



## Chapter Nineteen

# OF THE ABOLISHING OF THE CEREMONIAL LAW

## (ARTICLE 25)

### *ART. XXV. OF THE ABOLISHING OF THE CEREMONIAL LAW.*

*We believe that the ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished amongst Christians: yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the mean time, we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets, to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honesty to the glory of God, according to his will.*

### INTRODUCTION

The brevity of article 25 does not signify the relative unimportance of its subject for Reformed, indeed Protestant,

Christianity. Generally, this subject is the place of the law in the life of the Reformed believer. Specifically, the subject is the abolition of the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament regarding the holy life of the New Testament child of God. Underlying these subjects, important as they are in themselves, is the fundamental truth of the relation of the Old and the New Testament scriptures.

The importance of the content of the article is evident from the serious controversies in which the article involves the Christian. The gospel itself is at stake in these controversies. The apostolic church fought over the issues raised in the article. These issues occasioned the first synod of the New Testament church. This is the synod of which the agenda and decisions are recorded in Acts 15. The question before the apostles and elders was whether the New Testament, largely Gentile, church is required to observe the ceremonial laws of Moses, specifically, circumcision. Invariably involved in the imposition upon the New Testament church of the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament is the heresy of salvation—justification and sanctification—by works. Therefore, in combating the error of requiring New Testament Christians to be circumcised, Peter proclaimed salvation by grace: “But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11).

The article’s doctrinal content was at the heart of the controversy of the early church addressed by the apostle in the book of Galatians and in Colossians 2. This was the controversy of the gospel of grace with the Judaizers, those Jewish members of the church who insisted that the Christian must observe the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament. Those were the members of the church who

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“observe[d] days, and months, and times, and years” (Gal. 4:10). They judged other members of the church “in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days” (Col. 2:16). They made themselves “subject to ordinances” (v. 20).

The seriousness of the error—the error exposed in article 25 of the Belgic Confession—the apostle indicated when he warned that “if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing” (Gal. 5:2).

It would be naive to suppose that the matters of such important controversies in the early church are dead issues for the Reformed churches today.

Altogether apart from the controversies over the subject of the article, the truth that the article confesses is of positive importance for the Reformed Christian. The article is not only negative: the abolishing of the ceremonial law. It is also positive: “Yet the truth and substance of them [the ceremonies and figures of the law] remain with us in Jesus Christ.”

Old Testament law still has a place in the holy life of the New Testament believer. What this place is, the article teaches in the word “regulate”: “to regulate our life in all honesty to the glory of God, according to his will.”

### THE ROLE OF THE LAW IN THE THANKFUL LIFE OF THE SANCTIFIED CHRISTIAN

It is instructive to take note, why an article on the ceremonial law occurs where it does in the Belgic Confession. The Confession follows a definite order in its treatment of the doctrines of scripture. The Reformed Confession is systematic. The section in which article 25 is found is the treatment of God’s work of salvation, specifically the work

of sanctification. This treatment begins in article 24, “Of Man’s Sanctification and Good Works.” Article 25, on the ceremonial law, is part of the Reformed confession concerning the holy life of the performance of good works.

In God’s work of sanctification, his law has a necessary role. Already article 24 of the Confession described this role: a holy life is the “practice of those works *which God has commanded in his Word*” (emphasis added). The word that God commands is *law*. His law governs the life of the saint. The saint does not practice works that seem good to him, much less works that a godless society proposes and praises, but works that God commands. They are works, according to article 24, that faith performs. In its performance of works, faith observes the law.

Article 25 emphasizes and enlarges on the brief statement at the end of article 24. The Old Testament law of God regulates the life of the Reformed Christian. It is the clear norm, rule, and guide of his life of love to God and the neighbor. The rule of the life of the Reformed believer is “his [God’s] will”: “according to his will.” Excluding the will of the believer himself as the standard of the Christian life is characteristically Reformed. As little as the will of the sinner is the source of salvation, so little is it the guide of the holy life. The will of God is everything in all aspects of salvation. The will of man is excluded or subdued to the will of God.

