

APPENDIX TWO – THE DECALOGUE IN THE THOUGHT OF KEY REFORMED THEOLOGIANS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JOHN OWEN

Introduction

In this Appendix, we will explore the thought of John Owen, as well as several other Reformed theologians from the 16th-18th centuries, on the functions of the Decalogue. We will note the various nuances of terminology and theological formulation among Reformed theologians of the past. But we will also see basic methodological and theological continuity from John Calvin to Thomas Boston. This, once again, displays Owen's continuity with the Reformed tradition and the continuity among the Reformed orthodox on this subject. As will be seen, the Reformed orthodox approached this subject utilizing a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, something we noted in Chapter Six.

Our focus will be upon John Owen. He is not always easy to understand and has been misused on the issue of the functions of the Decalogue. We will seek to allow him to speak for himself, offer some observations, and compare Owen's statements with those of others before and after him. This will display, among other things, the fact that Owen fits within the broader theological tradition of Reformed thought on the functions of the Decalogue in redemptive history.

John Owen and other Key Reformed Theologians from the 16th-18th Centuries on the Functions of the Decalogue

• The Perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant in Owen and Others

1. John Owen. In his Hebrews commentary, Owen teaches that Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3 refer to the Decalogue being written on the heart of New Covenant saints. Commenting on Hebrews 9:5, he says:

This law, as unto the substance of it, was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works; for it contained the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image, and nothing else. It was the whole of what God designed in our creation unto his own glory and our everlasting blessedness. What was in the tables of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally; and which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant, Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:3.¹

Consider these observations relevant to our subject. *First*, the law, in the context of Owen's discussion, refers to the law contained on the tables of stone (i.e., the Decalogue). *Second*, Owen is considering the Decalogue "as unto the substance of it" and not necessarily as to the form and/or function of it under the Old Covenant.² *Third*, he claims that the Decalogue "was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works." *Fourth*, he claims that the Decalogue, as to the substance of it, "contained the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image." *Fifth*, he claims that "what was in the tables of

¹ Owen, *Works of John Owen*, XXII:215.

² Protestant Scholasticism taught that the Decalogue summarily contains the moral law and is the inscripturated form of the natural law, as to its *substance*. A distinction was made between *substance* and *form*. *Substance* is one; *form* may vary. Hence, when the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 98 says, "The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments," it refers to the fact that the *substance* (i.e., the underlying essence) of the Moral Law is assumed and articulated in the propositions of the Decalogue as contained in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The *form* fits the redemptive-historical circumstances in which it was given. The *substance* or underlying principles are always relevant and applicable to man. The application may shift based on redemptive-historical changes, such as the inauguration of the New Covenant, but its *substance* and utility never changes.

stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally.” *Sixth*, he claims that “what was in the tables of stone” (and written on the heart of man at creation) is that “which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant.” And *finally*, he references Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3. Owen, on this exegetical basis, clearly believed in the perpetuity (as to its substance) of the entire Decalogue under the New Covenant.

Owen continues:

Although this law as a covenant was broken and disannulled by the entrance of sin, and became insufficient as unto its first ends, of the justification and salvation of the church thereby, Rom viii. 3; yet as a law and rule of obedience it was never disannulled, nor would God suffer it to be. Yea, one principal design of God in Christ was, that it might be fulfilled and established, Matt. v. 17, 18; Rom iii. 31. For to reject this law, or to abrogate it, had been for God to have laid aside that glory of his holiness and righteousness which in his infinite wisdom he designed therein. Hence, after it was again broken by the people as a covenant, he wrote it a second time himself in tables of stone, and caused it to be safely kept in the ark, as his perpetual testimony. That, therefore, which he taught the church by and in all this, in the first place, was, that this law was to be fulfilled and accomplished, or they could have no advantage of or benefit by the covenant.³

From this statement, the following observations also are relevant. *First*, Owen distinguishes between how the Decalogue functioned in the covenant of works and how it functions “as a law and rule of obedience.” *Second*, he connects this law with God’s holiness and righteousness. In other words, Owen views the Decalogue as a perpetual “law and rule of obedience” because it is related to God’s holiness and righteousness (i.e., his unchangeable nature).

Continuing, and concentrating on how Christ is the true ark (the antitype of the Old Covenant’s Ark of the Covenant), he says:

In his *obedience unto God* according unto the law he is the true *ark*, wherein the law was kept inviolate; that is, was fulfilled, answered, and accomplished, Matt. v. 17; Rom. viii. 3, x. 4. Hence by God’s gracious dealing with sinners, pardoning and justifying them freely, the law [i.e., Decalogue] is not disannulled, but established, Rom. iii. 31. That this was to be done, that without it no covenant between God and man could be firm and stable, was the principal design of God to declare in all this service; without the consideration thereof it was wholly insignificant. This was the original mystery of all these institutions, that in and by the obedience of the promised seed, the everlasting, unalterable law should be fulfilled.⁴

Several observations are worthy of note. *First*, in the context of Owen’s discussion, the law is that which was placed in the ark (i.e., the Decalogue as written by God on stone tablets). *Second*, he says that this law was fulfilled, answered, and accomplished by Christ. *Third*, he says that the obedience of Christ to this law effects our justification. *Fourth*, he says that the law is not disannulled but established. *Fifth*, he teaches that all of this was typified in the Ark of the Covenant. And *finally*, he says that the law is *everlasting* and *unalterable*, probably due to its reflection of God’s holiness and righteousness.⁵

Owen’s use of Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3 was not novel. Others who held to his basic understanding argued for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant on the same exegetical grounds.⁶

³ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215, 16.

