to a point (30 percent)
9. I will put my lover at risk of disease. I sleep around a bit, but who doesn’t (31 percent)?
10. Technically, I may have committed date rape, but I know that she wanted it (20 percent have been date-raped).<sup>7</sup>

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In spite of the fact that nearly all Americans say they believe in God, “the overwhelming majority of people (93 percent) said that they—and nobody else—determine what is and what is not moral in their lives. They base their decisions on their own experience, even on their daily whims.”<sup>8</sup>

Again and again, in survey after survey, Christians and non-Christians respond in almost identical ways when questions are raised concerning greed, hedonism, and racism.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, something is rotten in our own backyard. We do not even seem to know right from wrong anymore, even as Christians. This ought to make us wonder what we are getting in our churches and in our Christian homes. That is why, throughout this book, we will make a conscious effort to see these commandments not merely as stones to throw at secular society, but as a witness to our unfaithful record at the end of the twentieth century. We need to relearn some things that we may have taken for granted. Before we go off on moral crusades, aligning ourselves with the secular Left or the secular Right, we would be well-advised to settle again in our minds what it is that God requires of us—and that is the exciting rediscovery awaiting us in the Ten Commandments.

### *Ambiguity About the Old Testament*

Many of us were raised not knowing what to do with that first half of our Bible. The idea was, Israel in the Old Testament was under the law and Christians in the New Testament are under grace. This means that the Old Testament equals works-righteousness and the New Testament equals the gospel of grace.

However, this is out of keeping with the biblical text on a number of points. First, God made one covenant with Abraham. It was an unconditional gift of eternal life to him and to all of his spiritual descendants. Justified by grace alone through faith alone, just like any believer today, Abraham became the spiritual father of all who trusted in Christ, including us (Galatians 3:7). In fact, “[Not] because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s

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children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Romans 9:7-8). Jesus made clear to the Jews of His day that they were not simply children of Abraham by racial descent. In fact, the gospels make plain that because they rejected the promise (i.e., the gospel), the Jews ceased to be children of Abraham (Matthew 3:9). The writer to the Hebrews cautions early Christians against repeating the folly of the Israelites in the wilderness, who also "had *the gospel* preached to [them,] . . . but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard it did not combine it with faith" (Hebrews 4:2, italics added).

Therefore, "law" does not equal "Old Testament," while "grace" or "gospel" equals the New Testament. "Law" refers to any command, from Genesis to Revelation. "Gospel" refers to any place in either testament where the promise of salvation by grace alone through faith alone is found. The law tells us what we *ought* to do, and this leads us to despair of meeting God's standard. Then the gospel tells us what God *has* done for us already in Christ, meeting the standard as our substitute and taking our punishment on Himself so that we could be regarded as righteous.

Seen in this light, the believer today ought to be as interested in the Old Testament as in the New. Although the gospel is more clearly articulated in the New Testament, surely there is no loss of gospel imagery in God's clothing of Adam and Eve Himself with skins from an animal He Himself sacrificed, or in Abraham's offering of Isaac, or in the Exodus from Egypt, and in the myriad of other examples of God's rescuing grace, in spite of the depravity of His people. Therefore, the Old testament still speaks to us today. When God confirms His promise (the gospel) to Jacob, that is for us today. When God commands Israel from Mt. Sinai, these commandments are for us as well.

But what about the sacrifices and all of those other laws that governed Israel's civic life? Surely, we are not called to execute adulterers, are we? To answer this ques-

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tion, we must make a crucial distinction between what biblical scholars have called the *moral*, *ceremonial*, and *civil* laws. In the first category—the moral—we have the Ten Commandments, with all of their repeated charges and extrapolations in the New Testament. Individuals are to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.

But there is another cluster of laws in the Old Testament governing religious ceremonies. There are the special feasts and fasts, together with the elaborate sacrificial system and temple worship. Every *ceremonial* law was to be precisely obeyed. As we go back and read some of these laws, we wonder at the detail. Why did God get caught up in the question of whether a priest cut the animal's throat, or whether the one offering the sacrifice did the deed? We can only see the importance of these rituals in retrospect, as we see, for instance, the importance of the sinner's identifying directly with the victim substituting for his sins. That is why each person had to take the life of the sacrificial victim himself. It was not merely the Jews or the Romans who crucified Jesus Christ: we were all there, driving the sword into His side, transferring our sins to Him just as the presenter in the Old Testament put his hands on the scapegoat, signifying a transfer of guilt from the sinner to the victim.