The Heidelberg Catechism also views the law as the authoritative guide of the Christian life of holiness. The third main division of the Heidelberg Catechism, consisting of the thankful life of the redeemed child of God, describes this life as obedience to the (commanding) law of God. The good works that make up a holy life are

“those only which are done...according to the law of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Confession recognizes that “testimonies taken out of the law,” that is, the ceremonial law—not the ceremonial law itself, but testimonies taken from it—function to regulate the life of the believer. Nevertheless, the law that is the guide of the Christian life is the moral law of the ten commandments. This is the law that Jesus summarized as the command to love God and the command to love the neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). The apostles repeatedly bind these commandments upon the believing church and its members. Romans 13:8–14 is typical. For example, under the rubric of love for the neighbor Paul explicitly exhorts five of the ten commandments of Exodus 20, adding his own explanation of several of them. It is significant that he concludes the passage with the admonition that believers “put...on the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14). The commandments are the guide of the holy life. They are not the efficacious power of this life. Jesus Christ is the power, by faith in him. The law is not the savior in sanctification any more than it is in justification. Jesus Christ is the only and complete savior.

By its confession in articles 24 and 25 that the law functions as the authoritative guide of the Christian life of holiness, the Reformed faith and church repudiate the heresy of antinomianism (literally: “against the law”). This is the deadly serious error that rejects the law of God as the rule of the life of the Christian. In its grossest form, it claims the right to sin with abandon, or at least to live carelessly, on the ground that the New Testament Christian is saved by grace alone.

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1 Heidelberg Catechism A 91, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:339–40.

The classic, biblical description of antinomianism is that of the words that Jehovah God put in the mouths of Judah in Jeremiah 7:9–10: “Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?” The Lord’s judgment on this antinomian theology is his own introductory word in verse 8: “Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.”

Antinomianism is the evil that the apostle warns against in Galatians 5:13: “only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh.” The Jezebel of Thyatira was a thorough antinomian in that, professing to teach the gospel, she seduced God’s servants to commit fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. She advocated knowing the depths of Satan in order that by sinning most grievously the members of the church could come to know the grace of God more fully (Rev. 2:20–24). The detestation of God for antinomian teaching is evident in his judgment upon this woman and her party: “great tribulation” (v. 22).

A milder form of antinomianism is the teaching that sanctification is by grace, so that the law is unnecessary. The Spirit teaches the believer how to live the life of holiness, without any use of the law. This antinomian doctrine ignores the truth that, although the sanctifying Spirit of Jesus Christ is indeed the power of the holy life, motivating the believer by the gospel of grace, the Spirit makes the law, which he himself delivered on Mount Sinai and which he renews on the pages of New Testament scripture, the clear and authoritative standard of the thankful life of love of the believer. The Spirit does not say to the believing

Christian, “Love God and your neighbor *as you think fitting*.” The Confession recognizes the necessity of a rule by which the Christian life is directed: “to regulate our life.” There must be an objective standard, and this standard of holiness is the will of God, that is, the law: “according to his [God’s] will.”

The Confession begins this article with the mention of a ceremonial law in the Old Testament: “ceremonies and figures of the law.” It continues by suggesting an even broader category of law that is accomplished, so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians: “all the shadows.” Thus the article indicates the important truth of a threefold distinction regarding law in the Old Testament: ceremonial law; civil law; and moral law. Although the distinction is founded on New Testament scripture, especially Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews, it was John Calvin who more than any other Protestant theologian took note of it, clarified it, and worked with it in his exposition of Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Article 25 of the Confession is another instance of the dependence of the Confession upon Calvin.

The ceremonial law of the Old Testament consists of those commands that concerned the ritual and ceremonies of Israel’s worship. This included the temple and its service, for example, the priesthood and the sacrifices; the sacred times in Israel’s calendar; and circumcision.

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2 For Calvin’s distinction between the moral law and the ceremonial law, by which he also understood the civil law, see his *Institutes*, 2.7.1–17, 1:348–66. Here Calvin affirms the “abrogation” of the moral law only regarding its condemnation of the believer. Concerning the ceremonial laws, which article 25 of the Confession refers to as “the ceremonies and figures of the law,” Calvin states that “they have been abrogated not in effect but only in use” (1:364). Thus De Bres’ dependence upon the Reformer is evident.