⁴ Owen, *Works*, XXII:217, 18.

⁵ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

⁶ In my book *In Defense of the Decalogue (IDOTD)*, I provided exegetical evidence that Jer. 31:33 and 2 Cor. 3:3 speak directly to the issue of the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. I provided references to Old Testament and New Testament scholars to this end. The scholars I referenced are not all Reformed confessionals. I did this on purpose to show that one’s confessional commitments do not necessarily cloud one’s exegetical lenses. See

2. Herman Witsius. In his *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, while discussing the reason that God “engraved them [Ten Commandments] with his own finger,”⁷ Herman Witsius says:

Both because they contained the declaration or testimony of the divine will, and because the preservation of them by the Israelites, was a testimony of the law given to, and received by them at Sinai. This writing also signified the purpose of God, to write the law on the hearts of his elect, according to the promise of the covenant of grace, Jer. xxxi. 33.

Nor is it for nothing that God himself would be the author of this writing, without making use of any man or angel. For this is the meaning of the Holy Spirit, when he says, that the tablets were written with the finger of God, Exod. xxxi. 18. and that the writing was the writing of God, Exod. xxxii. 16. The reasons were, 1st. To set forth the pre-eminence of this law, which he permitted to be written by Moses. 2dly. To intimate, that it is the work of God alone, to write the law on the heart, which is what neither man himself, nor the ministers of God can do, but the Spirit of God alone. And thus believers are “the epistle of Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God,” 2 Cor. iii. 3.⁸

Witsius goes on to discuss the effects of God’s grace, saying, “But the grace of God will cancel that writing of sin, and in the room of it, will the graver of his most Holy Spirit, engrave on the same table of our heart the characters of his law.”⁹

The context is clear. Witsius sees Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3 as testimonies to the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. As shown above, Owen used these texts in a very similar context and with the same practical result.

3. Francis Turretin. Turretin also references both Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3. His use of these texts corresponds with Owen’s and Witsius’ use, at least to a degree. While discussing how the abrogation of the Moral Law (the Decalogue) is not to be considered absolutely, but relatively, he says,

It is one thing to be under the law as a covenant to acquire life by it (as Adam was) or as a schoolmaster and a prison to guard men until the advent of Christ; another to be under the law as a rule of life to regulate our morals piously and holily.¹⁰

The law is compared by Paul to “a dead husband” (Rom. 7:2, 3), not simply, but relatively with regard to the sway and rigorous dominion it obtained over us and the curse to which it subjected sinners; but not with regard to liberation from the duty to be performed to it. Thus the law threatening, compelling, condemning, is not “made for a righteous man” (1 Tim. 1:9) because he is impelled of his own accord to duty and is no longer influenced by the spirit of bondage and the fear of punishment (Rom. 8:15; Ps. 110:3), but the law directive and regulative of morals is always laid down for him and he ought to be under it.¹¹

Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2001), 16-24 and 34-38.

⁷ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, II:170.

⁸ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, II:170, 171.

⁹ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, II:171.

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1994), II:143.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:143.

What was given to the Jews as Jews can be for the use of the Jews alone; but what is given to the Jews as covenanted (or as the people of God simply) does not refer to them alone, but to all those who hold the same relation of people of God.¹²

Turretin says many more similar things. Suffice to say that he makes distinctions in the way the law is viewed. This is done to protect the Moral Law from an absolutist view of abrogation (see below) and to promote its perpetual utility. It is in this context that Turretin says, “‘If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law’ (Gal. 5:18, viz., compelling and cursing), but under it directing, inasmuch as the Spirit works that law upon our hearts (2 Cor. 3:2; Jer. 31:33).”¹³ In this context, the law which directs is the Moral Law (Decalogue). Hence, it is the Decalogue which “the Spirit works upon our hearts.”