As we can see, especially from the book of Hebrews, all of these types and shadows are fulfilled in Christ. They all pointed to Him. He was the temple, so why go on with temple worship? He was the sacrifice, so how could we offend God by thinking there was still a need for a better or fuller sacrifice for sins? Therefore, the ceremonial laws vanish with the coming of the one they were designed to foreshadow.

Then there is the third category: the *civil* laws of Israel. Just as Israel's ceremonial laws prefigured Christ as the great prophet and priest, so her civil laws prefigured Christ as the great king. And just as He does not cease to be our prophet or priest with the fulfillment of the ceremonial laws, so too he does not cease to be our king with

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the fulfillment of the civil laws. Furthermore, just as we must not go back to the shadows of the promise in the ceremonial law when we have the fulfillment of that promise in Christ, so too we ought not to seek to return to the Jewish theocracy when we have the fulfillment of Christ's kingdom in His spiritual reign through the proclamation of the gospel. Through Israel, God gives us object lessons about the kingdom that will come with Christ's ministry. As the kings of Israel were to drive out the idolatrous nations (unlike Adam, who entertained God's enemy instead of driving him out of the land), so Christ will separate the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the weeds, at the end of the age (cf. Matthew 25:31-46; and also 13:25-29). But the reality of the kingdom is not seen in its political, military, or social might, but in its advance through the gospel of Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

This is especially important to reiterate at a time when America is being confused with Israel as a chosen nation destined by God to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. When the Puritans and Pilgrim separatists settled New England, the aim was evangelistic ministry: "to advance ye kingdom of Christ" through the proclamation of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of godly discipline and order. But as America secularized (as soon as the War for Independence), the vision of "Christian America" destined to spread its political gospel of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness continued, and evangelicals, instead of protesting the confusion of Christ and culture, have, especially in recent decades, helped to foster it. The Reformers argued that there are two swords: one ruling the temporal sphere (the state) and one ruling the eternal sphere (the church). The first sword is made of metal; the second of ink and paper. According to Calvin, nations are to be governed by laws created on the basis of "general equity," of which he believed even pagans were capable because of the image of God stamped on every person and the general revelation of justice, right, and wrong anchored in nature and in the human conscience.

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That is why J. Gresham Machen, leader of the intellectual crusade against liberalism in the twenties and thirties, insisted that the church has a purely spiritual function—to speak for God, where God has spoken for Himself in His Word. Although Christians may involve themselves in moral and political crusades, Machen insisted that whenever the church as a divine institution did so it violated its sacred mission and confused the gospel with civil righteousness.

In the New Testament, we not only do not find explicit calls to obey various ceremonial or civil laws of the Old Testament, we find it expressly forbidden, as a return to shadows after the reality has come. However, the New Testament does reiterate the *moral* laws of the Old Testament, giving them fuller explanation and a particular New Testament application (i.e., in terms of the believer's responsibility to God and neighbor). In Jeremiah 31:31–33, we read:

“ . . . I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their forefathers  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,”  
declares the LORD.  
“This is the covenant I will make with  
the house of Israel  
after that time,” declares the Lord.  
“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.”

Joel also prophesied that in the last days the Holy Spirit would be poured out on every believer, not merely on those who were called out as prophets, priests, or kings.

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Finally, the people of God would become what God intended the community to be: a whole *nation* of prophets and priests, declaring by the power of the Holy Spirit the good news of the gospel and the blessings of the covenant. At Pentecost, this prophecy was fulfilled, and since then every believer has been filled with the Spirit and given, in the new birth, a heart that has God's law, His revealed will, embroidered into it. This is why Paul calls Christian obedience the "fruit of the Spirit," because it is not the product of our own virtue or character, but the direct effect of having the law written on our heart and the Spirit working within us to produce a new obedience.