The civil laws, also known as judicial laws, were all those that governed the life of Israel as a nation. These included the law of the year of Jubilee; the laws forbidding farmers to harvest the corners of their fields and to muzzle the ox in his labor; and the law commanding the stoning to death of the sabbath breaker.

The moral law is the ten commandments, written with the finger of God himself and delivered to Israel through Moses on the two tables of stone.

### ABOLITION OF THE CEREMONIAL LAW

The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament have been “accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians.” All were “shadows” of Jesus Christ, his saving work, and the spiritual worship of God that he inaugurated for the New Testament church. In the fullness of himself, his salvation, and the worship of God that he has instituted, Jesus Christ is the substantial reality who casts the shadows of himself backward into the Old Testament. He and his saving work are the reality of the temple; of the sacrificing priests; of the altars; of the sacrificial beasts; and of the bloody covenantal sign of circumcision.

For worshipers of God, particularly professing Christians, to cling to the Old Testament shadows after the coming of Christ and the Spirit’s realization of New Testament worship is folly. It is as if a woman sustained by the picture of her husband while he was away on military duty would hug the picture, rather than her husband, upon his return. Exactly this is the thought of the Confession when it calls the ceremonies of the law “figures.” A figure is the likeness of one, in this case Jesus Christ. The Old Testament ceremonies were not the reality. They were merely

figures of the reality, important, even necessary, in the age before the coming of the reality, but only figures.

Already in the Old Testament, God exposed the ceremonies as worthless in themselves, if they are divorced from Jesus Christ:

6. Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?
7. Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Mic. 6:6–7)

Rightly, Calvin judged the ceremonial law to be “ridiculous” in and of itself, apart from its representing Jesus Christ and his saving work: “The whole cultus of the law, taken literally and not as shadows and figures corresponding to the truth, will be utterly ridiculous.”<sup>3</sup>

Clinging to the ceremonies of the Old Testament after the coming of Christ, who is the reality of them all, as some in the New Testament church insisted on doing, is foolish. It is an unbelieving rejection of Jesus Christ. With good reason the Confession declares that the “use of them [the shadows] must be abolished among Christians.” The abolition of the shadows is a matter of faith or unbelief; of the gospel or law; of life or death.

Abolition of the ceremonies and the necessity of doing so are the message of Galatians 5:2: “If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.” Setting aside the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.7.1, 1:349.

ceremonies of the Old Testament is the admonition of the New Testament gospel in Colossians 2:16: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.” The reason for the abolition of the ceremonies is immediately given, in verse 17: “Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

The entire epistle to the Hebrews is one long, detailed, and vehement defense of the truth that Jesus is the fulfillment and reality of the Old Testament ceremonies and figures and therefore that the ceremonies “ceased at the coming of Christ.” Article 25 of the Confession is the Reformed, abbreviated exposition of the book of Hebrews. Every effort by various religions and particularly by professing Christians to retain or reinstate the Old Testament ceremonies of the law shatters on the epistle to the Hebrews.

The temple of the Old Testament with all its elements of worship, so important in the Old Testament age, was merely “a figure for the time present” (Heb. 9:9).

All the ceremonies of Old Testament worship “stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation” (v. 10). The ceremonies were necessary for that time, but they were radically inferior to the reality whom they foreshadowed. Whom this reality is, the next verse in Hebrews 9 declares: “But Christ being come” (v. 11). In fact, the ceremonies of the Old Testament did not save the Israelite in and of themselves, but only by the reality Jesus Christ, whom they figured and shadowed to the Israelite. The believing Israelite was not justified and saved *in his consciousness* by the bloody sheep, but by the coming Lamb of God whom the bloody sheep figured.

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With regard to the fundamental ceremony of the Old Testament, namely, the animal sacrifice, Hebrews 10:1 is explicit and emphatic that that ceremony itself accomplished nothing regarding atonement and the salvation that atonement effects. The passage in chapter 10 is equally clear and emphatic that the entire sacrificial economy of the Old Testament was a shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ, so that the shadowy, unsubstantial sacrifices of the Old Testament are abolished at the coming of Christ. "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect" (v. 1). Not the Old Testament lamb-shadow, "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God" (v. 12).

