

Not Under Law?

Andy. Jane and I have been getting confused recently with the question of how far we as Christians are expected to keep the whole of the Old Testament law. We'd always assumed that it was a simple case of Christians not being obliged to keep the law in order to earn salvation but that, once saved, we must obey it in order to be holy.

Jane. In other words, although we are not under law as a means of salvation, we are expected to obey it as a way of life.

Andy. Yes, that's what we have always thought. However, we recently heard someone say that the Old Testament law is no longer relevant as a standard for Christians because we are now under grace - and grace and law don't mix do they?

Jane. But we have also talked with some Christians who take a completely opposite view and say that the Old Testament is relevant today both for Christians and for national governments, and that we should spend more time learning how to apply Old Testament laws to modern society.

Andy. Now you can see why we are getting confused!

Pastor. Yes, I can; and you have raised a very big issue, because both of the views you have outlined are held by evangelical Christians who are equally loyal to the authority of Scripture.

Andy. So how can we decide which view is right? Or are they both wrong?

Pastor. The best approach will be to look at them separately. Suppose we start with the view that the Old Testament law no longer has any claim upon Christians. Andy, what reasons do you think would support that position?

Andy. I knew you would ask that, so I've jotted down some Scripture references. Romans 6:14 says, 'we are not under law but under grace'; similarly Galatians 3:25 claims that the Christian is 'no longer under the supervision of the Law' and Galatians 5:18 says, 'If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.'

Jane. I've got another one. In 2 Corinthians 3:11 Paul tells us that the law 'was fading away' whereas the gospel lasts.

Pastor. Let's stop there so that we can take your arguments in turn. Perhaps the verses you quote need a little more careful examination because there are other passages in the New Testament that emphasis the continuing value of the Old Testament law.

Jane. For example?

Pastor. Here are just a few: Romans 15:4 tells us, 'Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement

of the Scriptures we might have hope.' Romans 3:31 asks, 'Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law'; and 1 Timothy 1:8 says, 'We know that the law is good if a man uses it properly.' And don't forget 2 Timothy 3:16-17: 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' This is primarily a reference to the Old Testament and it is hard to understand what Paul meant by 'all Scripture' if the Old Testament law has no relevance for Christians.

Andy. I can see that. So just swapping Bible texts doesn't prove the argument one way or the other.

Pastor. No it doesn't, but that doesn't mean we can ignore those passages. As you rightly say 'swapping Bible texts' is not the way - it never is. What we have to do is to understand the whole teaching of the Bible and examine particular passages carefully.

Jane. But isn't another argument against our need to obey Old Testament law the fact that it is all summarised in the new law of love? Isn't this what Paul means in Romans 13:9 where, after listing four of the Ten Commandments, he concludes that they are all 'summed up in this one rule: "love your neighbour as yourself."' In other words, if we love we don't need the law.

Andy. That seems to make sense to me. Aren't all the moral requirements of the Old Testament laws covered by this 'royal law' of Christ that we should love one another?

Pastor. Yes, of course they are. But in saying that you have just proved they are all still valid. After all, a summary doesn't do away with the parts it summarises, does it?

Andy. I'm afraid you've lost me. I think you had better explain that.

Pastor. What I mean is that by saying the rule of love is a summary of all God's laws in the Old Testament, we actually prove its value rather than denying it because a summary includes all the things it summarises. Let me give you an illustration. You don't announce to your friend: 'I've just bought a few hundred assorted nuts and bolts, several metres of upholstery - and I'm going to take Jane out in them this afternoon!' It's more likely that you will call all those items a 'car'. But the word 'car' is a summary which includes all those parts. It's the same with God's law. In Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus answered the question: 'Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' by stating the importance of love for God and our neighbour; but then he added, 'All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.' That was another way of saying these two sum up all the others. When Paul tells us in Romans 9:13 that love is a 'summary' of the law, and in Galatians 5:14 that love 'fulfils' the law, he is saying the same thing. He means that love, far from dispensing with the law, actually includes it.