4. Thomas Boston. Thomas Boston’s notes to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* reveal that at least one 18th century Reformed theologian held that Jeremiah 31:33 referred to the writing of the Decalogue on the heart under the New Covenant. Boston says:

One will not think it strange to hear, that the ten commandments were, as it were, razed out of man’s heart by the fall, if one considers the spirituality and vast extent of them, and that they were, in their perfection engraven on the heart of man, in his creation, and doth withal take notice of the ruin brought on man by the fall. Hereby he indeed lost the very knowledge of the law of nature, if the ten commandments are to be reckoned, as certainly they are, the substance and matter of that law; although he lost it not totally, but some remains thereof were left with him. Concerning these the apostle speaks, Rom. i. 19, 20; and ii. 14, 15. And our author teaches expressly, that the law is partly known by nature, that is, in its corrupt state, See page 181. And here he says, not simply, that the ten commandments were razed, though in another case (page 44), he speaks after that manner, where yet it is evident he means not a razing quite; but he says, “They were, as it were, razed.” But what are these remains of them in comparison with that body of natural laws, fairly written, and deeply engraven, on the heart of innocent Adam? If they were not, as it were, razed, what need is there of writing a new copy of them in the hearts of the elect, according to the promise of the new covenant? “I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” Heb. x. 16, and viii. 10; Jer. xxxi. 33.¹⁴

Like Witsius and Turretin before him, Boston proves that there were some in the 17th and 18th centuries who argued for the perpetuity of the Decalogue from Jeremiah 31:33 (and 2 Cor. 3:3), i.e., on the same exegetical ground as Owen.

Though Owen’s statements concerning Jeremiah 31:33 are not all equally clear, those provided above are clear enough to conclude that he used it and 2 Corinthians 3:3 in a context which argues for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. He does this in similar fashion as Witsius, Turretin, and Boston.

- **Matthew 5:17 and the Perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant in Owen and Others**

1. John Owen. In his Hebrews commentary, Owen argues for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant from Matthew 5:17. While discussing the foundations of the Sabbath, he says:

¹² Turretin, *Institutes*, II:145.

¹³ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:143, 144.

¹⁴ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, re. 1991), 177.

From these particular instances we may return to the consideration of the law of the decalogue in general, and the perpetual power of exacting obedience wherewith it is accompanied. That in the Old Testament it is frequently declared to be universally obligatory, and has the same efficacy ascribed unto it, without putting in any exceptions to any of its commands or limitations of its number, I suppose will be granted. The authority of it is no less fully asserted in the New Testament, and that also absolutely without distinction, or the least intimation of excepting the fourth command from what is affirmed concerning the whole. It is of the law of the decalogue that our Savior treats, Matt. v. 17-19. This he affirms that he came not to dissolve, as he did the ceremonial law, but to fulfill it; and then affirms that not one jot or tittle of it shall pass away. And making thereon a distribution of the whole into its several commands, he declares his disapprobation of them who shall break, or teach men to break, any one of them. And men make bold with him, when they so confidently assert that they may break one of them, and teach others so to do, without offense. That this reaches not to the confirmation of the seventh day precisely, we shall after-wards abundantly demonstrate.¹⁵

Commenting on Hebrews 9:3-5, Owen says:

Although this law as a covenant was broken and disannulled *by the entrance of sin*, and became insufficient as unto its first ends, of the justification and salvation of the church thereby, Rom. viii. 3; yet as a *law and rule of obedience* it was never disannulled, nor would God suffer it to be. Yea, one principal design of God in Christ was, that it might be fulfilled and established, Matt. v. 17, 18; Rom. iii. 31. For to reject this law, or to abrogate it, had been for God to have laid aside that glory of his holiness and righteousness which in his infinite wisdom he designed therein. Hence, after it was again broken by the people as a covenant, he wrote it a second time himself in tables of stone, and caused it to be safely kept in the ark, as his perpetual testimony. That, therefore, which he taught the church by and in all this, in the first place, was, that this law was to be fulfilled and accomplished, or they could have no advantage of or benefit by the covenant.¹⁶

Owen used Jeremiah 31:33 and 2 Corinthians 3:3 as proof of the perpetuity of the Decalogue. His use of Matthew 5:17 is to the same end.¹⁷

2. Zacharias Ursinus. While discussing how abrogation affects the Moral Law, Ursinus makes the point that “the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated in as far as obedience to it is concerned.”¹⁸ He then argues, “God continually, no less now than formerly, requires both the regenerate and the unregenerate to render obedience to his law.”¹⁹ As one of the reasons that he offers in proof of this proposition, he says:

From the testimony of Scripture: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” (Matt. 5:17.) This is spoken, indeed, of the whole law, but with a special reference to the moral law, which Christ has fulfilled in four respects ...²⁰

¹⁵ Owen, *Works*, XXIII:372.

¹⁶ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215, 216.

¹⁷ In *IDOTD*, I argued that Mt. 5:17 can be understood in such a way as not to eliminate the Decalogue from the New Covenant. As a matter of fact, I argued that it could be understood in such a way as not to eliminate the Old Testament from the New Covenant. For instance, after providing exegetical observations and conclusions and then testing my interpretation with the rest of the New Testament, I said: “The law of God, even the whole Old Testament, has its place under Christ, finding its realization in Him and its modified application in His kingdom. If the whole of the Old Testament is still binding, then certainly all its parts are as well.” See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 65. I realize my explanation has nuances Owen’s may not.