Every person—even the most perverted or confused person—has the law written on his or her conscience, Paul tells us in the first two chapters of Romans. But only believers have the law written on their heart; in other words, only through the new birth can one truly delight in God's law. Before, it only condemned and cursed, but now, because we are regarded as having fulfilled that law perfectly because Christ fulfilled it in our place, it can only direct us in our Christian life. It can never make such threats as "If you don't do your part, God won't do His." After all, God *did* "our part" through the perfect life and death of His own Son. Now, not only does this unconditional promise bring life to us who cannot gain a single part of the promise through our own obedience or effort; it brings a new heart that loves God's law for the first time. Notice that, instead of removing the law from the life of the believer, Paul declares, "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. . . . He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:3–4, 6).

This is not, as many have thought, to set the Spirit against the Word or law of God. Rather, it is to say that apart from the life-giving Spirit, God's commands (as well as His gospel promise) are dead. Or, better still, it is to say

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that *we* are dead. The law cannot give us life. We cannot gain life (or keep it or become more “filled with the Spirit,” or whatever you want to call it) by trying to achieve it. It all belongs to every believer. Only the Spirit can take those “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) and make them alive. And once one is made alive, he or she is able to respond positively and affectionately to the law of God for the first time.

So the believer today is just as much an heir to the promise as Abraham was, and as much obligated to the moral law of God as he was. The designation of Israel as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) is now applied to the New Testament church, composed of all of Abraham’s children, Jew and Gentile (1 Peter 2:9).

### *Popular Preaching on the Old Testament*

Very often, the preaching we get from the Old Testament these days is little more than *Aesop’s Fables*: a clever story, with a moral at the end. A sermon on David is sure to focus on his willingness to stand up to Goliath, with the easy (one might say, insipid) application to whatever “Goliaths” we happen to be facing in our lives. But, of course, this is not the author’s intention at all. We might be reading the text, but what is coming from the pulpit or the Sunday school room is not an exposition of the passage, making the point we are really supposed to draw from it.

It is ironic that in churches that so stress the literal nature of passages that are self-consciously apocalyptic, parabolic, or poetic, so much allegorizing of *historical narrative* passages of the Old Testament goes on. Whenever we turn Joshua or Gideon into characters whose main purpose in the Bible is to teach us a moral lesson, we are following the medieval method of interpretation, which sought to spiritualize, moralize, and allegorize historical narrative, rather than the Protestant method, which is aimed at explaining the passage according to its own context. An Australian evangelical, Graeme Goldsworthy, demonstrates the seriousness of this business:

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The Old Testament is dead—dead at the conspiratorial hands of rationalists, Jews, medieval allegorists, theological liberals, existentialists, evangelicals and others. The Jews denied the Old Testament its appointed goal in the gospel and thus transformed it into a dead legalism. Medieval church scholars followed Origen by capitulating to Gnostics who said the Old Testament was materialistic and unspiritual. Rationalists, liberals and existentialists bowed to the philosophical fads of their day and found the Old Testament incompatible. But are evangelicals, the “people of the Book,” involved in the conspiracy? We evangelicals are more guilty than all. We have prided ourselves on honoring the whole Bible as God’s Word and have cast pharisaic stones at the adulterous higher critics and liberals. . . . Where are the sermons on the Old Testament that preach Christ without bumbling allegorizing or untheological character studies? Where are the evangelical Sunday school courses which teach the Old Testament without legalistic moralizing? . . . And the new-birth oriented “Jesus-in-my-heart” gospel of evangelicals has destroyed the Old Testament just as effectively as nineteenth-century liberalism.<sup>10</sup>

Christianity is a historical religion. Whereas existentialists point out the meaninglessness of life (a realistic and appropriate reaction apart from Christ), the biblical revelation assures us that life and history have meaning because God elected, redeemed, called, and justified a people throughout human history and within human history, from Eden to the present and on into eternity, and all of this has centered on the entrance of the Son of God Himself into time and space history to redeem. Christianity is not a message about inner peace or being born again or having Jesus in my heart. Whereas there is an unmistakable personal aspect, the message of Christianity is *Christ*.