Andy. So, what did Jesus mean in John 13:34 when he told his disciples that he was giving them a 'new commandment' that they should love one another?

Pastor. He certainly didn't mean that he was giving them a rule that no one had ever heard before, because 'love your neighbour as yourself' - you may be surprised to know - comes straight from Leviticus 19:18; and Leviticus is right in the middle of a Bible book about the law.

Jane. So what did Jesus mean in John 13:34 when he said to his disciples, 'A new commandment I give to you'?

Pastor. If you look carefully at that passage you will see he immediately went on to describe the kind of love he expected from his disciples: 'Even as I have loved you, so you must love one another.' In other words what was new was not love, but the standard and quality of love. We might call that the New Testament 'plus factor'.

Andy. I must admit I'd never looked at it like that and I had no idea that the rule of love is found in Leviticus. But surely another argument against the continuing value of the law is that in the Sermon on the Mount Christ said he came to fulfil the law. Doesn't that imply that he brought it to an end?

Pastor. Hardly! Especially if you read that whole passage in Matthew 5:17-20. The word 'fulfil' has a number of meanings. It can mean to fill up something just as the wind fills up the sails of a boat, or as the Christian is filled with the Spirit. The word can also mean to complete something on time - like Galatians 4:4 which tells us that God sent his Son into the world 'when the time had fully come.' The same word has the meanings finishing something that has been started, or fulfilling a request or prophecy, or carrying out something fully.

Jane. So which did Jesus mean?

Pastor. Verse 18 makes it clear that Jesus didn't mean that he brought the law to an end. Interestingly, Jesus used exactly the same word when he insisted on John baptising him: 'It is proper for us to fulfil all righteousness' - that's in Matthew 3:15 where the word 'fulfil' means to carry out something fully. In other words Jesus had to do everything that made him completely righteous. I can see no reason why the word should not mean the same in Matthew 5:17.

Jane. Are you saying that Jesus came to carry out the law by obeying all its commands and to carry out the words of the prophets by doing all they said he would do?

Pastor. That's right. And because he kept the law perfectly he himself became a summary of the law. Remember that a summary includes the parts, so in Matthew 5:19, Jesus confirms the relevance and authority of the Law and the Prophets when he says, 'Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven.'

Andy. But I have heard it argued that these 'commandments' in Matthew 5:19 refer not to the Old Testament law, but to rules Jesus himself was about to give in the Sermon on the Mount.

Pastor. That's clever but not convincing. After all, Jesus had just been talking about the 'Law and the Prophets', and had not yet preached his sermon, so the only 'commandments' the disciples would think of would be those contained in the Law and the Prophets. Besides, the detailed instructions that follow in his sermon are in fact an explanation of how we should obey these 'commandments' referred to in Matthew 5:19. Have you noticed that on another occasion, when Jesus appeared to announce the end of the Law and the Prophets, he immediately confirmed their continuing value? I'm referring to Luke 16:16, 'The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time the good news of the Kingdom of God is being preached.' He obviously doesn't mean that the Law and the Prophets are no longer preached but that before now there was nothing else. Notice how he reaffirms in the very next verse that it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the Law to lose its relevance.

Andy. Let me see if I've got this straight so far. There are Scriptures which demonstrate the value and relevance of the Old Testament law today, and which show that the law of love is not a replacement but a summary of the commandments. Christ came not to do away with the Law and the Prophets but to confirm the law and complete all righteousness. So, far from bringing the law to an end, he actually requires his disciples to follow his example of keeping it perfectly.

Pastor. Yes, that's a fair summing up.

Jane. But that doesn't answer the fact that Romans 6:14 says we are 'not under law but under grace'; and what about Galatians 3:25 which says we are 'not longer under the supervision of the law'?