¹⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, re. n.d.), 496.

¹⁹ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 496.

²⁰ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 496.

Ursinus understands Matthew 5:17 in such a way as to demand the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant, as did Owen.

3. Francis Turretin. While offering “Proof that the law is not abrogated as to direction,”²¹ Turretin says, “Christ ‘did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law’ (Mt. 5:17). Therefore as it was not abolished but fulfilled by Christ, neither is its use among us to be abolished.”²²

It is now clear that Owen’s view of Matthew 5:17 (shared by Ursinus and Turretin) does not require the elimination of the Decalogue in all senses under the New Covenant.

- **The Multi-functional Utility of the Decalogue in Owen and Others**

1. John Owen. Owen viewed the Decalogue as having more than one function. He did not view it as Old Covenant law alone. His understanding of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue can be seen clearly in several places of his Hebrews commentary. For instance, commenting on Heb. 9:5 (referenced above), he says, “The law [the Decalogue], as unto the substance of it, was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works.”²³ Later he claims that “what was in the tables of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally; and which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant.”²⁴ Notice that he views the Decalogue as functioning several ways; *first*, “as unto the substance of it, ...the only law of creation”; *second*, “the rule of the first covenant of works”; *third*, that which “was in the tables of stone”; *fourth*, “a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally”; and *fifth*, that “which is returned [to the heart of man] again by the grace of the new covenant.”

Commenting on Hebrews 7:18, 19 (also referenced previously), he says:

Nor is it the whole *ceremonial law* only that is intended by “the command” in this place, but the *moral law* also [emphasis his], *so far as it was compacted with the other into one body of precepts for the same end* [emphasis added]; for with respect unto the efficacy of the whole law of Moses, as unto our drawing nigh unto God, it is here considered.²⁵

Here he views the Decalogue as a unit “so far as it was compacted with the other [ceremonial law] into one body of precepts for the same end.” In other words, he is considering the Decalogue not absolutely or in itself (see below), but relatively or as it was ‘compacted’ with the ceremonial law under the Old Covenant.

While discussing the causes of the Sabbath and arguing for the morality and immutability of the essence of the fourth commandment, he makes this statement concerning the nature and function of the Decalogue under the Old Covenant:

The nature of the decalogue, and the distinction of its precepts from all commands, ceremonial or political, comes now under consideration. The whole decalogue, I acknowledge, as given on mount Sinai to the Israelites, had a political use, as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their nation, as peculiarly under the rule of God. It had a place also in that economy or dispensation of the covenant which that church was then brought under; wherein, by God’s dealing with them and instructing of them, they were taught to look out after a further and greater good in the promise than they were yet come to the enjoyment of. Hence the Decalogue itself, in that dispensation of it, was a schoolmaster unto Christ.²⁶

²¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:142.

²² Turretin, *Institutes*, II:142.

²³ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

²⁴ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

²⁵ Owen, *Works*, XXI:458.

²⁶ Owen, *Works*, XVIII:365, 66.

First, Owen views the Decalogue as the core of the law of the Old Covenant. He says, “The whole decalogue, ...as given on mount Sinai to the Israelites, had a political use, as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their nation.” *Second*, he makes the point that the Decalogue was “made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government” of Israel under the Old Covenant. This is something that it was not until that time. He viewed it as already in existence, though in a different form and revealed in a different manner, but now being “made” something it was not. It was now “made” to fit the redemptive-historical conditions of the Old Covenant. This seems even more likely, since he goes on to say, “Some, indeed, of the precepts of it, as the first, fourth, and fifth, have either prefaces, enlargements, or additions, which belonged peculiarly to the then present and future state of that church in the land of Canaan.”²⁷ *Third*, he also viewed it as “a schoolmaster unto Christ.”

Next, speaking of the Decalogue “in itself, and materially,” he says:

But in itself, and materially considered, it was wholly, and in all the preceptive parts of it, absolutely moral. Some, indeed, of the precepts of it, as the first, fourth, and fifth, have either prefaces, enlargements, or additions, which belonged peculiarly to the then present and future state of that church in the land of Canaan; but these especial applications of it unto them change not the nature of its commands or precepts, which are all moral, and, as far as they are esteemed to belong to the Decalogue, are unquestionably acknowledged so to be.²⁸

Notice that he has transitioned from viewing the Decalogue in its Old Covenant functions to viewing the Decalogue in itself. We might say that he was considering it relatively speaking, as it functioned under the Old Covenant, but now he is considering it absolutely (or “in itself”), as it functions transcovenantally. *First*, he distinguishes between the Decalogue “as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their [Old Covenant Israel’s] nation” and “in itself.” Hence, “in itself” and “in all the preceptive parts of it,” the Decalogue is “absolutely moral.” *Second*, he says that the Decalogue under the Old Covenant had redemptive-historical “prefaces, enlargements, or additions” peculiar to the conditions in which they [the church in the land of Canaan] lived. These are positive, covenantal appendages added to the Decalogue and applicable to Old Covenant Israel in the land of Canaan.

