

Eschatological Fulfilment and the Confirmation of Mosaic Law (A Response to D. A. Carson and Fred Zaspel on Matthew 5:17-48)

by Greg Welty

The following is a series of comments on D. A. Carson's exposition of Mt 5:17-48, in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). D. A. Carson's interpretation of this crucial text – which includes Jesus' relation to the law (vv. 17-18) and the nature of his six 'antitheses' (vv. 21-48) – is often appealed to by New Covenant Theology (NCT) advocates as emphatically supporting their distinctive teachings concerning the moral law of God, and as undermining the traditionally Reformed view of the same.

I regard Carson as in general a fine exegete, and a great blessing to the church. I have profited greatly from several of his books (*Exegetical Fallacies*, *The Gagging of God*, etc.). In particular, his commentary upon Matthew combines a cautious spirit with remarkable exegetical skills (including a firm grasp of redactional criticism). However, I was disappointed to find his treatment of this crucial text afflicted with a number of self-contradictions and implausibilities. Since I have lost track of the number of times that NCT advocates have pointed me to Carson's exegesis as the intellectual foundation of their movement, I felt it was time to make some critical comments, and to defend the traditionally Reformed interpretation of this text as championed by those such as John Murray and Patrick Fairbairn, and encapsulated in the WCF and 2LBCF. Thus, my comments below.

After critiquing Carson, I close by providing a positive account of Mt 5:17-48 which both incorporates one of Carson's key insights from v. 17, and yet retains the traditionally Reformed interpretation of the antitheses. Indeed, what I will argue is that it is precisely because Jesus is the *eschatological* fulfilment of the law and the prophets, that we would expect him to *confirm* the Mosaic laws he treats in the antitheses, and to defend such laws from Pharisaic distortion and misinterpretation. Given my critique, this view is much more plausible than the alternative defended by Carson. The Appendix will then address the slightly different view of Fred Zaspel, in light of the preceding discussion.

In the following I am also indebted to:

- D *Divorce*, by John Murray (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1961)
- EF *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed., by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996)
- POC *Principles of Conduct*, by John Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957)
- TROLIS *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, by Patrick Fairbairn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996 [1869])

The depth and precision of Murray's and Fairbairn's exegesis of key texts should not be underestimated. I encourage my readers to avail themselves of their work.

1) Carson's Exposition of Mt 5:17-48

a) v. 17: is 'fulfill' / 'pleroo' confirmatory or eschatological?

i) Its eschatological sense

- (1) In Mt 5:17, Jesus says, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill [*pleroo*]."
- (2) Carson argues that we must take the *pleroo* of v. 17 in an eschatological sense of the law and the prophets 'prophetically foreshadowing' and 'pointing to' Christ, rather than in a

confirmatory sense of Jesus confirming / validating / establishing the law. Carson argues from both Septuagint (LXX) and Matthean usage.

- (3) With respect to the LXX, Carson rejects the meaning of *pleroo* as ‘establish’ or ‘confirm,’ because “the LXX never uses *pleroo* (‘fulfill’) to render *qum* or cognates (which prefer *histanai* or *bebaioun* [‘establish’ or ‘confirm’]).” Rather, “the verb *pleroo* renders *male* and means ‘to fulfill.’”
- (4) With respect to Matthean usage, Carson notes the ‘formula quotations’ throughout the gospel of Matthew, wherein an OT text is cited, and is then said to be ‘fulfilled’ (*pleroo*) in the NT.
 - (a) Carson lists sixteen Matthean references to ‘fulfillment’ in his “Introduction 11.b Prophecy and fulfillment.” And in each case it is clear that an OT prediction or event is not ‘confirmed’ or ‘validated’ or ‘established’ by its NT fulfilment, but rather that the OT prediction or event *prophetically foreshadows and points to* its NT fulfilment. There is an explicitly *eschatological* sense to the Matthean usage of *pleroo* throughout his gospel, and it would appear to be extreme special pleading to make Mt 5:17 the sole exception to this rule.
 - (b) Thus Carson concludes with respect to v. 17: “The best interpretation of these difficult verses says that Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets in that they point to him, and he is their fulfillment... Therefore we give *pleroo* (‘fulfill’) exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations, which in the prologue (Matt 1-2) have already laid great stress on the prophetic nature of the OT and the way it points to Jesus. Even OT events have this prophetic significance (see on 2:15). A little later Jesus insists that ‘all the Prophets and the Law prophesied’ (11:13). The manner of the prophetic foreshadowing varies. The Exodus, Matthew argues (2:15), foreshadows the calling out of Egypt of God’s ‘son.’”
 - (c) To summarise: what one is led to believe by this comparison, then, is that even as we learn from Mt 2:15 that Hosea 11:1 was fulfilled by the child Jesus residing in Egypt, so we learn from Mt 5:17 that the Law and the Prophets as a whole are fulfilled in Jesus, for they prophesied about and pointed to him.¹
- (5) I am persuaded by Carson’s analysis at this point (as well as the similar analysis of Vern Poythress’ *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*). The most plausible view is to take the *pleroo* in Mt 5:17 in an *eschatological* sense, rather than the *confirmatory* sense (famously championed by Greg Bahnsen, among others). In v. 17, Jesus fulfils the law and the prophets, not because he came to confirm, establish, or validate the law, but because the law finds its completion and realisation in him. That is, the entirety of the law and the prophets points to him and prophetically foreshadows him.
- (6) Even with respect to the law, this can be beautifully demonstrated in a number of ways. Jesus fulfils a sacrificial ordinance by becoming a sacrifice once for all. Jesus fulfils special-revelational temporal penology (as opposed to common-grace penology) by suffering capital punishment. Jesus fulfils the Mosaic law of divorce by standing as the wronged partner, divorcing that partner, refraining from insisting on the penal maximum for that partner, and eventually achieving reconciliation with that partner despite her indecency. We could multiply examples. Truly it is the law and not just the prophets which prophesy Christ, and are therefore eschatologically (as well as literally) fulfilled in Christ.
 - ii) Its relevance to the antitheses
 - (1) *Carson’s position*
 - (a) However, Carson goes further than simply affirming an eschatological sense to the *pleroo* of v. 17. He goes on to argue that this eschatological sense has *direct*

¹ As will be evident below, this actually *isn’t* Carson’s precise point with respect to v. 17, although one might think that initially, due to his reference to Mt 2:15 and other passages! As a matter of fact, Carson’s considered understanding of what is actually going on in v. 17 is significantly at odds with the very Matthean usage he appeals to in order to interpret v. 17, and this is one of my primary arguments against his exegesis. More on this, below.

relevance for interpreting the antitheses of vv. 21-48.² What is the connection which Carson makes? Immediately after defending his eschatological interpretation of the *pleroo* in v. 17 (cited above), Carson asserts that, “In the light of the antitheses (vv. 21-48), the passage before us insists that just as Jesus fulfilled OT prophecies by his person and actions, so he fulfilled OT law by his teaching.”

- (b) Careful readers will note that we have here an analogy of sorts (“just as... so...”), and in fact Carson’s distinctive approach to the antitheses rests upon this analogy. Jesus came to fulfil the law and the prophets. How did Jesus fulfil OT *prophecies*? Carson says, “by his person and actions.” And how did Jesus fulfil OT *law*? Carson says, “by his teaching.” *Both* types of ‘fulfilment’ are allegedly in view in v. 17, according to Carson, and the meaning of *pleroo* must be recognised as extending to both. Thus, we have two sets of eschatological *terminii*. On the one hand, OT *prophecies* prophetically foreshadowed and pointed to the *person and actions of Jesus*, and on the other hand, OT *laws* prophetically foreshadowed and pointed to the *teaching of Jesus*. Prophecies point to persons and actions, while laws point to teachings. Thus, when we come to the antitheses, we are being shown how laws *pleroo* laws, how OT laws point to Jesus’ ethical teaching. Thus at the very least, the content of the OT law Jesus treats in vv. 21-48 is different from the content of Jesus’ ethical teaching, for according to Carson, Jesus is “showing the direction in which it points.”
- (c) What are we to make of this analogy, that just as prophecies eschatologically point to persons and actions, so OT laws eschatologically point to NT laws? Well, with respect to the analogy’s first half (prophecies point to persons and actions), no doubt Jesus *did* fulfil OT prophecies by his person and actions, as Mt 2:15 and countless other passages in Matthew and elsewhere bear out. For those prophecies *pointed* to him, by *predicting and picturing* the details of his life and ministry. And no doubt even some *laws* pointed to persons and actions, for as Carson points out, “many cultic regulations of the OT” *did* point “to Jesus and are now obsolete,” as the writer to the Hebrews tells us. For those cultic regulations *typified* and *pictured* the Lamb of God who was to come.
- (d) But do we have grounds to extend *these* cases (abundantly testified throughout the NT) to the case of laws pointing to *teachings*? This is precisely what Carson has done, and it is this inference which must be scrutinised. Now, perhaps in the *abstract* this extension of the meaning of *pleroo* could be construed as plausible. I suppose it is theoretically possible for one set of moral teachings to prophetically foreshadow and point to another set of moral teachings. But can this interpretation be sustained in the face of the *concrete* facts of the case with respect to vv. 21-48? I don’t see how. For Carson’s contention that OT laws prophetically foreshadow and point to Jesus’ ethical teaching goes contrary to every other usage of *pleroo* in the NT (including Matthew’s), is implausible given the specific content of the antitheses, and is implausible even on its own terms. I shall now argue each of these points in turn.
- (2) *Reasons to reject Carson’s position*
- (a) Carson’s view goes contrary to every other usage of *pleroo* in the NT (including Matthew’s)
- (i) Carson’s hypothesis is that the meaning of *pleroo* in v. 17 should be extended in such a way that its eschatological *terminum* can embrace ethical teaching, as well as predictions, persons and events. Thus, on this hypothesis laws can *pleroo* laws (even as predictions and events can *pleroo* persons and their work). In particular, OT laws can prophetically foreshadow and point to Jesus’ ethical teaching.
- (ii) Since Carson has derived his basic meaning of *pleroo* from its consistent Matthean use as a marker of eschatological fulfilment, surely we would expect to find some Matthean use of *pleroo* in which what is ‘pointed to’ is ethical teaching.

² As will be seen in the final section of my paper, I also believe there to be a connection, although it is of a different sort than that which Carson draws, and such that it actually reverses Carson’s conclusions!

Surely there would be *some* usage of this term in which laws *pleroo* laws. But as a matter of fact, Matthew never uses the word in this sense (apart, of course, from the present possibility of Mt 5:17). Instead, over and over Matthew tells us that OT *predictions and events* prophetically foreshadow and are fulfilled in *Jesus' life and ministry*.

- (iii) Thus, Isaiah's prediction of the virgin birth is fulfilled by the birth of Jesus (1:22). Hosea's statement of God's call to Israel is fulfilled by Jesus' residence in Egypt (2:15). Jeremiah's description of Rachel weeping for her children is fulfilled in Herod's slaughter of innocents (2:17). The prophet's prediction that the Messiah shall be called a Nazarene is fulfilled by Jesus' residence in Nazareth (2:23). Isaiah's statement that the Galileans would see a great light is fulfilled by Jesus' residence in Capernaum (4:14). Isaiah's prediction that the Messiah would bear his people's sicknesses is fulfilled in Jesus' healing of the multitudes (8:17). Isaiah's prediction that the Messiah would not quarrel or cry out is fulfilled in the meekness and humility of Jesus' healing ministry (12:17). The psalmist's statement that he will speak in parables is fulfilled in Jesus' own pedagogical methods (13:35). Zechariah's prediction that Zion's king would come to his people on a donkey is fulfilled in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem upon a donkey (21:4). The Scriptures are fulfilled that Jesus would be betrayed to his enemies (26:54, 56). Zechariah's and Jeremiah's prediction that Messiah would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, which would be used to buy the potter's field, is fulfilled in the chief priests' reception and use of Judas' money (27:9). Since this list is exhaustive of the eschatological *pleroo* in Matthew, it's obvious that there is not a *single* Matthean usage of *pleroo* to the effect that OT ethical teaching prophetically foreshadows Jesus' ethical teaching. Indeed, there's no Matthean usage to the effect that *anything* in the OT prophetically foreshadows *any* ethical teaching. Why then did Carson say that "we give *pleroo* ('fulfill') exactly the same meaning as in the [Matthean] formula quotations," when it is perfectly obvious that he does no such thing?³
- (iv) In addition, there's not a single usage to this effect in the rest of the NT either. In fact, the *only* NT usage of *pleroo* with ethical teaching as a *terminum* – again, apart from the present possibility of Mt 5:17 – is Ro 8:4. And yet there it is clear that the law in question doesn't have *prophetic* force, much less prophetic force with respect to another *law*, but is simply descriptive of that ethical standard which God intends to be fulfilled (literally, not eschatologically) in the *daily walk* of the Christian as he is empowered by the Spirit. (Something similar is going on in Ro 13:8 and Ga 5:14.)
- (v) Thus, it appears that Carson's proposed meaning for *pleroo* in Mt 5:17, vital to his subsequent interpretation of the antitheses, is without parallel to *any* other usage of *pleroo* in the NT (including Matthew's)! Exegetically, the notion that laws *pleroo* laws appears to be a total innovation on Carson's part, for the very *concept* is foreign to the NT. If, with respect to Carson's argument for the basic eschatological sense of *pleroo*, "the lack of background for *pleroo* ('fulfill') as far as it applies to Scripture requires cautious induction from the NT evidence," then surely Carson should have been *equally* cautious with respect to his *extension* of that eschatological meaning to include ethical teaching, given the total lack of Scriptural evidence supporting that extension! Indeed, I reject Carson's extension of the meaning of *pleroo* for the same reason I accept Carson's argument for the

³ Carson seems to want it both ways, saying that "the manner of the prophetic foreshadowing varies" – i.e. prophecy foreshadows one way, cultic regulation foreshadows another way, and OT imperatival law foreshadows yet another way – while at the same time saying that "we give *pleroo* ('fulfill') exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations." But the exegetical data suggests that Carson cannot have it both ways, for we have seen that he cannot give an understanding of how OT law 'foreshadows' Christ's ethical teaching which is consistent with the actual meaning of *pleroo* in the Matthean formula quotations.

basic eschatological meaning of *pleroo*: the quality and amount of the NT evidence.