Pastor. Those are important verses, Jane, and they remind us that we must maintain the balance of the Bible, and keep an eye on the context of the phrases we often use as proof texts. Let's start with Romans 6:14. In chapters 3-5 Paul has been outlining the great doctrine of justification by faith and explaining its benefits. Then he faces the suggestion that if we can be declared free from sin and guilt by God through faith alone, surely we can sin as much as we like without it affecting our justification. Paul's answer is to remind his readers that the justified person is also given new life by the Spirit and becomes dead to the old life of sin. Sin cannot be master of the true Christian because what has the upper hand in his life is not the law of God that condemns, but grace, the loving mercy of God which sets us free and gives new life. In other words the phrase 'not under law' doesn't mean that the law is now irrelevant, but that it is not the ruling factor in the Christian's life. Instead, grace is the ruling factor, and the law cannot condemn me because God has justified me.

Jane. But what does Galatians 3:25 mean when it says that we are no longer under the supervision of the law?

Pastor. Well, you know that in the Old Testament there are two parts to the law: we often call the first part the 'moral law' because it told the people how to live in the way that pleased God. The moral law governed hundreds of details in the lives of the Israelites, including who they could marry, how they were to sow their crops, how they should build their houses and lots more. Above all it also included the Ten

Commandments. The second part we call the 'ceremonial law' because it told the people how to worship in the way that pleased God. The ceremonial law covered hundreds of details in the religious life of the Israelites including their sacrifices, the priests' clothing, and special religious festivals. However, the Bible itself never actually uses the two phrases 'moral law' and 'ceremonial law' and often when the word 'law' is used by Jesus and the apostles it simply refers to the whole of the Old Testament.

Jane. So why do you make that distinction if the Bible doesn't?

Pastor. I didn't say the Bible doesn't make a distinction, only that it doesn't use the two phrases 'moral law' and 'ceremonial law'. However, Jesus clearly implied a distinction between the two. In Mark 10:19 he reminded a young man of the moral law and told him to keep the Ten Commandments; but in John 4:21-24, he told the Samaritan woman that the ceremonial, or religious law was coming to an end and that soon there would be no special value in the temple at Jerusalem as a place of worship.

Jane. I can see that, but what has it got to do with Galatians 3:25?

Pastor. In writing to the Galatians Paul has a particular problem in mind. Someone had been telling these young Christians that in addition to trusting in Christ for salvation they must keep the Old Testament ceremonial laws as well - like circumcision. Therefore Paul sets out to prove that in order to be a Christian we must trust in Christ alone because we do not earn salvation by obeying the Old Testament ceremonial law. He makes that absolutely clear in 2:16, 'By observing the law no one will be justified.' But in case someone thinks Paul is dismissing the law altogether, he tells us about its value. In verse 23 he says that the ceremonial law was like a guard to make sure we didn't break free from God and make up our own rules. Then in verses 24-25 he says it was like a supervisor or schoolteacher to prepare the way for the coming of Christ - remember that all the Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies were just pictures of the coming Christ. Now that we are justified by faith in Christ we no longer need the law as a prison guard or as a supervisor because, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:26 and 5:1, we are children of God and we are therefore free.

Jane. But in saying that haven't you made a good case for saying that the law is no longer relevant for the Christian?

Pastor. Not at all. Paul argues that the law is no longer a prison guard and supervisor of the Christian but that is not to say that it has no relevance. In Romans 10:4 Paul claims that Christ is 'the end of the law', but he doesn't mean Christ puts an end to the law, he means that Christ is the goal to which the law has been moving. Just as we say to someone: 'What end have you in mind by doing this?' As the moral law points to the necessity for Christ as the one who would keep it perfectly, so the ceremonial law points to the sacrifice of Christ. That's why we said earlier that Christ 'fulfilled' the law - he both kept it and carried it out.

Jane. I can see that the law prepared for the coming of Christ, but I'm still not sure what its value is for the Christian today.