From these statements, the following observations are relevant to our purpose. *First*, Owen viewed the Decalogue both relatively and absolutely, depending on its function in redemptive history. *Second*, he viewed the Decalogue (i.e., that which “was in tables of stone... as unto the substance of it”) functioning various ways and in all of the epochs of redemptive history. He saw it functioning in the Garden of Eden. He regarded it as the law of creation, the rule of the Adamic covenant of works, and the law that was written on Adam’s heart. He then saw it functioning in a special manner under the Old Covenant. He also saw it functioning under the New Covenant. He taught that it was this same law, as unto its substance, “which is returned thither [to the heart of man] again by the grace of the new covenant.”²⁹ He viewed it as the rule of life for all men,³⁰ because “in all the preceptive parts of it” it is “absolutely moral.” And as stated earlier, he viewed it as related to the active and passive obedience of Christ and hence, connected and essential to the doctrine of justification.³¹

²⁷ Owen, *Works*, XVIII:366.

²⁸ Owen, *Works*, XVIII:366.

²⁹ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

³⁰ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

³¹ Owen, *Works*, XXII:89, 90. “But in the new covenant, the very first thing that is proposed, is the accomplishment and establishment of the covenant of works, both as to its commands and sanction, in the obedience and suffering of the mediator.”

2. John Calvin. In many places Calvin clearly identified the Decalogue as a special form of the Natural Law.³² For instance, Calvin said, “Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.”³³ Calvin “saw the revealed law as given in the ten commandments as a specially accommodated restatement of the law of nature for the Jews.”³⁴ He clearly held that by nature Gentiles without special revelation possessed the general knowledge of the Decalogue, though that knowledge is obscured by sin.³⁵ Hesselink says, “There is no denying that for Calvin the content of the moral law is essentially the same as that inscribed on the hearts of humans ‘by nature’.”³⁶ Wendel says, “One can even say that, for Calvin, the Decalogue is only a special application of the natural law which God came to attest and confirm.”³⁷

Calvin’s view of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue is no secret. It is also evidenced by the fact that he clearly upheld the perpetuity of both tables of the law for New Covenant believers.³⁸ For instance, he says:

The whole law is contained under two heads. Yet our God, to remove all possibility of excuse, willed to set forth more fully and clearly by the Ten Commandments everything connected with the honor, fear, and love of him, and everything pertaining to the love toward men, which he for his own sake enjoins upon us.³⁹

Calvin clearly held that the Decalogue, all Ten Commandments, functioned as the basic, fundamental law of the Bible and as a universal ethical canon for all men based on creation. He also believed in the basic centrality of the entire Decalogue under the New Covenant. Similar to Owen, Calvin holds to the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

3. Zacharias Ursinus. As stated above, in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, while discussing the question “To What Extent Has Christ Abrogated The Law, And To What Extent Is It Still In Force,” Ursinus says, “The moral law has, as it respects one part, been abrogated by Christ; and as it respects another, it has not.”⁴⁰ He continues, “But the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated in as far as obedience to it is concerned.”⁴¹ Ursinus, like Owen and Calvin, holds to a multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

4. Francis Turretin. While discussing the use of the Moral Law, Turretin says:

A twofold use of the law may be laid down—absolute and relative. The former regards the law in itself; the latter regards the law in relation to the various states of man. The absolute (which obtains in every state of man) is that it may be a unique, full and certain rule of things to be done and avoided by each of us as well towards God as his neighbor. Thus there is no work truly and properly good and acceptable to God which does not agree with the law and is not prescribed by it; and whatsoever is not commanded nor forbidden by it is to be considered in its own nature

³² Some of the following material comes from Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 92, 93, and is used with permission from Founders Press.

³³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.viii.1.

³⁴ I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992), 51.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.1.

³⁶ Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 10.

³⁷ Francois Wendel, *Calvin, Origins and Developments of His Religious Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, re. 1997), 206.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.13.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.12.

⁴⁰ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 495.

⁴¹ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 496.

indifferent and left to the freedom of man, unless this freedom has been restricted by some positive law.⁴²

In Turretin, the Moral Law or Decalogue is the inscripturated form of the Natural Law.⁴³ Notice that Turretin views the Moral Law absolutely and relatively. Viewing it absolutely, it is applicable “in every state of man.” How does he view the Moral Law relatively? He continues:

The relative use is manifold according to the different states of man. (1) In the instituted state of innocence, it was a contract of a covenant of works entered into with man and the means of obtaining life and happiness according to the promise added to the law...

(2) In the destitute state of sin, the use of the law cannot be “justification” because it was weak in the flesh. ...Still there is a threefold use of the law [in man’s destitute state of sin]. (a) For conviction... (b) For restraint... (c) For condemnation...