- (vi) I would submit that Carson's own book, *Exegetical Fallacies*, seems to document this kind of mistake as "appeal to unknown or unlikely meanings" (EF 37). Sometimes instances of this fallacy "spring from the desire to make a certain interpretation work out, and the interpreter forsakes evenhandedness. In some instances an intrinsically unlikely or ill-attested meaning receives detailed defense and may even become entrenched in the church" (EF 38). Carson notes that C. E. B. Cranfield fell into this fallacy with his idiosyncratic understanding of *nomos* as legalism: "the fact remains that the primary defense of that position is not rigorous linguistic evidence but the adoption of a certain structure of relationships between the Old Testament and the New" (EF 38).
- (b) Carson's view is implausible given the specific content of the antitheses
 - (i) But it is not only the case that Carson's proposal appears arbitrary and contrived. Things get much worse, when we actually try to *apply* Carson's proposal to the pericope it was meant to unify: the antitheses themselves. If, according to Carson, what Jesus is primarily doing in the antitheses is showing how *OT law* prophetically foreshadows and points to his own teaching, then on this hypothesis we would expect that the first half of each antithesis would be a reference to *Mosaic law*, rather than to Pharisaic tradition, for obviously the latter cannot 'prophetically point to' Jesus' ethical teaching. Only the *Scriptures* are the prophetic word of God. Thus, to the extent that the first half of any antithesis is not a reference to Mosaic law (but instead a reference to a distortion or misunderstanding of it), to that extent Carson's hypothesis fails. And, in addition, to the extent that the second half of each antithesis is not really an *addition* to Mosaic law (but a restatement of principles already present in the OT), to that extent the hypothesis fails as well. When I come to 'the interpretation of the antitheses' below, I will repeatedly show that the actual comparison in the antitheses is between Pharisaic distortion of Mosaic law, and Jesus' ethical teaching. To the extent that this is the case, to that extent Carson's hypothesis fails, and that twice over, for any antithesis you pick.
 - (ii) But what if it appears that at least one or two of my interpretations of the antitheses looks 'strained,' so that it just looks more plausible to see the contrast in those cases as being between OT law and Jesus' teaching? What if, for the sake of argument, we take a 'mixed' view of the antitheses, and say that, for *some* of the antitheses, the first half may very well be a reference to Mosaic law, and for *other* antitheses, the first half is a reference to Pharisaic distortion? But this only makes matters worse. For Carson thinks his extension of the eschatological meaning of *pleroo* to Jesus' ethical teachings should be taken seriously precisely because it gives 'unity' to the interpretation of the antitheses: "a unifying approach to the antitheses is possible in the light of our exegesis of vv. 17-20." But if we take a *mixed* view of the antitheses, then no unity is produced, for Jesus is only showing how OT law points to his own teachings, in *some* of the antitheses. And what Jesus is doing in the *other* antitheses (those referring to Pharisaic distortion of OT law) is left unexplained. Indeed it *cannot* be explained on Carson's hypothesis, for Pharisaic traditions could not prophesy or foreshadow Jesus' teachings. Thus Carson's view is implausible, *even if* it cannot be maintained that all of the antitheses begin with reference to Pharisaic distortion of OT law.
- (c) Carson's view is implausible even on its own terms
 - (i) But things get even worse. What if we were to concede the interpretation of *each and every one* of the antitheses to Carson's theory? What if, for the sake of argument, we went so far as to concede that in each antithesis, its first half *is* a reference to OT law, rather than a reference to a Pharisaic distortion of OT law?

And the second half of each antithesis is (obviously) a reference to the teaching of Jesus himself. Though I very much doubt that this is the true statement of the situation (see my evaluation of Carson's handling of the antitheses below), nevertheless it must surely be admitted that conceding *everything* to Carson concerning the identity of both halves of the antitheses is the most favourable situation to be had for his interpretation of the *pleroo* in v. 17. For we now have *throughout* the antitheses a sustained one-to-one contrast between OT law and Jesus' teaching. Surely, this is the perfect environment in which one could recognise, again and again, that *OT law* prophetically foreshadows and points to *Jesus' ethical teaching*. Isn't it? Wouldn't that be the most plausible interpretation of the antitheses?

- (ii) But the surprising (and in my mind, devastating) fact of the matter is that, even if we give Carson this enormous free ride, and concede to him *all* of the aforementioned favourable conditions, his view is *still* wholly implausible! For how could OT moral imperatives 'prophetically foreshadow' Jesus' ethical teaching? It is easy to see from the Gospels how OT *predictions and events* can point to Jesus' person and ministry, for those predictions and events *described and pictured* Jesus' person and ministry. And it is easy to see from the book of Hebrews how OT *cultic regulations* can point to Jesus' person and ministry, for those cultic regulations *described and pictured* Jesus' person and ministry. But how do the OT laws allegedly referenced in the first half of the antitheses point to the Messiah's *ethical teaching* referenced in the second half of the antitheses? For example, how do liberal OT divorce laws prophetically point to Jesus' stricter laws? And how do OT commands to swear oaths prophetically point to Jesus' abolition of all oaths, etc.? Does this even make sense? Nay, could it make sense? I haven't the foggiest idea what it *means*. Since the ethical content is distinctively different in each antithesis (that's the whole point of it being an *antithesis* after all), it is hard to understand how an ethical principle can describe or picture a *different* ethical principle! Perhaps this is why the rest of the word of God – apart from the present possibility of Mt 5:21-48 – affords us *no* examples of the kind of fulfilment which Carson wishes to see in Mt 5:21-48. It appears that Carson has 'extended' the meaning of *pleroo* in Mt 5:17 in a direction that doesn't even make sense on its own terms, and in a direction that finds no confirmation whatsoever in the rest of the word of God. It is a conceptual innovation on Carson's part that, upon closer analysis, renders the antitheses unintelligible.
- (iii) Re-examination of the Matthean usage of *pleroo* reveals yet another aspect of the conceptual innovation I have just noted. It is not merely the case that, in Matthew's usage, ethical teaching is never the eschatological *terminum* of *pleroo*. It is also the case that, in Matthew's usage of *pleroo*, what accomplishes the fulfilment *precisely* fulfils that which gets fulfilled. Review again the texts above. A prediction of a literal virgin birth is fulfilled by a literal virgin birth. Indeed, OT references to literal virgin births, countries, cities, sicknesses, silence, parables, donkeys, betrayal, and thirty silver pieces, are fulfilled (*pleroo*) in connection with literal virgin births, countries, cities, sicknesses, silence, parables, donkeys, betrayal, and thirty silver pieces. Of course, the precise *form of words* may not be the same in every case. But surely the pattern of the *precision* of these fulfilments cannot be missed. There is no thought that that which gets fulfilled is being *contrasted with* its fulfilment, or extended, or changed. In the context of the rest of Matthew, 'fulfilled' seems to merely designate the direction of the arrow of time, and little else: OT predictions and events pointed to their NT counterparts, but this implies no *difference* between the prediction and its fulfilment. But in the context of Mt 5:17-48, Carson repeatedly uses *pleroo* as a reference to *extension, change, contrast*. Yet there's little reason to think that *Matthew's* use of *pleroo* carries any connotation at all of a contrast between the content of what is fulfilled

and the content of what fulfils it! Thus, the more Carson relies upon the *pleroo* of v. 17 to demonstrate a *contrast* between the OT law and that to which the law points, to that extent it appears he is departing from the Matthean usage of *pleroo*. This is yet another reason why I think he has simply embraced a conceptual innovation that is without parallel in the rest of Matthew.

(3) *Conclusion*

- (a) I do not want to overstate the case against Carson's application of the eschatological *pleroo* of v. 17 to the antitheses of vv. 21-48, and make it appear that there is absolutely *no* evidence for his view of OT law pointing to NT ethical teaching. For when he introduces his crucial analogy, Carson states that: "*In the light of the antitheses (vv. 21-48), the passage before us insists that just as Jesus fulfilled OT prophecies by his person and actions, so he fulfilled OT law by his teaching*" (emphasis mine). In other words, the only evidence Carson actually cites to support this extension of the Matthean usage of *pleroo*, is the fact that *in the antitheses*, Jesus seems to be setting forth *teaching* of some kind. I think we should agree that this is indeed a fact; Jesus *is*, at the very least, setting forth his teachings in the antitheses. But is *that* sufficient grounds to invent what appears to be a wholly novel usage of *pleroo*, novel to both Matthew and to the rest of the NT? And does one want to embrace on *those* grounds a view that appears utterly irreconcilable with what is going on in the antitheses? In the end, Carson's mere observation that Jesus presents his own teachings in the antitheses comes nowhere near to constituting the kind of argument required in order to extend the *pleroo* of v. 17 to include ethical teachings as an eschatological *terminum*. Especially if that extension is rendered wholly implausible given my three points above.⁴
- (b) In conclusion, then, we should simply reject Carson's extension of the *pleroo* of v. 17 to include ethical teachings as an eschatological *terminum*. Such a hypothesis is a conceptual innovation with respect to the usage of *pleroo* in the rest of Matthew and the NT, and unnecessarily imposes a whole host of absurdities upon the text of vv. 21-48. I am surprised that Carson made this move, given his warning that a proper assessment of the meaning of *pleroo* "requires cautious induction from the NT evidence." For while Carson's argument for the basic eschatological sense of *pleroo* in v. 17 was a well-argued induction from NT evidence, his argument for the *extension* of that eschatological *pleroo* to include ethical teachings is disappointingly thin, and indeed appears wholly incautious given the evidence I have presented above.

iii) Its relevance to the abiding authority of OT law

- (1) In rounding off his exposition of v. 17, Carson makes a number of confusing applications of his view of the *pleroo* of v. 17, which I want to briefly consider. First, he says that, "As in Luke 16:16-17, Jesus is not announcing the termination of the OT's relevance and authority (else Luke 16:17 would be incomprehensible), but that 'the period during which men were related to God under its terms ceased with John' (Moo, 'Jesus,' p. 1); and the nature of its valid continuity is established only with reference to Jesus and the kingdom."
- (a) It's hard (for me at least) to know what Carson thinks here. On the one hand he assures us that "Jesus is not announcing the termination of the OT's relevance and authority." But on the other hand he says (following Moo) that "the period during which men were related to God under its terms ceased with John." I find it difficult to understand how the authority can continue when men are no longer "under its terms." How does it possess authority *apart from* the continuing relevance of at least some of its terms? Isn't being under something's terms precisely what we mean by being under its authority?
- (b) But more importantly, I don't know what Carson intends by his statement that, with respect to the OT, "the nature of its valid continuity is established only with reference to Jesus and the kingdom." Does this mean that if Jesus does not happen to comment

⁴ And if, in addition, its application to the antithesis just doesn't make sense. See my discussion of the antitheses below.

upon an OT text, that “the nature of its valid continuity” cannot be “established”? For example, are we to assume that all OT law is abolished, except for that law repeated by Jesus in the New? One wonders, on this hypothesis, about the normative status of a whole host of OT principles which are not repeated in the NT, such as the responsibility to physically discipline one’s children (Pr 13:24). Has this been abolished? More broadly, have *all* those Proverbs been abolished which have failed to be repeated or interpreted by either Jesus or his apostles? In fact, do not Jesus’ apostles seem to propose the *opposite* position? Namely, that we must have good exegetical grounds for believing that a command has *not* continued? After all, why would Paul say that *all Scripture* (in context, the *Old Testament Scripture*) “is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2Ti 3:16), if in reality the only Scripture which is applicable to the moral life of the congregation (for reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness) is the New Testament? Paul’s terms are normative terms. They speak of the authority of the OT over the life of a Christian. If Paul says *all* the Old Testament Scriptures are profitable for reproof and correction of one’s life, can we then say that all OT laws are totally done away as far as authority over one’s life (except for those specifically commented upon by Jesus and his apostles)? If Paul says that “all Scripture” is inspired, and is profitable for Christian moral instruction, can we then say that only the *New Testament* is profitable for Christian moral instruction? Again, this cannot be right. I don’t mean to lay all this baggage at Carson’s feet. But when someone says, in a context that is explicitly about the abolition or destruction of OT revelation (Mt 5:17), that the nature of the OT’s valid continuity is established *only* with reference to Jesus and the kingdom, these sorts of inferences immediately loom on the horizon. Perhaps some of Carson’s readers have actually gone on to make these kinds of inferences.

- (c) I repeat all these concerns with respect to Carson’s later comment on the “christological implications” of vv. 17-20: “Jesus presents himself as the eschatological goal of the OT, and thereby its sole authoritative interpreter, the one through whom alone the OT finds its valid continuity and significance.” My problem with this statement isn’t so much with what it says, as with what it doesn’t say. I don’t know what I am supposed to infer from the fact that Jesus is the “sole authoritative interpreter” of the OT, and “the one through whom alone the OT finds its valid continuity and significance.” Does this mean (as I asked above) that if Jesus does not happen to comment upon an OT text, that therefore that text is not authoritative for us, because “its valid continuity” is only found in Jesus, “the sole authoritative interpreter” of the OT?
- (2) Second, Carson says that, “If the antitheses (vv. 21-48) are understood in the light of this interpretation of vv. 17-20, then Jesus is not primarily engaged there in extending, annulling, or intensifying OT law, but in showing the direction in which it points, on the basis of his own authority (to which, again, the OT points). This may work out in any particular case to have the same practical effect as ‘intensifying’ the law or ‘annulling’ some element; but the reasons for that conclusion are quite different.”
- (a) I find it telling that Carson makes reference to “this interpretation of vv. 17-20,” for the only verse he has exegeted at this point is v. 17! This supports my contention (to be defended later) that Carson minimises the relevance of v. 20 in his understanding of the antitheses. For v. 17 appears to carry the whole weight, even though it is v. 20 which actually introduces the antitheses, and sets up an antithesis between two ethical standards.
- (b) In addition, Carson claims that Jesus is “primarily engaged” in vv. 21-48 with “showing the direction in which it [OT law] points, on the basis of his own authority.” But isn’t it just obvious that in the antitheses, what Jesus is *primarily* doing is *annulling* some standard or other? This is the whole reason why we call this section the *antitheses*, because of its repeated language of “You have heard that it was said...