There is a ceremonial element in one of the commandments of the moral law. This is the particular day that Israel remembered as the sabbath of rest. For Old Testament Israel the sabbath was the "seventh day" (Ex. 20:8-11). This day honored God's creation-rest for himself and for his people (Gen. 2:1-3). For the New Testament church, the sabbath of rest is the first day of the week. This day honors God's salvation-rest, the rest into which he himself entered and into which he took the church by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That there is still a special day of rest, that this day is the first day of the week for the New Testament church, and that the first day is determined by the resurrection of Jesus Christ as lord are the teaching of Revelation 1:10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice as of a trumpet." The Lord is the risen Jesus Christ, and his day is the day of his resurrection, which was the first day of the week.

The change of the day of rest, from the seventh to the first day of the week, expresses the fulfillment of the rest of Old Testament Israel in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

In view of the confusion and controversy over the fourth commandment of the moral law, the Synod of Dordt (1618–19) adopted six points of explanation:

1. In the fourth commandment of God's Law there is a ceremonial and a moral element.
2. The rest on the seventh day after the creation, and the strict observance of this day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, was ceremonial.
3. That a definite and appointed day has been set aside to the service of God, and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation, this element is moral.
4. The Sabbath of the Jews having been set aside, Christians are in duty bound to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.
5. This day has always been kept in the early Church since the time of the Apostles.
6. This day must be so consecrated unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, except those required by charity and present necessities, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1941), 276.

With article 25 of the Belgic Confession, the Reformed church and Christian engage in controversy with the Roman Catholic Church. Rome denies that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament are abolished. It retains the ceremonies of holy buildings and sacred times; sacrificing priests; altars and sacrifices; sprinklings; special clerical garb; and much more. Many are taken from the Old Testament. Many others are the invention of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome binds these religious ceremonies upon all its members. It makes observance and use of them necessary for salvation. This is the bewitching of the people (Gal. 3:1), an entangling with the yoke of bondage (5:1), a turning again to the weak and beggarly elements (4:9), the fall from grace (5:4), and the abandonment of Christ (v. 4).

Article 25 also condemns premillennial dispensationalism as heresy—the heresy condemned in the epistle to the Galatians and in the book of Hebrews. Dispensationalism teaches that in the future all the Old Testament ceremonies will be restored for one thousand years in a revived nation of Israel as the earthly kingdom of God. The entire Old Testament Jewish economy of temple, priests, and even bloody sacrifices for sins will be reinstated by God himself. The Confession is in error, then, according to dispensationalism, when it states that the “ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ.” This necessarily implies that the Confession errs also in affirming that Christ accomplished all the shadows.

The basic error of dispensationalism is that it is blind to the essential oneness of the Old Testament and New Testament people of God, the truth that underlies all that is taught in article 25 of the Confession. Dispensationalism

is not so much a false doctrine concerning eschatology, although it is this, as it is a heresy concerning Christ and salvation. Against this popular, prevalent doctrine among Protestants, the Reformed faith testifies that all the ceremonies of the Old Testament “ceased at the coming of Christ...so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians.”

Like Rome, dispensationalism denies Christ! In their own ways, both are guilty of the Judaizing heresy that the Holy Ghost condemns in Galatians and Hebrews.

Of late, a seemingly more innocuous use of the ceremonies appears in certain quarters of Reformed Christianity. Some observe certain Old Testament feasts and customs in order, they say, to win Jews to Christ. Prominent is their celebration of the passover meal. But this too was “shadow.” It “ceased at the coming of Christ.” Its use “must be abolished among Christians.” The reality has come: the sacrifice of the Lamb of God once for all, whose body is eaten and whose blood is drunk in a spiritual manner by faith. The sign and seal for the New Testament believer of this sacrifice and of the believer’s partaking of the sacrifice is the sacrament of the Lord’s supper.