(3) In the restored state of grace, it has a varied use with respect to the elect, both before and after their conversions. Antecedently, it serves (a) to convince and humble man... (b) To lead men to Christ...

It not only antecedently prepares the elect man for Christ, but consequently also directs him already renewed through Christ in the ways of the Lord; serving him as a standard and rule of the most perfect life...⁴⁴

Relatively, or considering the law in its relation ‘to the different states of man,’ the law has various functions as it pertains to the lost and the saved throughout all ages. In other words, there is a multi-functional utility to the law. Its utility transcends covenantal bounds. Due to the nature of the Decalogue, it cannot be eliminated from any era of redemptive history, which includes the New Covenant era. Turretin’s view is that of Owen, Calvin, and Ursinus.

5. Protestant Scholasticism. Richard Muller defines Moral Law in Protestant scholastic thought as follows:

[S]pecifically and predominantly, the *Decalogus*, or Ten Commandments; also called the *lex Mosaica* ..., as distinct from the *lex ceremonialis* ...and the *lex civilis*, or civil law. The *lex moralis*, which is primarily intended to regulate morals, is known to the *synderesis* [the innate habit of understanding basic principles of moral law] and is the basis of the acts of *conscientia* [conscience—the application of the innate habit above]. In substance, the *lex moralis* is identical with the *lex naturalis* ...but, unlike the natural law, it is given by revelation in a form which is clearer and fuller than that otherwise known to the reason.⁴⁵

While defining the Mosaic Law, he says:

...the moral law or *lex moralis* (q.v.) given to Israel by God in a special revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. In contrast to the moral law known in an obscure way to all rational creatures, the *lex Mosaica* is the clear, complete, and perfect rule of human conduct. The Protestant scholastics argue its completeness and perfection from its fulfillment, without addition, by Christ. Since the law does promise life in return for obedience, the Reformed argue that in one sense it holds forth the abrogated *foedus operum* (q.v.), or covenant of works, if only as the unattainable promise of the righteous God and the now humanly unattainable requirement for salvation apart from grace. In addition, the Reformed can argue that Christ’s perfect obedience did fulfill the covenant of works and render Christ capable of replacing Adam as federal head of humanity. Primarily, however, the Reformed view the law as belonging to the Old Testament *dispensatio* (q.v.) of the

⁴² Turretin, *Institutes*, II:137.

⁴³ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:6, 7.

⁴⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:138-140.

⁴⁵ Muller, *Dictionary*, 173-74.

foedus gratiae (q.v.), or covenant of grace. It is the norm of obedience given to God's faithful people to be followed by them with the help of grace. As a norm of obedience belonging to the *foedus gratiae*, the law remains in force under the economy of the New Testament. Lutheran orthodoxy, which does not follow the covenant schema typical of the Reformed, also views the law as the perfect standard of righteousness and the absolute norm of morals, which requires conformity both in outward conduct and inward obedience of mind, will, and affections.⁴⁶

These definitions of key theological terms and concepts used by Protestant Scholasticism amply display that it held to the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

Owen's view of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue comports with his view of abrogation (see below), Jeremiah 31:33, 2 Co. 3:3, and Matthew 5:17, and also with many of his theological contemporaries. There is a way to understand Owen on abrogation which both eliminates the Decalogue from the New Covenant and preserves it (see below). Relatively speaking, as the Decalogue functioned under the Old Covenant, it has been abrogated. Absolutely speaking, as the Decalogue represents and summarily comprehends the Moral Law as to its substance, it has not and cannot be abrogated. It has more than one function.

- **The Idea of Abrogation in Owen and Others**

1. John Owen. Owen teaches that the whole law of Moses (even the moral element) has been abrogated. Commenting on Hebrews 7:18, 19, Owen says:

I have proved before that "the commandment" in this verse [Heb. 7:18] is of equal extent and signification with "the law" in the next. And "the law" there doth evidently intend the whole law, in both the parts of it, moral and ceremonial, *as it was given by Moses unto the church of Israel* [emphasis added].⁴⁷

Commenting on Hebrews 7:12, Owen says:

It was the whole "law of commandments contained in ordinances," or the whole law of Moses, *so far as it was the rule of worship and obedience unto the church*; for that law it is that followeth the fates of the priesthood [emphasis added].⁴⁸

Wherefore the whole law of Moses, *as given unto the Jews*, whether as used or abused by them, was repugnant unto and inconsistent with the gospel, and the mediation of Christ, especially his priestly office, therein declared; neither did God either design, appoint, or direct that they should be co-existent [emphasis added].⁴⁹

Owen, of course, carefully qualifies what he means by the whole law and its abrogation. Commenting again on Hebrews 7:18, 19, he says:

Nor is it the whole *ceremonial law* only that is intended by "the command" in this place, but the *moral law* also [emphasis his], *so far as it was compacted with the other into one body of precepts for the same end* [emphasis added]; for with respect unto the efficacy of the whole law of Moses, as unto our drawing nigh unto God, it is here considered.⁵⁰

Again, Owen says:

⁴⁶ Muller, *Dictionary*, 174.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Works*, XXI:464.