But I say unto you...”? How could Carson possibly interpret this language as *primarily* “showing the direction in which” various laws “point,” rather than the straightforward *annulling* of a moral standard recognisable by both speaker and audience? On the traditionally Reformed interpretation, Jesus is annulling Pharisaic distortions of the OT law. Now, one can disagree that it is really *Pharisaic distortions* which are being annulled, but surely what is primarily going on, in each antithesis, is the *annulling* of some standard or other. This is another instance, I think, in which Carson allows his idiosyncratic interpretation of v. 17 to overshadow the obvious import of v. 20. In order to discover what is primarily going on in the antitheses, Carson simply reads into the antitheses the language of fulfilment.

- (c) Finally, Carson argues that this primary activity of Jesus in the antitheses, of “showing the direction in which it [OT law] points,” has secondary consequences: “This may work out in any particular case to have the same practical effect as ‘intensifying’ the law or ‘annulling’ some element.” Obviously then, Carson does see annulling going on in the antitheses, although (as argued above) I don’t think this is a mere secondary activity in the antitheses. But the important point is that, given Carson’s interpretation of *pleroo* in v. 17, these *manifold* consequences of ‘fulfilment’ seem totally arbitrary. What is the rationale for *sometimes* annulling, *sometimes* intensifying, those OT laws that are eschatologically prophetic of Christ’s teaching? By way of contrast, the traditional Reformed view – that Jesus is consistently annulling Pharisaic traditions throughout the antitheses – makes sense. Since he is here to confirm or establish OT law (v. 17), he wants to sharply distinguish the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees from the righteousness of the kingdom (v. 20). Thus, in the case of *each and every* antithesis Jesus presents, he is consistently *challenging* Pharisaic distortions and misinterpretations of OT law. On the Reformed view, a single cause (Pharisaic distortion) explains a single effect (Jesus’ repudiation of such a distortion). Whereas on Carson’s view, a single cause (the eschatological fulfilment of the OT law by Jesus’ teaching) somehow explains contrary effects (annulling OT law, or intensifying OT law). How can this rationale be anything but arbitrary?

b) The consequences for vv. 18-20

i) v. 18

- (1) The text reads, “18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”
- (2) On this text Carson says things which are very helpful and edifying, such as that “Jesus here upholds the authority of the OT Scriptures right down to the ‘least stroke of a pen.’ His is the highest possible view of the OT.” And Carson’s focus, in light of v. 17, that the *entirety* of OT revelation is eschatologically fulfilled in Christ, is also helpful.
- (3) However, the reader can get a sense that Carson’s treatment of continuing OT authority is excessively reductionistic. Carson says that “the nature” of the OT’s “validity and continuity...has been set forth in v. 17,” and that the nature of OT authority is that “it reveals God’s redemptive purposes and points to their fulfillment, their ‘accomplishment,’ in Jesus and the eschatological kingdom he is now introducing and will one day consummate.” One wonders at these repeated claims: does Carson want to *reduce* the nature of OT authority to its eschatological, prophetic foreshadowing role? And if so, what argument is given for this? It is one thing to say that *one way* the OT is authoritative for the NT believer is that it authoritatively depicts the person and work of the Messiah who was to come. It is quite another thing to say that the *only way* the OT is thus authoritative, is via its prophetic role of foreshadowing Christ and his distinctive ethical teaching.

ii) v. 19

- (1) The text reads, “19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

(2) *The reference of “these commandments”*

- (a) On this text, Carson inquires after the reference of ‘these commandments.’ Whose commandments are we talking about? Carson says that, “It is hard to justify restriction of these words to Jesus’ teachings... for the noun in Matthew never refers to Jesus’ words, and the context argues against it.” Similarly, “restriction to the Ten Commandments (TDNT, 2:548) is usually alien to the concerns of the context.” Finally, we cannot “say ‘these commandments’ refers to the antitheses that follow, for in Matthew *houtos* (‘this,’ pl. ‘these’) never points forward.”
- (b) So if the reference is not to Jesus’ teachings, nor the Ten Commandments, nor the antitheses of vv. 21-48, what is the reference? Carson tells us: “It appears, then, that the expression must refer to the commandments of the OT Scriptures. The entire Law and the Prophets are not scrapped by Jesus’ coming but fulfilled.”

(3) *The nature of their practising*

- (a) Carson then comments on what he means by his statement that the Law and the Prophets are ‘fulfilled’ by Jesus’ coming: “Therefore the commandments of these Scriptures—even the least of them (on distinctions in the law, see on 22:36; 23:23)—must be practiced. But the nature of the practicing has already been affected by vv. 17-18. The law pointed forward to Jesus and his teaching; so it is properly obeyed by conforming to his word. As it points to him, so he, in fulfilling it, establishes what continuity it has, the true direction to which it points and the way it is to be obeyed. Thus ranking in the kingdom turns on the degree of conformity to Jesus’ teaching as that teaching fulfills OT revelation. His teaching, toward which the OT pointed, must be obeyed.”
- (b) To summarise, Carson’s understanding of v. 19 seems to be the following. Jesus says that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those who practice and teach (even the least of) the commandments of the OT. But since (according to Carson’s interpretation of vv. 17-18) OT imperatival law is prophetic of Christ’s teaching and therefore fulfilled in Christ’s teaching, all of these OT commandments are “properly obeyed by conforming to his [Christ’s] word.” So what initially appeared to be a call to obey even the least commandments *of the OT*, is in reality a call to restrict oneself to the word of Christ in the NT. The OT law “is properly obeyed,” not by practising and teaching that OT law, but “by conforming to” Jesus’ word.

(4) *Carson’s dramatic shift*

- (a) I simply note the dramatic shift that has taken place in the reference of “these commandments.” Carson started his exposition of v. 19 by emphasising that the reference of “these commandments” was to *the OT Scriptures*, and not merely to Jesus’ teaching, and he argued this on the basis of perfectly sensible grammatical and contextual data (Matthew’s use of the noun, the concerns of the context, Matthew’s use of *houtos*). But then, on the basis of his interpretation of v. 17, Carson completely shifts this reference to Jesus’ teachings: “Thus ranking in the kingdom turns on the degree of conformity to Jesus’ teaching as that teaching fulfills OT revelation. His teaching, toward which the OT pointed, must be obeyed.”
- (b) In other words, Carson overturns his initial grammatical and contextual argumentation on the basis of the interpretation of a word (*pleroo*) that doesn’t even appear in the verse which is being expounded! Even though “it is hard to justify restriction of these words to Jesus’ teachings... for the noun [‘commandments’] in Matthew never refers to Jesus’ words, and the context argues against it,” Carson nevertheless does just that, and assures us that the teaching of v. 19 is that we must conform to Jesus’ words! It is clear, I think, that Carson is in the grip of a thesis. If the theory is that OT laws must *pleroo* Christ’s laws, then OT laws must be *distinguished from* Christ’s laws, since the former only ‘point to’ the latter, and are not identical to them. And so even if grammatical and contextual factors require the reference of “these commandments” to be to the OT Scriptures, we must nevertheless *make* the reference be to Christ’s laws instead. I find this implausible in the extreme. Carson

correctly notes, with reference to “these commandments,” that “in Matthew *houtos* (‘this,’ pl. ‘these’) never points forward.” But surely then there is only one direction left in which to find the reference of this demonstrative pronoun: *backwards*, to the previous verse, and its explicit reference to the OT. How strange then is Carson’s interpretation: Christ sternly and explicitly warns against breaking the commandments of the OT, and Carson takes it as a warning against breaking Christ’s own ethical teachings. He *must* make this move, because he has reduced the ethical authority of the OT to that which gets ‘taken up’ into Christ’s explicit teachings. But he makes this move against all conceivable rules of exegesis.

iii) v. 20

- (1) Mt 5:20 “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”
- (2) On the basis of this verse, Carson laments that the Pharisees “domesticated the law and lost the radical demand for absolute holiness demanded by the Scriptures.” But since, for Carson, the righteousness of kingdom inhabitants is defined by *Jesus’ ethical teachings* – and not by the OT laws which eschatologically point to such teaching – why would Jesus’ concern here be with the Pharisees’ failure to conform to *the OT Scriptures*? Isn’t the contrast supposed to be between Pharisaic righteousness and the righteousness of *the kingdom of heaven*, rather than between Pharisaic righteousness and that of the OT? One wonders as well about Carson’s reference to “the radical demand for absolute holiness” demanded by the OT Scriptures. Isn’t it rather, on Carson’s theory, the righteousness demanded by the kingdom of heaven (i.e. Jesus’ teachings) which forms the *radical* demand for *absolute* holiness? Surely the OT can’t compete here; it can only ‘point to’ Jesus’ teaching.
- (3) I propose that the reason why v. 20 appears to be an anomaly with respect to Carson’s theory, is because he has let v. 17 overshadow v. 20 in his interpretation of the antitheses. Indeed, in his exposition of v. 20, Carson seems to minimise the relevance of v. 20 to the interpretation of the antitheses which immediately follow. This is unfortunate, because v. 20 gives a single, unifying theme to vv. 21-48: it is *the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees* which is being exposed as fraudulent and in need of correction, not the OT. As Murray puts it, Jesus sets up “a complete contrast between the righteousness which the kingdom of heaven requires and that exemplified in the scribes and Pharisees” (POC 157). And it is this principle of v. 20 that particularly “needs to be borne in mind in the interpretation of the sustained contrast between rabbinic and pharisaic perversion, on the one hand, and the righteousness characteristic of the kingdom of heaven, on the other” (POC 157). And yet, in his comments upon v. 20, Carson has little to say about this vital connection between v. 20 and the six antitheses it introduces.

c) ***The interpretation of the antitheses (vv. 21-48)***

i) Introduction

(1) *What is Jesus doing in the antitheses?*

- (a) Of particular importance in this section is to see whether Carson’s proposal – that what Jesus is primarily doing in the antitheses is showing how laws *pleroo* laws – actually unifies the interpretation of the antitheses. It is important to remember that according to Carson’s interpretation of v. 17, the OT laws referenced in vv. 21-48 are supposed to have a ‘prophetic’ nature. It is precisely because they ‘prophetically foreshadow’ and ‘point to’ Christ, that they are fulfilled in Christ, and are therefore either extended, annulled, or intensified by Christ, the “sole authoritative interpreter” of the OT.
- (b) Crucial then to vv. 21-48 is the notion that the ethical standard which Jesus is revising is the ethical standard of *the OT*, for only OT scripture can be properly *prophetic*, and therefore point to Christ. Thus, to the extent that the ethical standard which Jesus is revising is *not* the ethical standard of the OT, to that extent Carson’s whole understanding of *pleroo* is undermined. Carson cannot maintain that the key to

interpreting vv. 21-48 is the ‘prophetic’ meaning of *pleroo* in v. 17, if that meaning of *pleroo* commits him to claims about vv. 21-48 that are flatly indefensible.

- (c) It will be my contention below that this is just what has happened, for it can be shown that the ethical standard which Jesus is revising in vv. 21-48 is *not* the OT law which ‘points’ to him. Rather, it is the ethical standard of the scribes and the Pharisees, which was a distortion and misrepresentation of the ethical standard of the OT. This is to be expected, as this is precisely the contrast in ethical standards which is made in v. 20, the verse which introduces the six antitheses. We proceed now to Carson’s introductory material on the antitheses.
- (2) *Is Carson consistent in his approach to the antitheses?*
- (a) Carson states: “Daube rightly points out that the first part of Matthew’s formulas means something like ‘you have understood’ or ‘you have literally understood.’ That is Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted. This is especially true of vv. 22, 43, where part of what was ‘heard’ certainly does not come from the OT.”
- (i) Thus, Carson understands by Jesus’ antithetical refrain (“You have heard that it was said... But I say unto you...”) that “Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted.” I find this remarkable, because this understanding is clearly contradicted by Carson’s specific interpretation of some of the antitheses in which that refrain is used. For Carson holds that Jesus *is* criticising the OT. Indeed, Jesus goes so far as to “revoke at least the letter of the law”! (See below.) Once again, Carson simply cannot have it both ways.
- (ii) As a matter of fact, as Murray points out, “If Jesus were contrasting his own teaching and the law of the Old Testament, then the formula ‘Ye heard that it was said’ would refer to the Old Testament Scripture. But Jesus elsewhere does not use such a formula when he refers to the Old Testament. He uses, rather, such a formula as ‘it is written’” (POC 158).
- (b) Carson claims that “a unifying approach to the antitheses is possible in the light of our exegesis of vv. 17-20.” What is this unifying approach? Well, says Carson, “in every case Jesus contrasts the people’s misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points, according to his own authority as the law’s ‘fulfiller’ (in the sense established in v. 17). He makes no attempt to fence in the law (contra Przvbylski, pp. 80-87) but declares unambiguously the true direction to which it points. Thus if certain antitheses revoke at least the letter of the law (and they do: cf. Meier, *Law*, pp. 125ff.), they do so, not because they are thereby affirming the law’s true spirit, but because Jesus insists that his teaching on these matters is the direction in which the laws actually point.”
- (i) Once again Carson is trying to have it both ways. He says concerning the antitheses that “in every case Jesus contrasts *the people’s misunderstanding of the law*” with something else. But he also says (and will defend later) that “certain antitheses revoke at least *the letter of the law*,” because Jesus’ “teaching on these matters is the direction in which *the laws* actually point” (emphasis mine). The reader is left wondering whether Jesus is correcting the people’s misunderstanding of the law, or rather the letter of the law itself. Since Carson says both, it is evident that his approach is not unifying, but simply contradictory.
- (c) Carson continues: “Likewise Jesus’ “you have heard ... but I say” is not quite analogous to corresponding rabbinic formulas; Jesus is not simply a proto-rabbi (contra Daube, Sigal). The Sermon on the Mount is not set in a context of scholarly dispute over *halakic* details but in a context of messianic and eschatological fulfillment. Jesus’ authority bursts the borders of the relatively “narrow context of legal interpretation and innovation which the rabbis circumscribed for themselves” (Banks, *Jesus*, p. 85). It is for this reason that the crowds were amazed at his authority (7:28-29).”