Pastor. The whole of God's law - all the Old Testament if you like - is holy and, according to Paul in Romans 7:12, 'the commandment is holy, righteous and good.' Remember that some of it told the Jews how to live and some of it told them how to worship - it was a guard to make sure they didn't break free from God, and a schoolteacher to lead them to Christ. When Christ came he fulfilled all the ceremonial law because he was the only priest and sacrifice that could take away sin, but he also fulfilled the moral law by keeping it perfectly.

Jane. That still doesn't tell me how far I have to go to keep the Old Testament moral law as a Christian.

Pastor. I'm coming to that now. Of course we have to realise there are some things that the law cannot do. It cannot save us or even add anything to our salvation. We need only to read Romans 3:28 to prove this: 'We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.' That much is clear to every true Christian. However, breaking the law of God is still the description of sin; according to 1 John 3:4, 'Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact sin is lawlessness.' Obedience to the Ten Commandments is therefore one test of a desire to please God in everything. But let's start with the way Jesus used the Old Testament law. He frequently challenged the people, 'Have you not read in the law?' or 'What is written in the law?' - in other words, far from dismissing the value of the law, he wanted them to learn how to use it. Similarly the New Testament writers often refer back to the law to support their argument. In 1 Corinthians 9:8 Paul writes: 'Doesn't the law say the same thing?' and in the following verse he adds, 'It is written in the law of Moses . . .'. Later in 14:21 and 34 Paul supports his arguments with, 'In the law it is written' and 'as the law says'. In fact in 1 Corinthians 9:21 Paul states clearly, 'I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law.'

Andy. What does that mean?

Pastor. This may be one of the most significant verses in our discussion because Paul is saying that as a Christian he is to live under the authority of the law of God, but motivated and controlled by Christ's law of love.

Andy. So there was a definite shift in the way the Jew and the Christian approach the moral law?

Pastor. Yes, if by the word 'Jew' you are thinking of the Pharisees and others who thought that merely by an outward obedience to law they could earn salvation. The real Israelite who trusted God obeyed the law out of love. Paul told Timothy, 'We know that the law is good if a man uses it properly', so, as Christians, we must use the law properly. You see, although we are under the great law of love, we are still fallen and sinful people and often, too often, we don't love God or our neighbour as we should. The law is there as a guide, to give us examples of the way our love should show itself. By listening carefully to the way Jesus and his disciples used the law we can learn how we should use it. Do you remember that when I referred to Galatians 5:14 a little while ago I said that a summary doesn't do away with the parts?

Andy. Yes, you used the illustration of the bits that go to make up a car.

Pastor. Right, well here's another illustration from the garage. When you are mending your car the workshop manual will probably give you a general summary such as 'On re-assembly do not overtighten any bolts'; that is like Paul saying in Galatians 5:14&16 that love is a summary of the law or 'live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desire of the sinful nature.' But each bolt has its own individual torque .

Jane. What's torque?

Andy. The amount of tightness.

Pastor. . . . So you have to refer to the handbook to know the torque for each bolt. The Old Testament is a bit like that. Sometimes we need to know what God expects on a particular matter so that we can live in love and by the Spirit. Take the matter of giving our money to God for example. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul encourages us to give regularly, and proportionately to our income, but as he doesn't tell us what proportion to give we cannot make this a matter of law for Christians. However, the value of the Old Testament law is that it lays down an obligation on the Israelite to tithe, which means giving one tenth, and therefore provides us with the pattern that pleases God. In other words we have used the Old Testament as our torque. Let's see this from Romans 13:8-10. Jane could you read that for us please?

Jane. 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.'

Andy. I think I can see the point. Paul considers that all the commandments are valid for the life of the Christian, but if we follow the summary of love we will not need them as law. On the other hand if we step out of line then the law is there to remind us of what God says is right and wrong.

Pastor. Correct. Here's an illustration Jane may find more helpful. When you start to play the piano there is a lot of hard work and attention to detail; but once you have mastered the rules they become, as it were, part of you, and you obey them without thinking. You are not free from the rules but you have freedom in obeying them. When you make a mistake it's those rules of music that show you where you went wrong.