Also the civil, or judicial, laws governing the life of Israel as a nation are abolished. These laws are included in article 25 of the Confession. They are an aspect of the “figures of the law” of which the article speaks. The Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith teaches the abolition of the civil laws explicitly:

To them [Israel, “the Church under age” (19.3)] also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that

people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.<sup>5</sup>

Also the civil laws of Israel shadowed the Lord Christ and his kingship of his New Testament kingdom. The Israel of the Old Testament age was an earthly nation, whereas the New Testament church, the fulfillment of Israel, is a spiritual kingdom. The Old Testament law commanding the death penalty for the heretic and for the one who desecrates the Sabbath by picking up sticks (Deut. 13; Num. 15:32–36) is not a law in the kingdom of Christ in the New Testament age. The church does not stone these evildoers, not simply because the law of the land forbids it, but because there is no such law of God for the New Testament kingdom of Christ.

The church is the New Testament nation and kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). She is spiritual, not earthy. She is mature, not childish. Christ's government of her is a spiritual discipline. Stoning befitted an earthy nation; excommunication is Christ's discipline in his spiritual kingdom.

With regard to the cessation of the civil laws of the Old Testament, creedal Reformed Christianity has a controversy with that movement in the Reformed sphere that calls itself theonomic Christian Reconstructionism. This movement very much concerns the function of the law in the New Testament kingdom of Christ and therefore in the life of the believer. *Theonomy* is literally "God's law." The doctrine of this movement is that the civil laws of the Old Testament are still binding upon the church of the New Testament.

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<sup>5</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 19.4, in Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 3:641.

Because of political circumstances, they are presently held in abeyance. But in the future, when, according to this post-millennial movement, the church as a politically powerful, carnal kingdom will govern all nations, the civil laws of the Old Testament will again be the law of the entire world.

Apart from its postmillennialism, this doctrine of the reinstatement of the civil laws of the Old Testament is erroneous. It conflicts with the Confession's authoritative judgment that the ceremonies and figures of the law have ceased and that all the shadows of the law are accomplished and fulfilled in Christ so that the use of them *must* be abolished among Christians, whether in the present age or in a future (imaginary) millennium. It is the denial of the teaching of scripture and the creeds that the church of the present age, already prior to the future (imaginary) millennium, is the fulfillment of Israel (1 Pet. 2:9). The kingdom of Christ is not a future reality, but a present reality in the true church. God has translated us believers "into the kingdom of his dear Son," which implies the existence already now of the kingdom in the form of the church (Col. 1:13). By its insistence on the restoration of the civil laws, theonomic Christian Reconstructionism brings the church back into the bondage of the law (Galatians).

### APPLICATION OF THE CEREMONIAL AND CIVIL LAWS TO THE CHURCH

Even though the ceremonial and civil laws in their shadow, Old Testament form ceased at the coming of Christ, they are still applicable to the New Testament believer: "The truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion." We have the truth and substance, that is, the spiritual reality, of them in Jesus Christ by faith. Jesus is our passover sacrifice and meal

by faith (1 Cor. 5:7). Jesus is our priest, who offered up the one atoning offering and who now consecrates us to God by faith (Heb. 7:27; 9:28). Jesus is our jubilee, who frees us and gives us full inheritance in the kingdom of God by faith.

That Jesus is the “truth and substance” of the Old Testament ceremonies and figures is the doctrine of John 1:17: “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”

In addition to having the truth and substance of the ceremonies and figures in Jesus Christ, we still use “the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets, to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel.” Deliberately, the Confession speaks of the “testimonies taken out of the law,” rather than simply of the law. It wants to maintain its statement that the ceremonial and civil laws themselves ceased. But those laws contain a “testimony.” This testimony is still of use to the New Testament church. All the temple rituals help the church understand right worship of God and the only way to live in his presence. All the Old Testament regulations concerning sacrifice shed light on the cross of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is necessary revelation for the New Testament church. Preaching the Old Testament is necessary and helpful for the confirmation of the believer’s faith. But every sermon on Old Testament scripture must end in Jesus Christ: “For Christ is the end (Greek: *telos*, that is, ‘end’ as ‘goal’) of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). Thus, and thus only, does the sermon confirm believers in the doctrine of the gospel.