- (i) Carson seems to think that a mere ‘context of legal interpretation’ is too narrow to explain the amazement of Jesus’ hearers at his authority. Rather, the appropriate explanatory context of such amazement is one of “messianic and eschatological fulfillment.” But surely we must avoid all thought that, on the hypothesis that Jesus is merely correcting the interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees, in doing so Jesus somehow *fails to exercise his divine authority*. It is not a diminishing of Jesus’ authority to confirm OT law in its breadth and depth! In correcting erroneous rabbinical traditions, Jesus is not himself a mere rabbi, for the simple fact that *his interpretation* (unlike those endlessly offered by the rabbis in their disputes with each other) is the *correct and authoritative one*.
- (ii) One only needs to ask: when God through the prophets rebuked the people for their vain traditions (Is 29:13; cf Mt 15:3, 7-9), was God failing to exercise his own divine authority? Was God himself, by his very activity of defending his law from legalistic addition and perversion, reduced to a mere rabbi? Of course not. So why think that the recognition of Jesus’ authority on the part of his hearers (7:28-29) requires that Jesus must be doing something *more* than challenging the vain traditions of men?
- (iii) And it is most likely that Jesus’ hearers were amazed at his authority because he, unlike the rabbis, cited absolutely no rabbinic precedent or opinion in his challenges to Pharisaic tradition. Jesus’ procedure radically set him apart from those interpreters of the law to whom the people were accustomed. Jesus was correcting vain interpretations *on his own authority* (and not by appeal to extracanonical tradition), but this is entirely compatible with the fact that Jesus was *correcting vain interpretations* (rather than correcting the OT law itself).
- (d) We proceed now to an examination of Carson’s interpretation of the antitheses themselves.
- ii) First antithesis: Vilifying anger and reconciliation (5:21-26)
- (1) The text reads: “21 " You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' 22 "But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. 23 "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 "Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”
- (2) Carson says that in this antithesis, “Jesus insists--the ‘I’ is emphatic in each of the six antitheses--that the law really points to his own teaching: the root of murder is anger, and anger is murderous in principle (v. 22). One has not conformed to the better righteousness of the kingdom simply by refraining from homicide.”
- (3) A number of criticisms present themselves. First, it is characteristic of Carson’s treatment of each of these antitheses to read his understanding of *pleroo* (from v. 17) *into* the text of the antithesis itself. When Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said... but I say unto you...,” Carson takes this as a claim that “the law really points to his own teaching.” But one searches each antithesis in vain for anything remotely resembling this claim. If Jesus is actually *claiming* that in each case the law in question “points to his own teaching,” why didn’t he simply *say so*? He doesn’t. Rather, he simply refers to an ethical teaching which was familiar to both speaker and hearers, and explicitly contrasts that teaching with his own. The additional claim, that the law “points to his own teaching,” is repeatedly read into the text by Carson himself.
- (4) Second, according to Carson, Jesus here insists that *the law* really points to his own teaching.

- (a) But is Jesus' citation in the first half of the antitheses a citation from *the law*? To be sure, "you shall not murder" is a citation from Ex 20:13. But where is it said that "whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment"? Carson references Dt 16:18 and 2Ch 19:5, but neither of those texts makes any reference to murder, much less to judgment for murder. We shall have to look elsewhere for the source of the first half of the antithesis.
- (b) I regard the most plausible interpretation to be Murray's: "It is probable that the sixth commandment was quoted by the Rabbis and then interpreted in the way Jesus indicates by his quotation. The important consideration is that the Rabbis interpreted the commandment, at least its penal sanction, in these terms, 'whosoever shall kill shall be liable to the judgment' ... In view of the fact that Jesus in his own interpretation and application lays the emphasis upon the inward feeling and upon the words of abusive contempt, we are forced to conclude that the addition supplied in the rabbinic tradition had the intent and effect of saying, 'Only he who commits the overt act of murder shall be liable to the judgment'. That is to say, rabbinical tradition had concentrated attention both in thought and instruction upon the external act, with the effect, if not also the intent, of restricting the prohibition of murder to the overt act. It is this externalism that Jesus proceeds to correct; he focuses attention upon the emotions of the heart and the words of the lips. 'But I say to you': in contrast with such a cabined and restricted conception of the sixth commandment, and in elucidation of its true and full intent, he teaches that the sixth commandment condemns the murder of heart and lips as well as the overt act of lawless killing" (POC 159-160).
- (5) Third, according to Carson "the [OT] law really points to his own teaching: the root of murder is anger, and anger is murderous in principle." In fact, as Carson says later, here Jesus "insists that the sixth commandment points prophetically to the kingdom's condemnation of hate." We see a reference here to "the better righteousness of the kingdom."
- (a) Carson seems to think that the contrast in this first antithesis is the following: there is 'the law' and then there is 'his [Jesus'] own teaching,' and the fact of the matter is that "the law really points to his own teaching." Indeed, it "points prophetically to the kingdom's condemnation of hate." But surely this is an erroneous contrast. For why think that *condemnation of hate* is distinctive to *Jesus'* kingdom inaugurated in the NT? We have the clear command of Lev 19:17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart." We have Pr 29:10 "The bloodthirsty hate the blameless, But the upright seek his well-being." Indeed, condemnation of hate is a prominent theme the OT Scriptures (cf. Pr 26:24-26, 29:22, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11; Ecc 7:9). Carson says that, "many Jewish maxims warn against anger (examples in Bonnard), but this is not just another maxim." No doubt. But why doesn't Carson consider the relevance of the many *OT* warnings against anger and hate? The false antithesis between OT law and Jesus' teaching could have been avoided.
- (b) These data strongly suggest that the real contrast here is between the Pharisaic restriction of divine judgement to the mere act of murder, and Jesus' recognition that divine judgement properly extends to inward hate and anger. But since the latter is an ethical norm abundantly testified *throughout the OT*, the point of the antithesis *cannot* be that "the law points to his teaching." For 'the law,' at this point, is *identical* to Jesus' teaching! Unfortunately, Carson's insistence that his prophetic understanding of *pleroo* in v. 17 must control the interpretation of vv. 21-48 leads him to impose a contrast here between OT law and Jesus' teaching that simply does not exist.
- iii) Second antithesis: Adultery and purity (5:27-30)
- (1) The text reads: "27 'You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 'But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 'If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your

members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."

- (2) Concerning this second antithesis, Carson says, "Jesus insisted that the seventh commandment points in another direction--toward purity that refuses to lust (v. 28). The tenth commandment had already explicitly made the point; and *gyne* here more likely means 'woman' than 'wife.' 'To interpret the law on the side of stringency is not to annul the Law, but to change it in accordance with its own intention' (Davies, *Setting*, p. 102; cf. Job 31:1; Prov 6:25; 2 Peter 2:14)."
 - (3) Carson acknowledges that the OT appears to already teach what Jesus insists on here. The 10th Commandment forbids, among other things, the coveting of your neighbour's wife. Surely this is a prohibition of the very heart adultery forbidden by Jesus in Mt 5:28. Similarly, the book of Proverbs contains much counsel to young men, that they should not lust after or desire the adulterous woman. In Pr 5:20, he is warned that he should not "be enraptured by an immoral woman." In Pr 6:25 (as Carson points out), he is commanded: "Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, Nor let her allure you with her eyelids." And in Pr 7:25, the son is specifically counselled: "Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways." Surely these are prohibitions of the very heart adultery forbidden by Jesus in Mt 5:28.
 - (4) Given all this, isn't it reasonable to think that Jesus is bringing out an application of the 7th Commandment which had *always* been intended by God, but which the scribes and Pharisees neglected to make known to the people (Murray, POC 55-56)? For *God himself* had already made this application known to the people in the OT; there is nothing new here. So why does Carson insist that Jesus is *changing* the law, "in accordance with its own intention"? Why contrast at this point Jesus' moral teaching with the moral teaching of the OT? Rather, we should recognise the genuinely unifying parallel between these first two antitheses: "What Jesus is doing here in reference to sex purity is precisely what he had done earlier in this discourse in reference to the sanctity of life (Matthew 5:22). He is showing that violation of these sanctities is registered first of all in the most rudimentary inclinations and emotions" (Murray, POC 56).
 - (5) The other main difficulties with Carson's theory now reappear:
 - (a) The 7th Commandment is supposed to have "its own intention," namely, that a more "stringent" interpretation must be adopted. Presumably this is the 'prophetic nature of imperatival law' that is revealed in 5:17. But it is difficult to see how the 7th Commandment itself 'prophetically foreshadows' or 'points to' Jesus' allegedly more stringent teaching. What does this mean? How is a liberal law 'eschatologically fulfilled' in a stricter law? Carson is shut up to this interpretation, because of his understanding of *pleroo* in 5:17, but the interpretation itself, in its concrete application to this second antithesis, remains inscrutable.
 - (b) Also, Carson earlier told us in his introduction to the antitheses that "in every case Jesus contrasts the people's misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points," and that "Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted." But now in his exposition of this particular antithesis, we are not told that the people *misunderstood* the law, but that *Jesus changed the law* in the direction of stringency!⁵
- iv) Third antithesis: Divorce and remarriage (5:31-32)
- (1) The text reads: "31 " Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery."

⁵ For thoroughness, I simply note that I am unpersuaded by Haacker's contention (referenced by Carson) that the second *auten* in this text must be 'unnecessary' on the traditional interpretation, so that we must instead translate this clause as "so as to get her to lust."

(2) *Carson's treatment*

- (a) Carson says that, "The OT passage to which Jesus refers (v. 31) is Deuteronomy 24:1-4, whose thrust is that if a man divorces his wife because of 'something indecent' (not further defined) in her, he must give her a certificate of divorce, and if she then becomes another man's wife and is divorced again, the first man cannot remarry her. This double restriction--the certificate and the prohibition of remarriage--discouraged hasty divorces. Here Jesus does not go into the force of 'something indecent.' Instead he insists that the law was pointing to the sanctity of marriage." A little earlier Carson says, "these two verses are innately antithetical."
- (b) It is difficult to know what to make of this interpretation, in light of Carson's theory from the *pleroo* of v. 17. According to Carson, Jesus is here showing how laws *pleroo* laws, that is, how "the law was pointing to the sanctity of marriage." But did not *the OT law itself* enshrine the sanctity of marriage? Indeed, Carson himself notes that, in the Dt 24:1-4 legislation, its "double restriction--the certificate and the prohibition of remarriage--discouraged hasty divorces" (emphasis mine). Thus, Jesus' teaching on the sanctity of marriage is not something that 'fulfils' the OT law. For all we know from Carson's exposition, it is essentially identical to its demands. Once again, Carson's master thesis from v. 17 fails to find any concrete application in the specific antitheses it was designed to enlighten. The following discussion will bear this out.

(3) *Is 'uncleanness' equivalent to porneia?*

- (a) Carson notes that there are "numerous points for exegetical dispute," including "the meaning of *porneia*," and he refers the reader to his exposition on Mt 19:3-12. But his comments there only serve to undermine his present treatment of this third antithesis.
- (b) First, Carson argues that *porneia*, which is Jesus' only grounds for legitimate divorce in Mt 5:32 and Mt 19:9, refers to a broad range of sexual sin: "But it must be admitted that the word *porneia* itself is very broad. In unambiguous contexts it can on occasion refer to a specific kind of sexual sin. Yet even then this is possible only because the specific sexual sin belongs to the larger category of sexual immorality. *Porneia* covers the entire range of such sins (cf. TDNT, 6:579-95; BAGD, s.v.; Joseph Jensen, 'Does *porneia* Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina,' *NovTest* 20 [1978]: 161-84) and should not be restricted unless the context requires it."
- (c) Second, Carson says that 'uncleanness,' which was Moses' only grounds for legitimate divorce in Dt 24:1-4, refers to a broad range of immoral behaviour: "But what was the 'indecent' in Moses' day that allowed for divorce? 'Something indecent' could not be equated with adultery, for the normal punishment for that was death, not divorce (Deut 22:22)--though it is not at all clear that the death penalty was in fact regularly imposed for adultery (cf. Henry McKeating, 'Sanctions Against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society,' *JSOT* 11 [1979]: 57-72). Nor could the indecency be suspicion of adultery, for which the prescribed procedure was the bitter-water rite (Num 5:5-31). Yet the indecency must have been shocking: ancient Israel took marriage seriously. The best assumption is that the indecency was any lewd, immoral behavior, sometimes including, but not restricted to, adultery--e.g. lesbianism or sexual misconduct that fell short of intercourse."
- (d) Thus, for all we know from Carson's exegesis of Mt 5:31-32 and Mt 19:7-8, the basic grounds for divorce under Moses and Jesus are *identical*: 'the entire range of sexual immorality' or 'any lewd, immoral behavior.' Given this, there is no reason to think that the OT law 'points to' or 'prophetically foreshadows' Jesus' law. There is no reason to think that Jesus is either annulling or intensifying OT law. Why then did Carson say that his proposal from the *pleroo* of v. 17 helps to unify our interpretation of the antitheses? For rather than helping us to see 'the direction in which the OT law points,' it is evident that OT law and Jesus' law are *pointing in the same direction*: to the sanctity of marriage.