Jane. Is that what Jeremiah 31:33 means when the prophet speaks of the gospel as a time when God will put his laws in our minds and write them on our hearts?

Pastor. Yes, exactly that. And Psalm 40:8 says the same thing: 'To do your will, O God, is my desire; your law is within my heart.' So, to sum up, the law is still vital for our Christian life because it helps us to see how holy God is, it helps to define sin, and it helps to keep us in check when we step out of line. For the Christian the law is

not an enemy, but a friend whose directions we love; and it brings freedom, not bondage, because the royal law of love now controls us. Remember, the whole of the Old Testament is for our instruction. Far from law and love being opposites, the law actually defines and describes love.

Jane. I think I follow what you are saying, but could you explain a little more fully what you mean by the law defining and describing love? It sounds a bit complicated.

Pastor. If love is our only test of whether an action is right or wrong that leaves us what a very subjective and uncertain basis. Two young people may justify pre-marital sex on the basis of love; a husband may defend his adultery on the basis of love; the murder of a cruel husband may be prompted by love for the wife and children. Who is to say whether these actions are right or wrong? It is God's law that regulates love. When we say 'God is love' how do we know that that means?

Jane. Surely we can see it in Christ?

Pastor. That's right - and Christ was the perfect law-keeper. He fulfilled all righteousness and allowed his life to be governed by law. His love was seen by the way he lived out the law. That is our pattern.

Andy. Let's see if I have got a correct summary of your arguments in support of the importance and value of the Old Testament law for the life of the Christian: Firstly there are many passages that, understood in their context, show the value of the law. Secondly that love, as a summary of the law, far from abolishing the law actually includes it - just as any summary includes the parts it summarises. Thirdly, the 'new commandment' of love that Jesus introduced was not new in the sense of never being known before, because it is actually found in Leviticus 19:18, but it was new because he set a new standard: 'as I love you, so you must love one another.' Fourthly, in Matthew 5:17-20 Christ claimed to have kept the law perfectly and he clearly told us that we must do the same; he did not come to abolish the law which continues in force 'until heaven and earth disappear.' Fifthly, verses like Romans 6:14 and Galatians 3:25 remind us that although the law is still our guide, we are not under slavery and fear but we follow it out of love because it leads us to the necessity of Christ as our law-keeper and Saviour. And finally, the law of God still defines and describes what sin is and regulates the meaning of love.

Jane. That sounds a brilliant summary to me.

Andy. Thanks! But I still want to know whether the New Testament helps us to know how we should apply the Old Testament law today?

Pastor. Yes it does. When Paul wrote in Romans 15:4 that 'Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us', don't you think that he was encouraging us to take the whole of the Old Testament seriously? We know that bestiality is wrong because Exodus 20:19 says so; we know that mediums and spiritists are wrong because Deuteronomy 18:11 says so, and we know what relatives we must not marry because Leviticus 18 tells us. In 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul refers to Deuteronomy 25:4, 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the corn' to support his argument that Christian workers have a right to expect support from

those who receive their ministry. In the Corinthian passage Paul is quite clear that in Deuteronomy God is more concerned for the principle than for the ox: 'Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?'

Andy. That seems to bring us to the other approach we referred to at the beginning. There are those who believe we should apply the Old Testament moral laws as a basis either for national legislation or personal living - or both - because God's Word is unchanging in its relevance and authority.

Pastor. There are two or three ways used to describe this approach to the Old Testament: the first is Theonomy, which is Greek for 'God's Law', and it is the view that we are under an obligation to keep the Old Testament moral laws unless they are cancelled or modified by the New Testament, and that these laws are still the standard by which all national laws should be modelled.

Andy. That sounds reasonable. What's the other way of describing this?