From Genesis to Revelation, every figure, every story, every image, every lesson is the wrapping in which we find God’s gift, Jesus Christ. Even in the Ten Commandments, Christ is not only prefigured in Moses, but is present as the one who has won His right to rule His people by the redemption He has accomplished for His people in the Exo-

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dus, a down payment on the great redemption to be accomplished, this time not through the signs and wonders of Moses in Pharaoh's court, demanding "Let my people go!" or in the parting of the sea, nor by feeding His people with bread in the wilderness, but by raising the dead, bearing the wrath of the divine justice for His brothers and sisters, and by *being* the Bread of Life from heaven (John 6). The Old Testament is not merely the part of our Bibles that predicted a coming Messiah and was rendered irrelevant when that Messiah arrived; it is part of one full, complete, running drama of redemption, and beginning with Matthew's Gospel is like walking into a movie halfway into the story. It is like thinking you are telling a good joke when all you can remember is the punch line.

David really lived in history. And the usefulness of that life, measured by the fact that the Bible records great segments of it, is not determined by how many instructive lessons we can learn from character studies, for there were greater men and women of character, no doubt, who never made it into the Bible. David's inclusion into the canon of Holy Scripture is defined by the place he had in redemptive history—not only as a precursor of Christ, the Son of David, but as someone to whom the gospel promise came, in spite of all his failures and unfaithfulness. "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, . . . whose sin the LORD does not count against him" (Psalm 32:1–2) wicked David cried, after confessing his utter depravity. In other words, we ought to be asking, "How is God's redemptive program advancing in this place and time, during the reign of David?" "Where is the gospel in this passage?" "How is Christ revealed, even in a shadowy way?" We read of Abraham, not to learn what Abraham, a liar, cheater, and schemer, did for God, but what God did for this sinner and, through him, for the rest of us who are wicked. These figures are not there primarily for our imitation, but for our instruction in the gospel.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day took the view that we often hear in our own churches. Our Lord castigated them for missing the forest for the trees: "You diligently study

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the Scriptures, thinking by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39). They saw the Scriptures (our Old Testament) essentially as a moral code, a handbook for living. Although the Old Testament does contain moral commands (as does the New Testament), they are commands given to people who have already been redeemed and promised unconditionally that through faith in the promise they shall inherit the heavenly Promised Land on the other side of death. The moralistic and pietistic approach many of us have taken toward the Old Testament may be the reason many Christians have been bored by it and turned off to it, but a view that attempts to see the redemptive theme advancing throughout the history of God's people will revive our generation's sense of belonging to this people of God, this family of Abraham. With Isaac, Jacob, David, Rahab, and the prophets, we too inherit the family treasures: the law and the promise.

### LAYING DOWN THE LAW

Most biblical scholars are agreed that the Old Testament is a legal document, a covenant between God and His people. The Ten Commandments are merely a summary—perhaps the best—of the covenantal arrangement for God's people. Before the commands are given, there is a preamble. We are used to preambles in covenants, treaties, and contracts. In our own Constitution, the Preamble reads, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, to provide for the common defense and to ensure to ourselves and to our posterity domestic tranquillity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America."

Similarly, the Ten Commandments begin with the source of their authority: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). God is represented here as the Great King who has just rescued a tiny, helpless state from the clutches of an oppressive regime. But this rescue does not leave them to themselves, to be invaded and tyrannized again some-

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time in the future. Instead, God Himself assumes the reign of Israel as its Redeemer-King. We often speak of "letting God" do this or that, or of "making Him Lord," but the biblical idea could not be more different. God is Lord by right. "It is he who has made us, and not we ourselves"—so He is our Lord by right in creation—for "we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3 NKJV), making Him our Lord by right in redemption. The Lord creates the covenant and does not bargain with us concerning its content. Instead of "we the people" or "I the believer," it is "God the Redeemer" who gives this covenant its binding nature. Instead of our making Him our Lord, in the covenant, God makes us His people.

Unlike the Preamble of the American Constitution, this divine preamble governing the people of God, the church, derives its authority not as an arrangement of the people covenanting together to obey God or to set up a kingdom, but as an arrangement of God Himself. It is not a contract where the two parties are equal, but a covenant in which God the Redeemer declares "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7).