(4) *Does Jesus abrogate Moses?*

- (a) 'Uncleanness' and *porneia* again

- (i) We have seen that Carson's own arguments for the meaning of *porneia* and 'uncleanness' seem to show that they mean the same thing. But interestingly enough, when Carson comes to exegeting Mt 19:9 in particular, he examines seven alternative interpretations of *porneia* and the exception clause, and concludes: "Jesus is then saying that divorce and remarriage always involve evil; but as Moses permitted it because of the hardness of men's hearts, so also does he—but now on the sole grounds of *porneia* (sexual sin of any sort)."
 - (ii) Thus, Carson here *contrasts* the Mosaic grounds for divorce, and Jesus' grounds for divorce. Jesus' grounds for divorce are *porneia*, or "sexual sin of any sort." But didn't Carson argue earlier that the 'uncleanness' of Dt 24 was "any lewd, immoral behavior"? What then is supposed to be the principled difference between "sexual sin of any sort" (Jesus' grounds) and "any lewd, immoral behaviour" (Moses' grounds)?
 - (iii) It *appears* that Carson has neglected his own lexical data, in order to arrive at his own conclusion that (as he puts it in the next paragraph), "Jesus is abrogating something of the Mosaic prescription." I find myself very perplexed when I consider this material taken together. I encourage the reader to study this section of Carson's commentary, and see if they can render it consistent. I cannot.
- (b) The problem of penal maxima
- (i) Carson does seem to have an argument, however, independent of his lexical conclusions. "Formally Jesus is abrogating something of the Mosaic prescription; for whatever the *erwsat dabar* ('something indecent') refers to (Deut 24:1), it cannot easily be thought to refer to adultery, for which the prescribed punishment was death. That this was rarely carried out (McKeating, 'Sanctions Against Adultery'; cf. Joseph in 1:19-20) is beside the point: as a legal system, irrespective of whether it was enforced, the Deuteronomic permission for divorce and remarriage could scarcely have adultery primarily in view. But *porneia* includes adultery even if not restricted to it. Jesus' judgments on the matter are therefore both lighter (no capital punishment for adultery) and heavier (the sole exception being sexual sin)."
 - (ii) Carson's argument appears to be founded on a distinction between the *de jure* status of Mosaic law as a legal system, and its *de facto* enforcement. While I grant the distinction, it is not sufficient to make Carson's point, for perhaps it is implicit *in the Mosaic legal system* that the application of penal *maxima* was left to the discretion of the local judges involved in any particular case.⁶ If this is correct, then Dt 24:1 can "easily be thought to refer to adultery," even though "the prescribed punishment was death" according to other Mosaic statutes. This position also harmonises with the lexical data concerning 'uncleanness' and *porneia*, noted above.
- (5) *Conclusion*
- (a) Carson concludes that Jesus is here seen to "abrogate any permission for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1 if that permission extends, or is thought to extend, beyond sexual sin." But it is precisely this 'if' which must be challenged. *Did* the Dt 24:1 permission for divorce extend beyond the equivalent of *porneia*? If not, then Jesus is not abrogating the Mosaic law, but defending it from Pharisaic distortion.
 - (b) Coming back to Mt 5:31-32, and reflecting on the parallel to Mt 19:7-9, it is easily seen that Jesus is *defending the law from Pharisaic distortion*. For the first half of this third antithesis only mentions the *paperwork* required for divorce, as if that were *all* that was specified in Dt 24:1-4. Jesus corrects this erroneous impression, that one could divorce for just *any* reason as long as there was a divorce certificate, by

⁶ For convincing argument to this effect, cf. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 161; Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 285; Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan, 1983), p. 73; and Kaiser, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 155.

reiterating that proper *grounds* were required for divorce as well. That this was indeed the characteristic but erroneous impression of the Pharisees, can be seen by consulting the Pharisees' own question on this point: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" (Mt 19:3). No, says Jesus, it must be on the grounds of *porneia* ('uncleanness'). Thus, in both Mt 5:32 and in Mt 19:9, Jesus is defending the Mosaic law on divorce from Pharisaic distortion. He is not 'abrogating' that law.

- (c) Carson's treatment of this antithesis conflicts with itself. Though Jesus' grounds for divorce is said to be "sexual sin of any sort" (*porneia*), and though Moses' grounds for divorce is said to be "any lewd, immoral behaviour" (uncleanness), nevertheless Carson holds that Jesus' grounds for divorce are stricter than Moses'.
 - (d) Carson's treatment of this antithesis conflicts with his initial statement concerning the antitheses. While he initially claimed that "Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted," he claims here that Jesus "abrogates" Mosaic permission for divorce.
 - (e) Finally, Carson's treatment of this antithesis conflicts with his interpretation of the *pleroo* of v. 17. On that hypothesis, laws *pleroo* laws. But it is extremely hard to see how liberal divorce laws 'point to' or 'prophetically foreshadow' strict ones.
- v) Fourth antithesis: Oaths and truthfulness (5:33-37)
- (1) The text reads: "33 " Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' 34 "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 "nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 "Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."
 - (2) *The OT background*
 - (a) Carson rightly points out *the depth of the Mosaic law* on this topic: "The Mosaic law forbade irreverent oaths, light use of the Lord's name, broken vows. Once Yahweh's name was invoked, the vow to which it was attached became a debt that had to be paid to the Lord."
 - (b) Carson also rightly points out *the Pharisaic distortions of this Mosaic law* which had developed by Jesus' day: "A sophisticated casuistry judged how binding an oath really was by examining how closely it was related to Yahweh's name. Incredible distinctions proliferate under such an approach. Swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing by Jerusalem, though swearing *toward* Jerusalem was. That an entire mishnaic tract (M *Shebuoth*) is given over to the subject (cf. also M *Sanhedrin* 3.2, *Tosephta Nedarim* 1; SBK, 1:321-36) shows that such distinctions became important and were widely discussed."
 - (c) Carson says that, "If oaths designed to encourage truthfulness become occasions for clever lies and casuistical deceit, Jesus will abolish oaths (v. 34). For the direction in which the OT points is the fundamental importance of thorough and consistent truthfulness. If one does not swear at all, one does not swear falsely."
 - (i) It *appears* Carson is saying that Jesus abolishes those oaths which "become occasions for clever lies and casuistical deceit." This appears to be exactly right. And, of course, the OT never permitted *those* kinds of oaths, for, as Carson himself pointed out earlier, "the Mosaic law forbade irreverent oaths" and "light use of the Lord's name." But this is much different from Jesus literally forbidding all oaths whatsoever.
 - (ii) In addition, it appears that Carson imposes his understanding of the *pleroo* in v. 17, upon vv. 33-37, for he insists OT law 'points to' (and is therefore eschatologically fulfilled in) Jesus' own stricter teaching: "the direction in which the OT points is the fundamental importance of thorough and consistent truthfulness. If one does not swear at all, one does not swear falsely." The great problem here is that the OT *already* taught "the fundamental importance of thorough and consistent truthfulness," for the prohibition against bearing false

witness is the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, and there were few documents more ‘fundamentally important’ in the Old Covenant than the Decalogue! In addition, there are literally scores of verses in the Proverbs advising thorough truthfulness, not to mention the witness of the rest of the OT with respect to God’s severe condemnation of its opposite. So it is difficult to see how this is “the direction in which the OT points” eschatologically, since it *just is* the teaching of the OT.

(3) *Jesus’ teaching on oaths*

- (a) As I said above, Carson appears to take the view that Jesus is *not* literally forbidding the swearing of any oaths. This is reinforced when Carson says, “Many groups (e.g., Anabaptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses) have understood these verses absolutely literally and have therefore refused even to take court oaths. Their zeal to conform to Scripture is commendable, but they have probably not interpreted the text very well.” Carson brings out several excellent points in favour of this view, which are worth reproducing in full:
- (b) “1. The contextual purpose of this passage is to stress the true direction in which the OT points--viz., the importance of truthfulness. Where oaths are not being used evasively and truthfulness is not being threatened, it is not immediately obvious that they require such unqualified abolition.”
- (c) “2. In the Scriptures God himself ‘swears’ (e.g., Gen 9:9-11; Luke 1:68, 73; cf. Ps 16:10 and Acts 2:27-31), not because he sometimes lies, but in order to help men believe (Heb 6:17). The earliest Christians still took oaths, if we may judge from Paul’s example (Rom 1:9; 2Cor 1:23; 1Thess 2:5, 10; cf. Philippians 1:8), for much the same reason. Jesus himself testified under oath (26:63-64).”⁷
- (d) “3. Again we need to remember the antithetical nature of Jesus’ preaching (see on 5:27-30; 6:5-8).” (With regard to this third point, we must also note Carson’s excellent and related point in his comments on v. 17: “comparison with 10:34 shows that the antithesis may not be absolute. Few would want to argue that there is *no* sense in which Jesus came to bring peace (cf. on 5:9). Why then argue that there is no sense in which Jesus abolishes the law?” I think that this is entirely right. We cannot conclude from the mere fact that Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth” (Mt 10:34), that therefore there is no sense in which Jesus came to bring peace. Yes, absolutistic language is used, but it is obvious from *other* passages of Scripture that this absolutistic language is for rhetorical effect, for obviously Jesus *did* come to bring peace in some sense. Ditto for the allegedly absolutistic contrast here, in v. 34. Indeed, Carson’s comments on v. 34 are an excellent application of this principle of using Scripture to interpret Scripture.)

(4) *Conclusion*

- (a) However, despite Carson’s well-reasoned rebuttal to those who think Jesus’ words “require such unqualified abolition” of oaths, Carson immediately goes on to conclude this section by claiming, “It must be frankly admitted that here Jesus formally contravenes OT law: what it permits or commands (Deut 6:13), he forbids. But if his interpretation of the direction in which the law points is authoritative, then his teaching fulfills it.”
- (b) I find this conclusion to be truly perplexing. Carson has brought out for us the depth of the Mosaic law concerning oaths, the reality of Pharisaic distortion of that law (which forms the background to Jesus’ teaching), and a strong, Scripturally-informed *rebuttal* of the notion that Jesus required the ‘unqualified abolition’ of oaths. And yet, in spite of all this, Carson concludes that “Jesus formally contravenes OT law”!
- (c) I do not know what to make of this. I ask my readers to study this portion of Carson’s commentary and see if they can render his argument consistent. I cannot. I can only

⁷ Cf. also Murray’s six arguments in POC 170-172, for the conclusion that “Our Lord’s teaching would be in conflict with Scripture analogy” if we were to think that “Jesus here proscribe[s] all such swearing” (POC 171).

conclude that once again Carson is in the grip of a thesis. He *wants* to conclude that Jesus is giving us “the direction in which the law points.” He *wants* to conclude that Jesus’ teaching eschatologically ‘fulfills’ OT law. He wants to do these things because his idiosyncratic extension of the meaning of *pleroo* in v. 17 to embrace ethical law as an eschatological *terminum* just *has* to provide a ‘unifying approach’ to the antitheses. But when it comes to examining the specific content of those antitheses, Carson’s explanatory theory just falls apart.

- (d) In addition, as we saw with previous antitheses, Carson’s treatment conflicts with his initial statement concerning the antitheses. While he initially claimed that “Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted,” he claims here that Jesus “formally contravenes OT law.”
 - (e) Finally, as we saw with previous antitheses, Carson’s treatment of this antithesis conflicts with his interpretation of the *pleroo* of v. 17. On that hypothesis, laws *pleroo* laws. But it is extremely hard to see how liberal oath laws ‘point to’ or ‘prophetically foreshadow’ the abolition of all oaths. How does a *command to swear* by God’s name (Dt 6:13) point toward a *prohibition from all swearing*? Isn’t such a notion just inscrutable?
- vi) Fifth antithesis: Personal injury and self-sacrifice (5:38-42)
- (1) The text reads: “38 " You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 "But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.”
 - (2) *The lex talionis and the OT prohibition against revenge*
 - (a) On the one hand, Carson says that, “The distinctive element in Jesus’ teaching is the way he sets it over against the *lex talionis* (the principle of retribution) and the reasons he does this.” Thus, there is supposed to be a contrast here between Jesus’ teaching and the *lex talionis*.
 - (b) But on the other hand, Carson says that, “The OT prescription (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21) was not given to foster vengeance; the law explicitly forbade that (Lev 19:18). Rather, it was given, as the OT context shows, to provide the nation’s judicial system with a ready formula of punishment, not least because it would decisively terminate vendettas.” Thus, we see that the OT itself explicitly forbade vengeance by means of the *lex talionis*.
 - (c) The question then needs to be asked: if the OT explicitly forbid taking revenge, by means of the *lex talionis* or anything else for that matter, then what precisely is the *contrast* between OT law and Jesus’ teaching? The answer is that there *is* no contrast, and we can see that via a distinction between righteous law and corrupt motive which Carson himself actually enunciates: “The trouble is that a law designed to limit retaliation and punish fairly could be appealed to as justification for vindictiveness.”
 - (i) Notice where Carson locates the ‘trouble’: not in the law itself, but in the fact that people could appeal to the law with corrupt motives, using it ‘as justification for vindictiveness.’ But Carson has already argued that “the OT prescription was not given to foster vengeance; the law explicitly forbade that (Lev 19:18).” Thus, on the Scriptural evidence Carson himself adduces, the problem was not in any way with the *OT law*, but rather with the possibility of corrupt motives in appealing to that law!
 - (ii) The fact of the matter is that there is no contrast between Jesus’ teaching and the *lex talionis*, since the OT itself forbid taking vengeance by any means. This is because there is a principled distinction between vindication and vindictiveness, between justice and revenge. This will become clear when we examine Jesus’ four applications of his principle, below.