Pastor. Some Christians believe that as we get nearer to the Second Coming of Christ there will be an increasing influence of the gospel upon the nations until the majority of people, or at least a significant minority, will want to be governed by the just laws of the Old Testament. They believe we should start the process now by reminding governments of God's Laws. Sometimes this is referred to as Dominion Theology. But the more popular term used to describe this position is Christian Reconstruction. The leaders in Christian Reconstruction today come from the United States of America and the big names at present are Rousas John Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen and David Chilton. Their books tend to be incredibly long and detailed. Gary North has produced a four volume 'An Economic Commentary on the Bible' and the two volumes on Genesis to Exodus alone amount to over 2,600 pages!

Jane. I hope you're not going to ask us to read them!

Pastor. No, but let me try to summarise the position of Christian Reconstruction. The starting point is that the whole of the Bible, the Old as well as the New Testament, is relevant to the world today - not just to the church but to the whole world. Whilst Reconstructionists believe the ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ - so there is no more need for animal sacrifices and priestly rituals - they insist that the Old Testament law provides a pattern that even modern governments ought to follow. They believe every nation should be governed or 'reconstructed' by God's laws.

Jane. You mean that the laws God gave to Moses for governing the nation of Israel should be used for governing the nations today?

Pastor. Generally, yes. And they would point to passages like Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Proverbs 14:34 and Isaiah 2:2-4 to show that the laws of God are always the best laws for the nations. The reason why the books of Reconstructionists are so long and detailed is that they make a serious attempt to show how the Old Testament applies today.

Andy. But surely the Old Testament laws were just for the nation of Israel before Christ came? And some of the laws and the punishments for failure to keep them are a bit primitive aren't they?

Pastor. Be careful Andy, because you may be suggesting more than you intend to! Are you really saying that the laws God gave for the moral and spiritual health of his people are 'primitive'? Does that include the Ten Commandments? And how do we know these laws were for the guidance only of Israel? Let's look at one of those passages I referred to just now. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 God tells his people that they must keep his laws, 'For this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" Then God adds these words, 'What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?' Doesn't that suggest that God's laws are a reflection of his holy character?

Andy. Yes, but are the Old Testament laws all relevant for us today? Hasn't God modified any of them?

Pastor. The answer to that is, yes they are, and, yes he has! If any nation today wants to know how best to govern its people where better can it learn than from God's laws revealed to Israel? But certainly there are some changes that God himself has made clear to us.

Andy. For example?

Pastor. For a start the whole of the ceremonial law that we talked about earlier was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, so the laws of sacrifice, priesthood and religious festivals . . .

Andy. . . . are no longer relevant.

Pastor. No, it's not true to say they are no longer relevant. It would be better to say that we no longer have to obey them to the letter because they are all completed in Christ. They are certainly relevant because they tell us a lot about God and worship and salvation, but Christ has accomplished everything the ceremonial laws pictured.

Andy. But I still have a problem in applying to our modern society all the laws given to Moses three and a half thousand years ago.

Pastor. I understand what you are saying Andy, but could that be simply because our nation has slipped a long, long way from listening to what God's Word has to say on everything?

Jane. Can you show us how relevant these laws are then?

Pastor. It's a massive subject, as the Reconstructionist books show, but suppose you suggest what you consider to be some of the key issues in our nation today - and we'll briefly see what the Old Testament laws have to say about them.

Andy. Crime and punishment is number one for me.

Jane. Ecology is high on the agenda for many. I mean, looking after our environment. Then there's unemployment and housing.

Andy. Health and safety.

Jane. And animal welfare.

Pastor. Hold it! That's probably enough to keep us going. Now of course the Old Testament doesn't deal with all the detail of a modern technological society, but I think I can show you how Old Testament laws give basic principles on each of those issues. Let's start with Andy's concern about crime and punishment. It is interesting that Moses built no prisons in the desert nor did Joshua in the Promised Land. Economic crimes such as theft and arson were punished by making the criminal adequately compensate the victim, and if he couldn't pay he was made to work for his victim until he had! Violence was met with physical punishment and more serious crimes with the death penalty. We haven't time to go into detail now, but God's severe response to serious crimes was neither unjust nor 'primitive'.

Andy. And health and safety?