Whereas the promises concerning the physical land were conditional (Exodus 19:5; Ezekiel 33:21–29), the promise of everlasting life through faith in God's redeeming arm was unconditional (Deuteronomy 31:6; Romans 11:29; 2 Timothy 2:13). This is the promise we inherit, along with Jews who turn to Christ. Of course, the church is not an heir to any plot of land in Palestine, but it is the heir to the unconditional promise made to Abraham. For this, and not the earthly territory, was the ultimate hope of Israel (Hebrews 11:9, 14–16). Because God has already redeemed us by grace alone, we can serve in perfect freedom, not fearing the terrors of the law, but delighting in its precepts. We gain freedom through the gospel, not through the law; but the freedom we gain through the gospel is a freedom to obey for the first time, from our hearts, not to be left to ourselves. God redeems and God rules His people. The New Testament reiteration of this Old Testament preamble can be found, among other places, in 1 Pe-

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ter 1:18–19, where we are told, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” We must never start with the first commandment, as though we entered into new life, or were somehow made acceptable to God by our performance and conformity to the commands, but must always begin right here, with the preamble, where God Himself does, in making His claim to His people on the basis that He has already done everything—including fulfilling the conditions of obedience to the law. He does this for us, in our place, through the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

### THE NATURE OF THE LAW

At Mount Sinai, God delivered to His people, through Moses, the famous Ten Commandments. But this was merely a republication of the eternal will of God already stamped on human nature. Paul argues, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). The problem people have is not, first and foremost, a lack of data. In spite of this law written on the conscience, humans “have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (vv. 29–32).

Therefore, God published His eternal will again. Christians have found at least three purposes for this written law: a civil use, a theological use, and a moral use.

#### *Civil Use*

The list Paul gives us in the passage quoted above does not leave much room for trusting human nature. That

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is why the civil authority must respect both liberty (because of the divine image in humanity) as well as justice (because of the fallenness of humanity). Unfortunately, when we want to break the bounds of the law, the only thing that stops some of us is the threat that law imposes. Therefore, this first use of the law is that of a deterrent in the civil sphere, with the police and prisons to back up the threat.

### *Theological Use*

Also called the pedagogical use, taken from Paul's reference to the law as God's tutor, leading us to faith in Christ (Galatians 3:24), the law shows us how hopelessly we fall short of the righteousness God requires. Just when we think we are not quite as bad as the guy down the street living with so-and-so, the law puts us on trial and compares us—not to other fallen men and women, but to God. This is meant to drive us to despair so that we seek our shelter from God's wrath in Christ's righteousness alone.

### *Moral Use*

Since the law is the expression of God's eternal character, it does not change. We must remember that God first gave the law, written on the human conscience, not to drive people to Christ (for they were not lost), nor to threaten them with civil penalties (for they were not criminals). The law was first given as a realistic expectation for human behavior because God had created Adam and Eve with moral excellence. After the Fall, of course, human beings are incapable of conforming to this law. Even if they have not physically abused another person, they have murdered through gossip or slander. Even if they have not stolen from their neighbor by slipping into his home at night, they have not done everything they could to protect their neighbor's possessions. Even Christians cannot conform perfectly to this law, and they ought never to approach the law as though they could even come close to its moral excellence. Rather, believers ought to approach the law as the perfect standard God requires as the expression of His

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moral character and live, not in order to *meet* God's requirements (for that is achieved only in Christ), but in order simply to *obey* God's requirements. In the former approach, one sets out to *earn* God's favor by *attaining* His own righteousness; in the latter, one sets out to obey a gracious heavenly Father simply because He has *already accepted* him or her as righteous and holy.

For those, like the Pharisees, who sought to be justified by their own righteousness, the law comes to condemn and to judge. But for those, like David, who have known the liberating good news of God's free justification of the wicked, the law comes to lead and guide in the paths of righteousness: "I run in the path of your commands, *for you have set my heart free*" (Psalm 119:32, italics added). "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 147:19–20). Only those who know the privilege of adoption can say with the psalmist, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law!" (Psalm 119:18).

## NOTES

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3. Thomas Molnar, *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, December 1992, 14.
4. *Rolling Stone*, 10–24 December 1992, 39.
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6. George Gallup and James Castelli, *The People's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 60.
7. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Plume, 1992), 201.
8. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
9. George Barna and James Mackay, *Vital Signs* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1984), 140–41.
10. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Verdict* 2, no. 1 (February 1979), 5–10.