(d) Carson says that “it will not do to argue that Jesus is doing nothing more than combatting a personal as opposed to a judicial use of the *lex talionis*, since in that case the examples would necessarily run differently: e.g., if someone strikes you, don’t strike back but let the judiciary administer the just return slap. The argument runs in deeper channels.” Well, it is true that Jesus is doing something “more than combatting a personal as opposed to a judicial use of the *lex talionis*.” But that ‘something more’ is to discourage perverting the *judicial* use of the *lex talionis*. Murray brings out these *two* distortions of that particular law:

- (i) “The *lex talionis* was part of the Mosaic jurisprudence; it was one of the measures instituted for the penalizing of injury inflicted. It was part of the order of public justice and not of private revenge. It is easy to see how this distinction could be overlooked or discarded and two distortions would readily result:
 1. “(1) the transfer to private life of a rule which applied only in the sphere of public justice;
 2. “(2) the misappropriation of the provision to justify personal vindictiveness.
- (ii) “The latter distortion would be more heinous than the first because it proceeds from a misconstruction of the motive in criminal punishment. Retribution is never for the purpose of placating vindictive revenge but for the purpose of satisfying justice. Justice is not vindictive though it is vindicatory.
- (iii) “We can reasonably infer that this is the evil Jesus has in view – vindictiveness which seeks personal revenge and wreaks it if possible. The series of injunctions takes on meaning in that context. How totally different is the attitude of mind reflected in the conduct which Jesus enjoins from that which is vengeful and calculating in terms of repayment” (POC 174-175).

(3) *The lex talionis and its alleged eschatological fulfilment*

- (a) Carson makes a series of statements which appear to be rather confused: “Jesus’ disciple is not to resist ‘an evil person’ (*to ponero* could not easily be taken to refer here to the Devil or to evil in the abstract). In the context of the *lex talionis*, the most natural way of understanding the resistance is ‘do not resist in a court of law.’ This interpretation is required in the second example (v. 40). As in vv. 33-37, therefore, Jesus’ teaching formally contradicts the OT law. But in the context of vv. 17-20, what Jesus is saying is reasonably clear: the OT, including the *lex talionis*, points forward to Jesus and his teaching. But like the OT laws permitting divorce, enacted because of the hardness of men’s hearts (19:3-12), the *lex talionis* was instituted to curb evil because of the hardness of men’s hearts. ‘God gives by concession a legal regulation as a dam against the river of violence which flows from man’s evil heart’ (Piper, p. 90).” In this one paragraph we can see the several elements of Carson’s approach come together, each of which is highly debatable:
 - (i) “Jesus’ teaching formally contradicts the OT law. “ But in that case, why did Carson say earlier that, throughout the antitheses, “Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted”?
 - (ii) Vv. 17-20 allegedly enables us to see that “the OT, including the *lex talionis*, points forward to Jesus and his teaching.” But how can a law which specifically commanded “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” *point forward to*, prophetically foreshadow, etc., a teaching that says we are not to resist the evil person at all, not even “in a court of law”? How does a positive *command* for legal retribution foreshadow the *rescinding* of any and all retribution?
 - (iii) “OT laws permitting divorce” and “the *lex talionis*” were “enacted because of the hardness of men’s hearts,” so that “God gives by concession a legal regulation as a dam against the river of violence which flows from man’s evil heart.” But how can a law which enforced *violent retribution* against law-breakers, be a dam *against* the river of violence which flows from man’s evil heart? If it be said, “That is the point; the *lex talionis* was instituted precisely to make sure that people didn’t take matters into their own violent hands,” the reply is: “Then the analogy

is precisely wrong. Divorce was instituted as a *concession to* the hardness of men's hearts (*allowing* them in their hardness of heart to go ahead and separate what God had joined together), but the *lex talionis* was instituted to *prevent men* from inflicting personal violence on each other (*forbidding* them in their hardness of heart to go ahead and take matters into their own hands, and *detering* them from law-breaking as they observe the just penalties of the law meted out). So any way you look at it, this observation simply doesn't make sense.

- (b) Carson also reads a whole context of fulfilled prophecy into this text, citing the New Covenant prophecies of Jer 31 and Eze 36, to the effect that "there would be a change of heart among God's people, living under a new covenant." Thus, "obedience to God would spring from the heart (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27) as the eschatological age dawned. Thus Jesus' instruction on these matters is grounded in eschatology... the prophecies that curbed evil while pointing forward to the eschaton are now superseded by the new age and the new hearts it brings (cf. Piper, pp. 89-91)."
- (i) I find this emphasis upon fulfilled prophecy to be not only strained (there's nothing about this in the text of the fifth antithesis), but contradicted by the OT data. The OT clearly forbids taking revenge or even bearing any grudge against your neighbour (Lev 19:18)! Why then think that Jesus' prohibition against personal revenge is distinctively tied to "the new age and the new heart it brings"? Is this not the very prohibition *of the OT*?
- (c) We turn then to Jesus' illustrations of his own principle of non-retaliation, in vv. 39-42. Carson reminds us that these "illustrations must not be diluted by endless equivocations; the only limit to the believer's response in these situations is what love and the Scriptures impose." This is entirely correct. But the key question will be: what do the Scriptures (OT and NT) impose?
- (4) *Jesus' four illustrations*
- (a) The slap on the cheek (v. 39)
- (i) Carson says that that in Jesus' first illustration of his new teaching (v. 39), "a man strikes another on the cheek--not only a painful blow, but a gross insult... *typto* can refer to a slap (e.g., Acts 23:3). But instead of seeking recompense at law under the *lex talionis*, Jesus' disciples will gladly endure the insult again."
- (ii) But the antithesis Carson sets up is false, for where in OT law is the *lex talionis* set up as a remedy *for a slap*? As far as the OT prescriptions are concerned, this would be a gross *abuse* of the *lex talionis*. That law was for serious injury (Ex 21:23)! The OT clearly forbid taking revenge or even bearing any grudge against your neighbour (Lev 19:18)! So how can Jesus' teaching "formally contradict" the OT law?
- (b) The taking of the tunic (v. 40).
- (i) Carson says that, "Although under Mosaic law the outer cloak was an inalienable possession (Exod 22:26; Deut 24:13), Jesus' disciples, if sued for their tunics (an inner garment like our suit but worn next to the skin), far from seeking satisfaction, will gladly part with what they may legally keep."
- (ii) Carson appears to be setting up a contrast between Mosaic law and Jesus' teaching. But he later undermines this very point: "While these four vignettes have powerful shock value, they were not meant to be new legal prescriptions... Verse 40 is clearly hyperbolic: no first-century Jew would go home wearing only a loin cloth." So it is difficult to see what contrast Carson is claiming.
- (c) The being forced to go a mile (v. 41)
- (i) Carson says that, "The third example refers to the Roman practice of commandeering civilians to carry the luggage of military personnel a prescribed distance, one Roman 'mile.'... Impressment, like a lawsuit, evokes outrage; but the attitude of Jesus' disciples under such circumstances must not be spiteful or vengeful but helpful--willing to go a second mile... This illustration is also implicitly anti-Zealot."

- (ii) Again, it is difficult to see what contrast with OT law Carson is claiming. Jesus' disciples must not be "spiteful or vengeful but helpful." Is it any different under the OT? Towards one's neighbour: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). And towards one's enemy: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. 22 For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the LORD will reward you" (Pr 25:21-22). (More on love to one's enemies, in the sixth and final antithesis, below.)
- (d) The giving to the one who asks of you (v. 42)
 - (i) Carson says that, "The final illustration requires not only interest-free loans (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:37; Deut 23:19) but a generous spirit (cf. Deut 15:7-11; Pss 37:26; 112:5)."
 - (ii) Carson's OT citations prove the point: there simply *is* no contrast here between the demands of OT law and Jesus' demands on his followers. I encourage the reader to look up these OT texts, and compare their teaching with the teaching of Jesus. Carson lessens any alleged contrast even further, when he says a little later, "Verse 42 does not commit Jesus' disciples to giving endless amounts of money to every one who seeks a 'soft touch' (cf. Prov 11:15; 17:18; 22:26)."
 - (iii) Carson claims that, "These last two illustrations confirm our interpretation of vv. 38-39. The entire pericope deals with the heart's attitude, the better righteousness. For there is actually no legal recourse to the oppression in the third illustration, and in the fourth no harm that might lead to retaliation has been done." But what we have seen is that there is an abundance of OT texts which also "deal with the heart's attitude" (and more, see below). Why then the assertion that Jesus' teaching is "the better righteousness"?

(5) *Conclusion*

- (a) We have seen once again that there is no principled contrast between OT law and Jesus' teaching in the antitheses.
- (b) We have also seen the failure of Carson's 'unifying hypothesis,' for there is little sense in thinking that a positive command for legal retribution foreshadows and is fulfilled in the *rescinding* of any and all retribution.

vii) Sixth antithesis: Hatred and love (5:43-47)

- (1) The text reads: "43 " You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?"
- (2) As Carson points out, "The command 'Love your neighbor' is found in Leviticus 19:18, but no OT Scripture adds 'and hate your enemies.'" But if this is the case, then it follows that Jesus is not contrasting his teaching with that of Moses, since Moses never commanded hatred of one's enemy. Indeed, Carson speaks of "the popular perversion of Leviticus 19:18 presupposed by Matthew 5:43."
- (3) In addition, Carson points out that, "The quotation also omits 'as yourself,' words included in 19:19; 22:39; and the attitude reflected ignores the fact that Leviticus 19:33-34 also commands love of the same depth for the sojourner, the resident alien in the land. The popular reasoning seems to have been that if God commands love for 'neighbor,' then hatred for 'enemies' is implicitly conceded and perhaps even authorized." Thus, once again we are in the realm of an antithesis between a *perversion* of OT law (a Scripturally ignorant 'attitude,' and 'popular reasoning') and Jesus' teaching, rather than an antithesis between OT law and Jesus' teaching.

- (4) However, what about Jesus' explicit command to love your enemies? Surely *this* command is to be contrasted with OT moral teaching! By no means:
- (a) Pr 25:21-22 teaches that "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. 22 For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the LORD will reward you" (cf. Pr 24:17). Interestingly enough, when Paul instructs Christian believers to "Repay no one evil for evil" (Ro 12:17) and to "overcome evil with good" (Ro 12:21), Pr 25:21-22 is the precise OT passage he adduces in support of this NT moral exhortation. Indeed, since both Pr 25:21-22 (explicitly) and Mt 5:46 (implicitly) speak of the *reward* which accrues to those who love their enemies, it is quite likely that the Proverbs passage forms the OT background of Jesus' exhortation.
 - (b) Again, Paul cites Dt 32:35 as the OT support for his exhortation that Christian believers are not to take vengeance on their enemies (Ro 12:19).
 - (c) Thus, it is abundantly clear that there is no contrast between OT injunctions and Jesus' moral exhortations in Mt 5:43-47. There *is* an antithesis in this passage, but it is not between divinely revealed law and Jesus' teachings. It is between the Pharisaic addition to the Mosaic law ('you shall hate your enemy') and the Mosaic law itself ('do good to those who hate you' = 'if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,' etc.).
- (5) Why then does Carson say: "The real direction indicated by the law is love, rich and costly, and extended even to enemies." This is more than the 'real direction indicated by the law.' It *was* the law!
- (6) Carson notes that, "Jesus' disciples have as their example God himself." This is entirely correct. Jesus grounds his moral imperatives in the character of God himself; you are to be "sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (v. 45). But this is the same reasoning we find in the OT. For in the same passage in which the Israelites are commanded to "not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev 19:17) and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18), they are also told that "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). As in Mt 5:43-47, the holiness commended to the people of God in this passage is grounded in the character of God himself.
- (7) Surprisingly, Carson devotes an entire paragraph to eradicating any significant contrast between OT and NT on this point of love for enemies: "It is equally unsound to conclude that the OT requires harsh terms for an enemy, but that the NT overcomes this dark portrait with new demands for unqualified love. Counter evidence refutes this notion: the OT often mandates love for others (e.g., Exod 23:4-5; Lev 19:18, 33-34; 1Sam 24:5; Job 31:29; Ps 7:4; Prov 24:17, 29; 25:21-22 [cf. Rom 12:20], and the NT speaks against the reprobate (e.g., Luke 18:7; 1Cor 16:22; 2Thess 1:6-10; 2Tim 4:18; Rev 6:10)."
- (8) Nevertheless, Carson persists in finding a place for his theory that OT laws *pleroo* Jesus' laws: "vv. 44-45 insist that the OT law cited (v. 43) points to the wealth of love exercised by the heirs of the kingdom, a love qualitatively different from that experienced by other people (see on vv. 46-47)." Since we have seen in a variety of ways that the moral standards are essentially the same across covenants, Carson's theory fails to find any real application here. It appears at this stage to be an irrelevancy. There is simply no reason to adopt it. The antitheses have a 'unity' on their own, quite apart from Carson's theory: Jesus is defending the OT law from distortion and misinterpretation. He is telling us how our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, not that his standard of righteousness exceeds that of the OT. Carson notes "the OT law cited" in v. 43 ("you shall love your neighbor"), but he neglects the *perversion of OT law* explicitly attached to that verse ("hate your enemy"). Since Jesus' response exclusively focuses upon *love to one's enemies* (rather than love to neighbour), it is clear that it is the perversion of OT law, enshrined in the first half of the antithesis, which is being addressed.