⁴⁸ Owen, *Works*, XXI:428.

⁴⁹ Owen, *Works*, XXI:429.

⁵⁰ Owen, *Works*, XXI:458.

By all these ways was the church of the Hebrews forewarned that the time would come when the whole Mosaical law, *as to its legal or covenant efficacy*, should be disannulled, unto the unspeakable advantage of the church [emphasis added].⁵¹

This comes in a section in which Owen is showing how “the whole law may be considered ...absolutely in itself” or “with respect ...unto the end for which it was given” or “unto the persons unto whom it was given.”⁵² He calls the law “the whole system of Mosaical ordinances, as it was the covenant which God made with the people of Horeb. For the apostle takes ‘the commandment,’ and ‘the law’ for the same in this chapter; and ‘the covenant,’ in the next, for the same in them both.”⁵³ Owen is concentrating on the whole Mosaic law, i.e., it is the law in its totality as it related to God’s Old Covenant people that has been abrogated. Thus the abrogation of the law in Owen refers to the whole law as it functioned in Old Covenant Israel.⁵⁴

2. John Calvin. This understanding of abrogation is found in Calvin also. Calvin taught that the abrogation of the law under the New Covenant in no way abrogates the Decalogue in every sense of the word. Commenting on Rom. 7:2, Calvin says:

...but we must remember, that Paul refers here *only to that office of the law which was peculiar to Moses*; for as far as God has in the ten commandments taught what is just and right, and given directions for guiding our life, no abrogation of the law is to be dreamt of; for the will of God must stand the same forever. We ought carefully to remember that *this is not a release from the righteousness which is taught in the law, but from its rigid requirements, and from the curse which thence follows*. The law, then, as a rule of life, is not abrogated; but what belongs to it as opposed to the liberty obtained through Christ, that is, as it requires absolute perfection [emphasis added].⁵⁵

It is important to note that “the term ‘law’ for Calvin may mean (1) the whole religion of Moses...; (2) the special revelation of the moral law to the chosen people, i.e., chiefly the Decalogue and Jesus’ summary...; or (3) various bodies of civil, judicial, and ceremonial statutes.”⁵⁶ Calvin says, “I understand by the word ‘law’ not only the Ten Commandments, which set forth a godly and righteous rule of living, but the form of religion handed down by God through Moses.”⁵⁷ Calvin views the law in various ways. So when he speaks of abrogation, he does not intend absolute abrogation, but relative abrogation in terms of the law considered not in itself, but in its redemptive-historically conditioned use. Commenting on the concept of abrogation in Calvin, one Calvin scholar said, “the Law was not in itself abrogated by the Christ, but only the slavery and malediction attaching to it under the ancient Covenant.”⁵⁸ According to Calvin, therefore, the Moral Law has not been abrogated, as such. What has been abrogated or

⁵¹ Owen, *Works*, XXI:469.

⁵² Owen, *Works*, XXI:466.

⁵³ Owen, *Works*, XXI:471.

⁵⁴ I defended this view of abrogation in my *IDOTD*. “Hearty agreement must be given when New Covenant theologians argue for the abolition of the Old Covenant. This is clearly the teaching of the Old and New Testaments (see Jeremiah 31:31-32; Second Corinthians 3; Galatians 3, 4; Ephesians 2:14-15; Hebrews 8-10). The whole law of Moses, *as it functioned under the Old Covenant*, has been abolished, including the Ten Commandments. Not one jot or tittle of the law of Moses functions *as Old Covenant law* anymore and to act as if it does constitutes redemptive-historical retreat and neo-Judaizing. However, to acknowledge that the law of Moses no longer functions *as Old Covenant law* is not to accept that it no longer functions; it simply no longer functions *as Old Covenant law*. This can be seen by the fact that the New Testament teaches *both* the abrogation of the law of the Old Covenant *and* its abiding moral validity under the New Covenant.” See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 61.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, re. 1984), IXX:246.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii, n. 1.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.1.

⁵⁸ Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 203.

fulfilled in Christ for believers is its function as a curse. “The law itself is not abolished for the believer, but only the *maledictio legis*... [F]or Calvin the law is related above all to believers for whom, however, the *maledictio* is removed.”⁵⁹

3. Zacharias Ursinus. In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, while discussing the extent that Christ abrogated the law and the extent that it is still in force, Zacharias Ursinus says:

The ordinary and correct answer to this question is, that the ceremonial and judicial law, as given by Moses, has been abrogated in as far as it relates to obedience; and that the moral law has also been abrogated *as it respects the curse*, but not as it respects obedience [emphasis added].⁶⁰

The moral law has, *as it respects one part*, been abrogated by Christ; *and as it respects another*, it has not [emphasis added].⁶¹