Pastor. Let me give you just two examples that provide us with principles we use today. Exodus 21 sets out laws for Israel indicating the responsibility of the owner of a dangerous animal to keep it under control, and the duty of someone who digs a pit to cover it over. Similarly Deuteronomy 22:8 instructs the people that when they build a house with a flat roof for people to walk on, they must erect a parapet as a safety measure. All this may seem obvious to us, but only in the last one hundred years or so have such responsibilities been covered by legislation in our country - and in many nations today there are still no such safety regulations. So we can say that the Old Testament does give us certain principles about health and safety.

Jane. Does the Old Testament have anything to say about looking after our environment and about animal welfare?

Pastor. Yes it does. But again we would not be looking for exact laws to copy, but principles to apply. Remember that God included even the animals in his provision of a day of rest each week, and Proverbs 12:10 tells us that 'A righteous man is kind to his animals.' There is an interesting passage in Deuteronomy 22:6-7 that helped the people to care for their natural resources; they could take the eggs or young from a nest for food, but they must not harm the hen bird. In other words God was teaching them not to ignore the importance of using our natural resources with the future in mind. All simple lessons perhaps, but the nations have not been very good at learning them.

Jane. What about unemployment and housing?

Pastor. The Old Testament recognises that there will always be those who are poor and that's why such passages as Deuteronomy 24:10-22 specifically remind us of

our responsibility not to exploit such people, but to care for them. It does not take very much thought to find modern applications for the whole of a passage like this.

Andy. So, is all this what you call Christian Reconstruction?

Pastor. No. This is Theonomy - showing how relevant Old Testament law is today. There is nothing new in this; evangelical Christians have been applying the Old Testament in this way for centuries. Admittedly we didn't give it the name 'theonomy', but that's what we have been doing.

Andy. Then, remind us again what Christian Reconstruction is.

Pastor. Reconstructionists believe that a time of wonderful gospel success will come just before the return of Christ, and that during this time the nations will be governed by the Old Testament law. They also believe that we should start this process of reforming the nations by reminding governments to return to those Old Testament laws for their legislation.

Jane. Is that wrong?

Pastor. I have no problem with the basic approach of theonomy - though I don't particularly like the name - but I do have some concern about Christian Reconstruction. In the first place it has become something of a movement, and for many of its followers it appears to be the most important thing in their lives. It is also tied in with the view that through persistent witness of the church and a powerful Holy Spirit revival there will come a time when the gospel will triumph across the world and the authority of Christ and his Word will be accepted by at least a significant minority of people. Those who belong to this movement believe that it is then that the Old Testament will be accepted as the foundation for the laws of the nations. The Reconstructionist view of the 'end times' is called post-millennialism; the belief that Christ will return in glory after (post) this wonderful period of biblical rule (millennium). However, not all post-millennialists are Reconstructionists, and not all Reconstructionists are post-millennial either!

Jane. Now I'm getting confused again!

Pastor. Don't worry, we won't get into the subject of the millennium now!

Jane. We might ask you about that at some other time! Are you saying that if they are wrong about this final end-of-time hope then a big part of their agenda is irrelevant because there will be no reconstruction of the nations?

Pastor. That's right. Fallen, sinful man will never accept God's law over society - and history shows that every attempt at this has failed. But talking about agendas, Jane, that is my second problem with Christian Reconstruction. When you read the New Testament you just do not find this idea of reconstructing the nations according to God's laws on the agenda of the apostles.

Andy. You mean that Paul would be happy to apply the law to the lives of Christians so that they would be examples to the world, but he did not set out to reform governments.

Pastor. Exactly. Nowhere in the New Testament are we told either that there will come a time when nations will accept God's laws or that we should start the programme of Reconstruction now. That doesn't mean that we can't point magistrates or politicians to the Old Testament, but it is not to be too high on the agenda of the local church or in the life of the Christian. Significantly, when Paul wrote to the Christians in Romans 13 about the duty of governments and those governed, he made no reference to Old Testament law. You might expect Paul to have taken this opportunity to set out his agenda for Reconstruction, but in 1 Corinthians 5:12 he specifically asks the Corinthians: 'What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?' Although Christians may be politicians and Christians may remind politicians of their obligations, politics is not on the church's programme.