2) Conclusion: Eschatological Fulfilment and the Confirmation of Mosaic Law

a) Review

- i) In his comments on the verse which ends the antitheses and the pericope under discussion – “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (v. 48) – Carson concludes: “In the light of the preceding verses (vv. 17-47), Jesus is saying that the true direction in which the law has always pointed is not toward mere judicial restraints, concessions arising out of the hardness of men's hearts, still less casuistical perversions, nor even to the law of love... No, it pointed rather to all the perfection of God, exemplified by the authoritative interpretation of the law bound up in the preceding antitheses. This perfection Jesus' disciples must emulate if they are truly followers of him who fulfills the Law and the Prophets (v. 17).”
 - ii) Carson says that there is an “authoritative interpretation of the law bound up in the preceding antitheses.” But now we are in a position to see that that is a fairly misleading summary, for Carson has gone much, much further than this, in his actual exposition of the antitheses. One does not give an “authoritative interpretation” of OT divorce laws, oath laws, and the *lex talionis*, by bluntly rescinding or changing or contradicting such laws. That is not an authoritative interpretation of such laws; it is an abrogation of such laws! This vital distinction is blurred through Carson's use of the word ‘fulfills.’
 - iii) Beyond this, I trust that the preceding critique has undermined the heart of Carson's thesis, that what is primarily going on in the antitheses is Jesus showing “the true direction in which the law has always pointed.” To review, I have largely based my critique on the following grounds.
 - iv) **First**, the ethical contrast again and again throughout the antitheses is between Pharisaic distortions of OT law, and the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven (as summarised in Jesus' teaching). The contrast is *not* between the OT law itself and Jesus' teaching. Therefore, in the antitheses Jesus is not primarily engaged in bringing out how one ethical standard (OT law) prophetically foreshadows and points to another ethical standard (Jesus' teaching). Such a contrast is simply not in view. As I have tried to show above, this contrast is repeatedly imposed upon the text, and does not withstand scrutiny of the relevant OT data.
 - v) **Second**, we have seen that Carson's distinctive proposal with respect to the *pleroo* of v. 17 – that it receives ethical teaching as its eschatological *terminum* – finds no support whatsoever from Matthean usage and broader NT usage, and is implausible given the specific content of the antitheses. In addition, it makes little sense even on its own terms, for how do liberal laws point to stricter ones? How do commands point to their own abrogation? How do radically different *ethical* principles become eschatologically related?
 - vi) **Third**, we have seen that Carson repeatedly reads his distinctive understanding of *pleroo* into vv. 18-20, even though at several points this move requires him to violate fairly standard principles of exegesis, and to argue (against the analogy of Scripture) that the Christian's ethical canon is restricted to that of the NT.
 - vii) **Fourth**, we have seen that Carson minimises the relevance of v. 20 to the interpretation of the antitheses, which v. 20 immediately introduces. The antitheses are obviously contrasts between competing ethical standards, and v. 20 is the only part of the introduction to the antitheses which sets up a contrast between competing *ethical* standards, and therefore provides a guide as to *which* ethical standards are being contrasted in the antitheses: OT law and Christ's law, or Pharisaic righteousness and kingdom righteousness?
 - viii) **Fifth**, we have seen a variety of times that Carson seems to want it both ways. He wants to affirm that “Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of hearers adopted,” but he also wants to affirm that Jesus ‘abrogates,’ ‘revokes,’ ‘contravenes,’ ‘contradicts,’ and ‘changes’ several OT laws.
- b) Is there an alternative?**
- i) I spoke in the Introduction of my intent to defend ‘the traditionally Reformed interpretation of this text.’ This was especially seen in my treatment of the six antitheses above, where I tried to show that Jesus is defending OT law from Pharisaic distortion, rather than revising OT law. Nevertheless, my statement in the Introduction is not quite right. Traditionally, Reformed interpreters have taken the significance of the *pleroo* of v. 17 to be that of confirming / establishing / validating the law and the prophets, rather than eschatologically

fulfilling what the law and the prophets prophetically foreshadowed. Since I am persuaded that the former sense of *pleroo* is most unlikely in v. 17, to this extent I indeed depart from the ‘Reformed tradition’ (however, see Murray, POC 149-151, for an example of a confessionally Reformed exegete who sees *both* senses in v. 17, and see Fairbairn, TROLIS 223, for an example of a confessionally Reformed exegete who sees *neither* sense!).

- ii) Nevertheless, my contention is that this eschatological sense of *pleroo* is not only quite compatible with the traditionally Reformed interpretation of the antitheses, but in fact leads us to expect it. This is surprising, since most NCT advocates draw attention to the eschatological sense of the *pleroo* in v. 17 as evidence *against* the traditionally Reformed interpretation of the antitheses. Thus, while I affirm a connection between v. 17 and vv. 21-48, it is not the connection which *Carson and NCT advocates* make.

c) *The relevance of v. 20*

- i) There is indeed a connection between the *pleroo* of v. 17 and the antitheses of vv. 21-48. As argued extensively above, I do not see any hope for the *kind* of connection proposed by either Carson (or Zaspel, see Appendix). But before I get to what I think is the real connection, I wish to comment upon the significance of v. 20 for the antitheses. For I regard v. 20 to be equally relevant to the interpretation of vv. 21-48. Neither Carson (nor Zaspel) make much use of v. 20 in the interpretation of vv. 21-48. Their comments are at best general ‘side comments,’ disconnected from the antitheses, and I believe this is a weakness in their approach, for v. 20 is the verse which immediately introduces the antitheses! And it is the only verse preceding the antitheses, which actually sets up an *ethical* antithesis: that between the righteousness of *the scribes and Pharisees*, and the righteousness of *the kingdom of heaven*.
- ii) We must remember that Jesus is preaching a sermon. In v. 20 he warns his hearers that their righteousness, the righteousness of kingdom inhabitants, must *exceed* the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. And then in the immediately succeeding verses he repeatedly illustrates the contrast *he* has instituted in v. 20, by setting forth deficient Pharisaic righteousness over against the requisite kingdom righteousness. This is of course precisely the background to the traditionally Reformed interpretation of the antitheses. Thus, v. 20 gives unity to the interpretation of the antitheses.

d) *The relevance of v. 17*

- i) My proposal for the relationship between v. 17 and vv. 21-48 is simply this: it is precisely because Jesus is the *eschatological* fulfilment of the law and the prophets (v. 17), that we would expect him to *confirm* the Mosaic laws he treats in the antitheses, and to *defend* such laws from Pharisaic distortion and misinterpretation (vv. 21-48).
- ii) Why do I say this? Well, it is precisely because the entirety of OT revelation, that seamless fabric of the law and the prophets, consistently prophesy a coming Saviour from *sin*, that we would expect the Saviour pictured by that revelation to *confirm* those Mosaic laws which the Pharisees subjected to distortion. For the same Christ whose *life* is the ground of our imputed righteousness, is the Christ whose *life* is the pattern for our practical righteousness, our Christian sanctification. Since throughout the NT, one and the same life of Christ is both the grounds of our righteousness (his obedience to God’s moral law) and the pattern for our righteousness (his example to us), we would never expect Christ to drive a wedge between the moral law to which he submitted (OT moral law), and the practical righteousness he commended to his followers (via his own life and ethical teaching). The eschatological *pleroo* of v. 17, by which Jesus declares that he really is that Saviour from sin promised on every page of the OT, only reinforces this point.
- iii) Lest it be thought the preceding relies too heavily upon Pauline and systematic theological categories, there is a quicker and even more decisive argument that arises directly from the details of the text itself. For v. 19, with its inferential *oun* or ‘therefore,’ explicitly infers the responsibility to *literally teach and obey* OT law, from the fact that Jesus has come to *eschatologically fulfil* that law (vv. 17-18)! This cannot be missed. It is because Jesus has come to eschatologically fulfil the law (vv. 17-18), that *therefore* whoever literally obeys and teaches OT law will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (v. 19). To deny Jesus’

inference is simply unthinkable. Those who want to revise the obvious reference of ‘these commandments’ to Jesus’ teachings, rather than OT law, are in the grip of a thesis. And those who want to revise the ‘doing and teaching’ of these commandments to eschatological fulfilment, rather than literal obedience, are in the grip of a thesis.

- iv) Details of v. 20 confirm this approach as well. Via its explanatory *gar* or ‘for,’ v. 20 is linked to the thought of v. 19, and reminds us that the kingdom righteousness exemplified in Jesus’ teaching, is not merely distinctive to the inhabitants of the kingdom of heaven; it is a *condition of entry* into the kingdom of heaven (‘you will by no means enter’)! Since it is Jesus’ literal obedience to (and not his eschatological fulfilment of) the Mosaic law which provides the very righteousness we need for our entry into the kingdom, why would Jesus drive a wedge between the OT law that defines that righteousness, and the teaching about the kingdom’s righteousness which he affirms in the antitheses?
 - v) This is where Carson (and advocates of NCT) have it all wrong. They think that Jesus’ eschatological fulfilment of the law leads us to expect him to modify and extend the law in new directions. But the reverse must be the case. To ‘eschatologically’ fulfil the law is to be the kind of Saviour pictured and foreshadowed *by* the law. And *that* kind of Saviour saves his people from their sin, by his obedience *to the law*. So a Saviour who changed the definition of sin, is a Saviour who isn’t really an *eschatological* fulfilment of the law after all!
- e) ***The relevance of the rest of Matthew and the NT***
- i) It is significant to note that Jesus simply cited the OT as the source of the two *greatest* commandments, directly connecting them with the kingdom of God he came to inaugurate (Mk 12:28-34). If it does not conflict with Jesus’ status as the ‘eschatological fulfiller of the law’ to confirm the abiding authority of these two OT commandments, why would it conflict with such a status to confirm other, lesser commandments? In addition, what is the attitude of Jesus and his disciples to Moses’ ethical teaching throughout the *rest* of the NT? Is it one of deference, or one of revision? Universally, it is one of deference. Again and again, Jesus will appeal to the abiding authority of *Moses’* statutes in debates with his opponents, and in teaching his disciples (e.g., Mt 15:1-9, 19:17-19, 22:35-40; Mk 12:28-34). Again and again the apostles will appeal to the abiding authority of *Moses’* ethical teaching as the ground of their moral exhortations to believers (Ro 13:8-10; Eph 6:2-3; 1Ti 1:8-11; 2Ti 3:16-17; Jas 2:8-11). Given their distinctive exegesis of Mt 5:17-48, NCT advocates must argue that this *united witness* of the rest of the NT on this point is a grand coincidence! Apart from what is allegedly going on in Mt 5:17-48, Jesus and his apostles just *happen* to always defer and never challenge or revise Moses’ ethical teaching in the course of their ministries!
- f) ***Is the traditionally Reformed interpretation ‘strained’?***
- i) Still, the question may be asked, by those who are simply not persuaded by every point of my treatment of the antitheses: why go to such lengths to argue that Jesus is merely *confirming* the Mosaic laws which he references? Why such apparently ‘strained’ exegesis? Why not let Jesus do in the antitheses what it appears at first glance he is doing?
 - ii) My response is simple: we are never to be victims of a ‘first glance’ theology. The overwhelming message of vv. 17-19 is that Jesus did not come to modify the law *in any way*. He did not come to destroy it (v. 17), not one jot or tittle will pass from it till heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished (v. 18), and whoever breaks the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (v. 19). So the law *will not be destroyed* by Jesus, even its smallest aspects *will abide* until the end of history, and its smallest demands *are not to be broken*. All of this creates the *overwhelming* presumption that Jesus will not then engage in the activity of abrogating Mosaic law, in the laws he chooses to reference in vv. 21-48. This is a presumption worth fighting for. One would have to sustain an *enormous* burden of proof in order to argue that, despite vv. 17-19, Jesus will *immediately* go on to *emphatically* announce what amounts to his ‘abrogation,’ ‘revocation,’ ‘contravention,’ ‘contradiction,’ and ‘change’ to Mosaic law!
 - iii) Nay, in the face of *these* considerations, the traditionally Reformed exegesis of the antitheses doesn’t seem ‘strained’ at all. Rather, it just looks like common sense, combined with a healthy dose of the kind of godly ingenuity and comparing Scripture with Scripture which we

bring to *any* difficult passage. On the contrary, what is counterintuitive is to interpret the entirety of the antitheses in terms of one word in v. 17 (*pleroo*), on the basis of an extension of its meaning that is literally invented out of thin air, and which doesn't even make sense on its own terms!

3) Appendix: Fred Zaspel's Exposition of Mt 5:17-48

a) Introduction

- i) In this Appendix I wish to make a series of comments on Fred Zaspel's exposition of Mt 5:17-48, in his "New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law: A Theological and Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20" (1997, available at http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/hermenutics/new_c_law.htm). Zaspel's exposition appeals to that of Carson, and has much in common with it, although their respective analyses diverge at significant points.
- ii) As with Carson, I find Zaspel to be in general a fine exegete, and I commend to the reader his encouraging and edifying treatments of a wide variety of topics at his website. But as with Carson, I found key elements of his treatment of Mt 5 to be implausible. Since Zaspel is one of the more sophisticated and well-read exponents of NCT, and since his treatment is similar to that of Carson's, I have decided to include him in this paper.

b) The eschatological *pleroo* of v. 17

- i) Throughout his exposition, it is clear that Zaspel agrees with Carson in the latter's treatment of v. 17. Indeed, Zaspel cites Carson to this effect. Thus Zaspel holds that laws *pleroo* laws, OT ethical teaching prophetically foreshadows and points to Jesus' ethical teaching. And he holds that this view of v. 17 provides the clue for interpreting the antitheses. For example, Zaspel says that in Jesus' teaching in the antitheses: "there is eschatological transcendence. Jesus' teaching brings about that for which Moses' law was ultimately intended. It expresses fully and ideally the 'righteousness' anticipated at Sinai and in the prophets. The old law was not 'full' in itself; it had a forward look. It anticipated a 'fulfilling' which in Christ's teaching finally came to perfect realization." Notice that throughout this section, it is *Jesus' ethical teaching* which is clearly an eschatological *terminum*.
- ii) Thus, to the extent that Zaspel agrees with Carson on this fundamental point, to that extent I believe my critique of Carson above applies to Zaspel as well, and so I will say nothing further here to extend that basic critique. I do believe however that the set of criticisms directed at Carson – especially concerning the whole range of implausibilities which are generated once we take *pleroo* to have ethical teachings as its eschatological *terminum* – are devastating to Zaspel's whole approach to Mt 5:17-48. For instance, given the critique of Carson above, it is simply not the case that Zaspel "does not require a different sense for 'fulfill' than what is found consistently in Matthew." He does, since the notion that laws *pleroo* laws is entirely foreign to Matthew's usage of the word. Nor is it the case that Zaspel "provides the simplest explanation for Jesus' handling of Moses' law in 5:21-48." For liberal laws do not point to stricter ones, ethical requirements do not point to their own abrogation, and so on.
- iii) However, quite apart from simply applying the bulk of the preceding critique to Zaspel, several more things could be said about Zaspel's exposition, including his notion of 'Jesus as the greater Moses,' his treatment of the antitheses themselves, his treatment of vv. 17-20, and a few other related topics.

c) Jesus as the greater Moses

- i) At several points, Zaspel appears to overinterpret Matthean Christology. To be sure, Jesus is presented as one like Moses. There even appears to be a parallel between Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount, given the events leading up to the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus' birth, flight into Egypt, baptism by water, wilderness temptation). But the conclusion that therefore we should expect in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus will give essentially *new* law is wrong on three counts.
- ii) First, this seems to imply that the law Moses revealed at Sinai was essentially *Moses' law*, and nothing could be further from the truth. Moses mediated *divine* law; he did not *invent his own law*. Thus even if Jesus is confirming divine law in Mt 5:21-48, it is *divine* law he is

mediating, by ensuring that its revelation to the people of his own day is unencumbered by the traditions of men. In order to develop the ‘historical-redemptive’ expectation that Jesus would reveal *his own law* in Mt 5:21-48, Zaspel must portray Moses as similarly revealing *his own law*, and thus misconstrue the very nature of the law which Moses promulgated!