Similarly, the civil laws still serve to regulate our life. The righteousness embodied in these laws applies to the life of the New Testament believer. The law against harvesting the corners of the field regulates the life of the believer

in that he cares for the needy (compare Lev. 19:9, 10 and Gal. 2:10). The law against yoking an ox and an ass regulates the believer's life in that he forms no friendship with unbelievers (compare Deut. 22:10 and 2 Cor. 6:14). The law against muzzling the ox that treads out the corn regulates the life of the New Testament congregation in that it supports the minister of the gospel financially (compare Deut. 25:4 and 1 Cor. 9:9–10). The prescription of the death penalty for sabbath breaking, idolatry, and rebellion against parents is instruction to the New Testament church to exercise discipline upon such sinners (compare Num. 15:32–36, Deut. 13:6–11, 21:18–21, and 1 Cor. 5).

### HARMONY OF THE TWO TESTAMENTS

Article 25 implies a truth that is fundamental to the Reformed faith. This is the relation of the Old and New Testaments. The longer title of the article expresses this relation as the implication of the article: “and the Agreement (or, Harmony) of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>6</sup> They are not opposed, as some heretics in the early New Testament church taught. Marcion, a teacher in the church in the second century after Christ, taught the absolute difference and opposition between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He accepted only the New Testament as the inspired word of God, rejecting the Old Testament as the words of men, if not the words of a false god. Even with regard to the New Testament, Marcion was selective. Significantly, he rejected the book of Hebrews as

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6 This longer, Latin heading of the article derives from the Latin text of the Belgic Confession that was adapted by the Synod of Dordt. See Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 1:506–507, and, for the longer title itself, *ibid.*, 3:412.

uninspired—significantly, because Hebrews clearly teaches the close relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament, as shadow and reality. Already article 4 of the Belgic Confession declared the Reformed, Christian faith, that “the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and New Testaments, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged.”

The two testaments are not opposed, but related. Formally, both are inspired of the Holy Ghost. Concerning the Old Testament, the inspiration of which was questioned by Marcion and is still today the object of criticism by unbelieving higher critics of the Bible, the apostle wrote: “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21). With regard to the content, both testaments testify of Jesus Christ. The entire Bible is Christology, that is, the truth about Jesus Christ. This was the doctrine of Jesus himself, particularly regarding the Old Testament: “Search the scriptures...they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39). Of the salvation that is enjoyed by the New Testament church, Peter declared that “the prophets... prophesied of the grace that should come unto you [the New Testament believers]: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (1 Pet. 1:10–11). Verse 12 adds that the Old Testament scripture was written to minister unto the New Testament church.

Both the content of the Old Testament and the relation of the Old Testament and the New Testament are revealed by Jesus’ word to the disciples after his resurrection: “All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning

me” (Luke 24:44). “Law, prophets, and psalms” was the customary description of the entire Old Testament. The entire Old Testament, therefore, concerns Jesus Christ. The content of the Old Testament, like that of the New, is Jesus Christ. The relation of the two testaments is that of prophecy and fulfillment, or shadow and reality.

The apostle’s contrast of law and gospel in the book of Galatians and elsewhere in the New Testament, as well as in the writings of Luther and Calvin, indeed in the Reformed creeds, therefore, is not between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This radical contrast between law and gospel in the matter of salvation is creedal for Reformed churches. With regard to the law of the ten commandments—the moral law—the Canons of Dordt confesses that the law does not and cannot save. Salvation is the work of Christ through the gospel.

In the same light are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to his peculiar people the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man can not by this law obtain saving grace.<sup>7</sup>

This contrast is between the law divorced from the gospel of grace; the law as itself the means or condition of salvation; the law, obedience to which is said to merit salvation; the law, obedience to which constitutes the sinner’s

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<sup>7</sup> Canons of Dordt 3–4.5, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:588.

righteousness with God (justification) in whole or in part; and the ceremonial and civil law renewed in the church of the New Testament, on the one hand, and the gospel of grace, on the other hand.

Between the Old and New Testaments, however, there is only the harmony of shadow and reality, of promise and fulfillment. Both testaments are gospel—the glad tidings of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Even the law, strictly conceived as commandment, in the Old Testament was subservient to Jesus and the gospel of grace: “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).