Andy. What should be high on our agenda then?

Pastor. Evangelism and the reformation of the church. To be fair, Reconstructionists would agree with that; it's just that their emphasis has become a bit out of balance and that's why, as I said a moment ago, their views have turned into a movement.

Jane. Have you any other criticisms of Reconstruction?

Pastor. Yes. Reconstructionists are often slow to recognise that some of the things prohibited in the laws given to Israel were not wrong for other nations. For example, according to Deuteronomy 14:21 the Jews could not eat the meat of an animal they found dead - but the nations could. In Deuteronomy 23 the Israelites were forbidden to lend money at interest to each other but they could to foreigners; and they were allowed to eat fruit from their neighbours' orchards or vineyards provided they did not put the fruit into a basket. These laws did not apply to the nations. They were there to show the Israelites that they must live to a standard the other nations could not hope to reach. This is probably illustrated by the command in Deuteronomy 22:9 that the people of Israel must not plant two kinds of seed in a field; the only purpose of that rule may be to show God's chosen nation that they were to be completely different and separate from everyone else. There are always some things that are not wrong for the world, but are wrong for the people who belong to God. That's why in 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul reminds us that although 'everything is permissible . . . not everything is beneficial.'

Andy. Are you saying that some things in the laws of Moses only apply to God's chosen people and not to ungodly nations then or now?

Pastor. Yes I am saying that; the word used to describe this is 'discontinuity' - some things are discontinued. Reconstructionists do accept this principle of discontinuity, but I would use it to cover a wider area of issues. You see, we must not overlook some significant differences between Israel in the Old Testament and any other nation today.

Jane. Such as?

Pastor. In the first place, some of the laws, as I have just been saying, were inseparably linked with the fact that, as we read in Deuteronomy 23:14, 'The Lord your God moves about in your camp' and he was not to see anything unclean among them. Sometimes moral, social and ceremonial laws were bound up together. In Deuteronomy 14 we have a list of the clean and unclean foods for the Israelite. Some of this was wise health advice; we still only eat herbivores - that's plant eating animals - and not carnivores. But for the Israelite it wasn't just a matter of dietary health; it was a moral sin for him to disobey those laws. It is clear from Acts 10:9-15 and 1 Timothy 4:3-4, that we are released from the moral guilt aspect of those laws, though we may still follow the wisdom of them. In this way God discontinued his rules for Israel when the church came into being. But we cannot assume that these laws were ever intended as a standard for the nations around Israel even in the Old Testament. Then again the Israelites had the Urim and Thummim, which are referred to in Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 33, to guide them.

Jane. What were they?

Pastor. No one can know for sure, but it was clearly a supernatural method of making judgements in hard cases. No nation since the Old Testament Israel has had that powerful provision.

Andy. You are clearly not happy with some of the arguments of the Reconstructionists, partly because the system is often tied up with their hope of reforming the nations towards the end of time, partly because their strong emphasis upon reconstructing nations according to Old Testament law was not on the agenda of the apostles, and partly because they don't take sufficient note of the big differences between Old Testament Israel and every nation since.

Pastor. However, Christian Reconstruction is not a heresy and its leading writers are sincere evangelical men who believe firmly that the Bible is without error. They are making a serious attempt to understand the Old Testament law very seriously. I don't agree with them in a number of areas but that does not mean that I cannot respect their sincerity. Too many Christians use the Old Testament just as a book of spiritual illustrations and completely neglect the fact that we learn there what God's standards are for every area of human relationships. It is sad that some Christians think that much of the Old Testament is irrelevant to their life today and so regard it as uninteresting and even boring. On the contrary, to find that all of it is relevant, and to begin to apply it to every area of life, may require some hard work but it is very exciting.