- iii) Second, it is absolutely no denigration of Jesus’ authority, and indeed it is evidence of that authority, for Jesus to confirm the divine law revealed through Moses. As we saw with respect to Carson (that a mere ‘context of legal interpretation’ insufficiently explains Jesus’ authority in the antitheses), *God himself* defends his own law from legalistic addition and perversion in the OT (Is 29:13), and surely this confirmatory activity on God’s part is no denigration of his authority. In addition, correcting vain interpretations on one’s own authority would have been a breathtaking departure from the rabbinical method with which Jesus’ hearers were familiar.⁸
- iv) Third, it can be plausibly argued that the expectation that a ‘greater than Moses’ should reveal a *new law* simply makes Jesus *the same as* Moses: both Moses and Jesus reveal new divine law. So what? This *reduces* Jesus to the level of Moses, for Jesus is doing something that Moses has already done. But if Jesus is truly *greater* than Moses, then he must do what Moses could *never* do: save his people from their sin. Again and again, this is the *true* import of the Matthean usage of *pleroo*: Jesus fulfils OT Scriptures, in the smallest detail, in confirmation of its Messianic picture of the Redeemer who was to come.⁹

d) Zaspel’s interpretation of the antitheses

- i) Zaspel introduces his discussion of the antitheses by claiming that, “If Jesus is quoting the rabbinic traditions in order to then expound the true meaning of the law of Moses, there is little evidence for it in the passage itself. It would seem on first reading that He is making specific reference to Moses -- indeed, He is quoting him.” But as we have seen in our treatment of Carson above, this position is difficult to sustain. Not only does it overlook relevant evidence from the antitheses themselves: “Whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment” and “You shall hate your enemy” are not quotes from Moses. But it also neglects the relevance of the verse which immediately introduces the antitheses, and the ethical contrast explicitly drawn there by Jesus himself (v. 20). Such details may well be overlooked “on first reading”!
- ii) On the first antithesis, Zaspel says that, “it is difficult to agree with those who see this as a mere exposition of the sixth command.” But given our earlier discussion of this antithesis, and the abundant OT data there surveyed, it is difficult to agree with Zaspel that we see here ‘advance,’ ‘extension,’ ‘addition.’ For the fact of the matter is that Jesus is expounding the true meaning of the law, *as the OT itself expounded it*.
- iii) On the second antithesis, Zaspel says that, “The situation here is virtually parallel to the previous case. Again, there is an advance of some sort.” And our response is parallel as the previous one as well, in accordance with our treatment of Carson: OT data abundantly testifies to the prohibition against lust Jesus here makes.
- iv) On the third antithesis, Zaspel says that, “Jesus plainly rescinds” Moses’ “permission to divorce.” Thus, “What Moses clearly allowed, Jesus expressly forbids. Here there is a tightening of the law at least, but apparently an abrogation.” But since Zaspel offers absolutely no argumentation whatsoever for this conclusion (it is a bare assertion; certainly not deducible from the text of Matthew), his observations are a bit premature, if not naïve. I refer the reader back to the treatment of Carson’s commentary on the third antithesis.¹⁰
- v) On the fourth antithesis, Zaspel says that, “Jesus expressly forbids what the older law allowed. Is this not abrogation?... He renders the older law obsolete.” But surely, given the

⁸ For an alternative treatment Matthew’s ‘greater than Moses’ motif, that brings out its consistency with the traditional Reformed interpretation of the antitheses, cf. Fairbairn’s TROLIS 219-223.

⁹ At times Zaspel succumbs to the temptation to read his ‘greater than Moses’ motif into passages which give little evidence of this, such as Dt 18:15-19. On other occasions he succumbs to arguments from silence, such as his reference to Mt 17:1-10.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, just before his ‘Summary and Conclusion,’ when Zaspel brings out the alleged contrasts between OT law and Jesus’ teaching in the antitheses, he skips over this one. Is he not able to clearly articulate just what the ‘advance’ is supposed to be here?

NT data examined in our treatment of Carson, this conclusion is at odds with the analogy of Scripture, for in the NT it appears that Paul, Jesus, and even God himself swore oaths or testified under oath. Why then conclude that Jesus literally forbid all oaths? Why say, as he says later, that “the fulfilled law forbids them”? Thankfully, Zaspel seems aware of the responsibility to interpret this passage in the light of other NT Scriptures, for why *else* would he refer to “whatever hyperbole may be involved here”? But rather than investigate how he can harmonise the relevant NT data with his ‘first glance’ interpretation of Jesus’ saying, Zaspel seems content to believe that his distinctive theory of divine law has once again been confirmed.

- vi) On the fifth antithesis, Zaspel rejects Luther’s and the traditionally Reformed interpretation because, “Jesus is not simply directing our revenge to the proper channels,” as if revenge (as opposed to justice) was *ever* countenanced as acceptable in the OT. It is expressly forbidden (Lev 19:18)!¹¹ Zaspel claims that Jesus “very severely restricts” the use of the *lex talionis*. But as our examination of Carson’s treatment revealed, neither OT nor NT data will support such a construction. For instance, the *lex talionis* was for serious injury, not as a remedy for an insulting slap. Zaspel concedes that “there is hyperbole involved” in Jesus’ sayings here, but does not seem willing to pursue the matter any further.
 - vii) On the sixth antithesis, Zaspel says that, “‘loving one’s enemy’ is a principle not immediately evident in any exposition of Moses.” We have here an ‘advance’ on Moses: “Jesus extends the law’s requirement.” But as we saw with the first antithesis, relevant OT data makes it clear that Jesus is expounding the true meaning of the law, *as the OT itself expounded it* (Pr 25:21-22, 24:17). By focusing on love for enemies, Jesus rebuts the Pharisaic addition to the law of God (“hate your enemy”).
- e) **The interpretation of vv. 17-20**
- i) Zaspel says that the *pleroo* of v. 17 is “the key word to the entire discussion.” He says that, “Of particular significance are the ‘fulfillment quotations’ in which the ‘filling up’ is that of God’s purposes in redemptive history.” Zaspel does not realise that Matthew never uses the word to convey the notion that OT laws prophetically foreshadow Jesus’ ethical teaching, that laws *pleroo* laws.
 - ii) “It seems, then, from the general Matthean use of “fulfill” (*pleroo*), that Jesus’ claim is intended to be understood in an eschatological sense.”
 - iii) Beyond v. 17, Zaspel reads ‘eschatological’ implications into nearly all the key terms of vv. 18-20.
 - (1) The ‘passing away’ of heaven and earth is “is that of that of failure to achieve an intended goal, ‘falling to the ground’ unfulfilled. There is again an eschatological sense.”
 - (2) “The *genetai* of v. 18, which Zaspel admits means “simply, ‘happen’ or ‘come about’,” is charged with eschatological significance: “Jesus is speaking in terms of the law’s “prophetic”/ eschatological purposes being achieved (cf. Luke 16:16). This, taken in consideration of the two “until” (*heos*) clauses, shouts of eschatological fulfillment.”
 - (3) The ‘righteousness’ of v. 20 “presumably, is the very righteousness expected in the prophets, particularly Isaiah. Here also, then, there is indication of ‘fulfillment’ in an eschatological sense.”
 - iv) Some of these points are more debatable than others. But what is significant is that in his study of these ‘contextual considerations,’ Zaspel leaps right over v. 19, in which the main thought concerns a warning to those who would break the least of the OT commandments, and an encouragement to those who keep and teach them. Since this is an encouragement for Jesus’ followers to *literally obey* the OT, rather than to *eschatologically fulfil* it, one wonders what place it has in Zaspel’s schema. The fact of the matter is that it *cannot* have a place, since – as we saw in my ‘Conclusion’ above – in v. 19 Jesus explicitly infers the responsibility to *literally teach and obey* OT law, from the fact that he has come to

¹¹ How then can Zaspel say, later, that “the old law provide[d] for revenge through legal means”? That law expressly forbid revenge!

eschatologically fulfil that law (vv. 17-18). This is precisely the opposite of Zaspel's theory, even though it directly arises from the exegetical details of the text itself.

f) *The arbitrariness of Jesus*

- i) Zaspel says several things which bring out the utter arbitrariness of Jesus' 'fulfilment' of the law by his own ethical teaching.
 - (1) With respect to the six antitheses, Jesus takes "the law of Moses in whatever direction He sees fit. In some cases, He leaves the particular command in tact (#1 & 2). In some cases He extends the teaching of the command as originally given or advances it in some other way (#1, 2, 3?, 6). But in some cases He seems to rescind the original legislation (#3, 4) or at least restrict it (#5). There seem to be elements both of continuity and discontinuity. And there appears to be no simple explanation for this other than that *Jesus has claimed and exercised a prerogative that is uniquely His*. Indeed, He is greater than Moses, and greater than the law itself."
 - (2) Thus, "there is no hermeneutical 'tool' with which the interpreter can sort out the 'new' interpretations which Jesus gives to Moses in verses 21-48. It must suffice to say simply that this is how the Lord of the law hands it down. There is no other cohesive factor involved in the various directions the law is taken."
- ii) The quotes above bear witness to what Zaspel calls his "simplest explanation for Jesus' handling of Moses' law in 5:21-48." And what a simple explanation it is! Jesus confirms, extends, advances, and rescinds Mosaic law willy-nilly. Zaspel has invoked the grand theme of God's historical-redemptive, eschatological purposes – a theory which was supposed to reveal *order* and *purpose* and *wisdom* in God's unfolding, organically-interrelated redemptive scheme – so that he can deliver to us an utterly *arbitrary* theory of moral law. Did God forbid murder and adultery in the OT? Yes, but according to Zaspel, Jesus' teaching 'fulfils' these laws by confirming and then adding to them. Did God allow oaths in the OT? Yes, but according to Zaspel, Jesus' teaching 'fulfils' that law by completely rescinding it. Why does Jesus confirm the one but rescind the other? Who knows?! "It must suffice to say simply that this is how the Lord of the law hands it down." There's as much sense in asking our question, as in asking how a "provision for revenge" foreshadows and is 'fulfilled' in its *opposite*, the command for "patience under God's providential care." One searches Matthew's usage of *pleroo* in vain for this kind of arbitrariness; in each case there is a consistent match between OT prediction/event and NT event, right on down to names of cities and countries, kinds of animal, and number of silver pieces. Not here. *Ethical* fulfilment can shrink backwards and forwards like an accordion. One suspects a trick of some sort. 'Fulfil' is being used as a cover for caprice. Moral law is being grounded in the bare sovereignty of the divine will, rather than in the unchanging character of God. Ockham's ethical nominalism has come home to roost, in the name of allegiance to Jesus.
- iii) The alternative to this chaos is the *real* "simplest explanation": the traditionally Reformed interpretation of the antitheses. In each and every case Jesus is not annulling OT ethical teaching, but defending that teaching from Pharisaic distortion. As we noted in our main critique of Carson, on the Reformed view a single cause (Pharisaic distortion) explains a single effect (Jesus' consistent repudiation of such a distortion), whereas on Zaspel's (and Carson's) alternative, a single cause (the eschatological fulfilment of the OT law by Jesus' teaching) somehow explains *contrary* effects (annulling OT law, or intensifying OT law). How can this rationale be anything but arbitrary?

g) *Miscellaneous observations*

i) *Hermeneutics*

- (1) Zaspel makes the disturbing statement about how New Covenant Theology "relates to the law. Really, this is the specific area of concern handed to anyone studying the larger picture of the Divine schema -- it just works out that way in that it is such a pivotal matter from the point of view both of Scripture and of the competing systems of theology today. Your view of the law winds up shaping your entire hermeneutical grid." I say this statement is disturbing because one would hope that a distinctive view of law would be the *last* thing which shapes *an entire hermeneutical grid!* Shouldn't it be precisely the

reverse? Shouldn't our view of law be a *result* of carefully worked out hermeneutical principles and conclusions gathered from the entirety of Scripture? I regard Zaspel's statement as a blunt concession that, for NCT's view of how one should interpret the rest of the Bible, Mt 5:17-48 is the tail that wags the dog.¹²

- (2) Zaspel says that, "Matthew 5:17-20 looms large. Indeed, out of this pivotal statement of Jesus the whole New Testament theology of law grows." Really? Their whole New Testament theology of law grows out of this text? Then it must *die* there as well, for as we have seen above in connection with Carson, their distinctive interpretation of this text entails that the universal deference of Jesus and his apostles to the ethical teaching of the OT throughout the rest of the NT must be regarded as a *grand coincidence!*

ii) *The ethical relevance of the OT*

- (1) The apostle Paul says that the entire OT is profitable not only for teaching, but also for rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2Ti 3:16-17). But Zaspel says that "the church is not at all obliged to follow the old law in its older form. She is required to follow the law only as it comes to her through the grid of Jesus Christ, the law's Lord and Fulfiller." Indeed, "apart from his interpretation of it, it has precisely no enduring applicability." Zaspel's final claim is that, "It is the law *interpreted by Him which remains binding.*" As we earlier queried Carson, now we query Zaspel: do we only follow those bits of the OT that Jesus happens to comment upon? Cf. my response to Carson on this point.

¹² Or, to switch the metaphor, the point upon which the upside-down pyramid rests.