But the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated *in as far as obedience to it is concerned*. God continually, no less now than formerly, requires both the regenerate and the unregenerate to render obedience to his law [emphasis added].⁶²

4. Francis Turretin. A similar understanding of abrogation is found in Francis Turretin. In volume 2 of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Turretin entitles chapter XXIII as follows:

THE ABRIGATION OF THE MORAL LAW

XXIII. Whether the moral law is abrogated entirely under the New Testament. Or whether in a certain respect it still pertains to Christians. The former we deny; the latter we affirm against the Antinomians.⁶³

Notice Turretin’s careful qualifications (i.e., “entirely” and “in a certain respect”). While discussing the abrogation of the moral law, he says, “In order to apprehend properly the state of the question, we must ascertain in what sense the law may be said to have been abrogated and in what sense not.”⁶⁴ Then, after listing three senses in which the law has been abrogated, he says, “But the question only concerns its directive use—whether we are now freed from the direction and observance of the law. This the adversaries maintain; we deny.”⁶⁵

Turretin does what we have seen in others. He has a view of abrogation which both includes the Decalogue and does not include the Decalogue. This is because the law can be viewed from different theological and redemptive-historical vantage points.

5. Protestant Scholasticism. Finally, concerning the *lex Mosaica* [law of Moses], which, representing the view of Protestant Scholasticism, he defines as the moral law as given to Israel by God in a special revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai, Richard Muller says, “As a norm of obedience belonging to the [covenant of grace], the law remains in force under the economy of the New Testament.”⁶⁶ Muller recognizes the fact that Protestant Scholastics considered the law in different ways. Therefore, when we examine their statements about abrogation, we must take this into consideration. If we do not, we may take their statements on the abrogation of the law in an absolute manner and make them mean something they did not.

⁵⁹ Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 256.

⁶⁰ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 492.

⁶¹ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 495.

⁶² Ursinus, *Commentary*, 496.

⁶³ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:ix.

⁶⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:141.

⁶⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, II:141, 42.

⁶⁶ Muller, *Dictionary*, 174.

We have seen that Owen's view of abrogation was similar to Calvin's, Ursinus', Turretin's, and Protestant Scholasticism's. With them, he carefully and repeatedly qualifies what he means by abrogation. He stands clearly within Reformed orthodoxy at this point. His view of abrogation neither necessarily demands the elimination of the Decalogue as a unit in all senses under the New Covenant, nor is it contradicted by the inclusion of the Decalogue as a unit under the New Covenant. Though with his own nuances and emphases, Owen's view is substantially that of others in his day. It was Calvin's, Ursinus's, Turretin's, Protestant Scholasticism's, as well as that of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration, and the 2nd LCF.⁶⁷

From the evidence presented, Owen must be understood to view abrogation as both including and not including the Decalogue, depending on how it is viewed. If this is the case, his understanding of abrogation, though with its own nuances and emphases, has clear and ample precedent in Calvin, Ursinus, Turretin, and Protestant Scholasticism.

Conclusion

What can we conclude in light of the evidence presented?

- **Owen in the context of his own writings**

Primary source documentation of Owen has been presented on (1) the perpetuity of the entire Decalogue from Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3, (2) Matt. 5:17 as it relates to the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant, (3) the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue and (4) abrogation. Examining Owen on these subjects put us both into the primary documents themselves and within Owen's systematic thought on relevant theological issues. This was necessary in order to understand him on the primary issue under investigation.

Owen's view of abrogation must be carefully qualified, especially as it relates to the Decalogue and the New Covenant. On the one hand, he viewed the Decalogue as abrogated under the New Covenant. But he viewed it abrogated in terms of its function under the Old Covenant and along with the rest of the Old Covenant's law. His view of the abrogation of the Decalogue was not absolute, but relative. It concerned a specific redemptive-historical function of the Decalogue and not all redemptive-historical functions.

On the other hand, Owen did not view the Decalogue as abrogated under the New Covenant. He viewed it as perpetual because it contains "the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image."⁶⁸

These distinctions in his views on abrogation and the various redemptive-historical functions of the Decalogue are in his early and later statements in the Hebrews commentary. It may be difficult for us to understand them, taking them at face value, but once his careful qualifications are taken into account, along with his clear assertions concerning the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant and the grounds for it, his meaning comes clearly into focus. But if we import into Owen our understanding of what certain statements mean or fail to understand his systematic thought, we are apt to misread him and either force on him something he never intended or force him to contradict himself.

- **The historical/theological context in which Owen wrote**

Primary source documentation has been presented from Calvin, Ursinus, Witsius, Turretin, Protestant Scholastic thought, and Boston. In doing so, the attempt was made to put Owen in historical and theological context. We found that his views on the matters examined were not

⁶⁷ See chapters 4 and 19 of these Confessions.

⁶⁸ Owen, *Works*, XXII:215.

novel and fit within the theological nomenclature of his contemporaries. Though what he said may be hard to understand and even appear novel to us, it was not so in his day.