

39 Articles of the Church of England

The *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* are the historically defining statements of doctrines of the Church of England with respect to the controversies of the English Reformation. First established in 1563, the articles served to define the doctrine of the Church of England as it related to Calvinist doctrine and Roman Catholic practice. The full name for the articles is commonly abbreviated as the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. The Articles spell out Anglican theology as differing from the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant dissenters, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Lutherans. As the Church of England found itself caught between the Papacy of Rome and the Protestant Reformers, it recognized the need to set out its general theological position. It is this need that The Thirty-Nine Articles address.

Their statement on the Old Testament offers some profit to our dialogue. It becomes clear as we look through the confessions of those who undertook to understand and apply the Law in church History that there is much consistency in understanding how the Bible addresses the issue.

VII. Of the Old Testament.

The **Old Testament is not contrary to the New**: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, **who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man**. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although **the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth**; yet notwithstanding, **no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral**.

See here a view which we have covered many times. They see a **Continuity** in the Old and New Testaments wherein **Christ** is upheld as the only **sufficient and ultimate Mediator** between God and Man. They see a **Discontinuity** in the **Ceremonial Law**, which does *“not bind any men,”* and the **Civil Law** which need not *“of necessity”* be *“received by any commonwealth.”* However there is a binding **Continuity** in the *“Commandments which are called Moral,”* from which *“no Christian man is free”* from *“the obedience”* thereof.

The Heidelberg Catechism

The **Heidelberg Catechism** is a Protestant confessional document, approved for use in 1563, taking the form of a series of questions and answers, for use in teaching Reformed Christian doctrine. It has been translated into many languages and is regarded as one of the most influential of the Reformed catechisms. The Heidelberg deals with the Law in questions 92-115.

92. Q. What is the law of the LORD?

A. God spoke all these words, saying: Exodus 20:1-17 & Deuteronomy 5:6-21

93. Q. How are these commandments divided?

A. Into two parts. The first teaches us how to live in relation to God; the second, what duties we owe our neighbor. *Matt. 22:37-40.*

In question 92 & 93 it deals with the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments or the **Moral Law**, and makes reference to the fact that they are presented in two tablets, and how they deal with the whole scope of relations both to God and to man. Questions 94-133 deal with each of the individual commandments and how they should be applied to us as the **rule or guide for our life and worship**. Question 94 is a good example of how it deals with the first commandment by explaining how we should understand and apply the commandment to our life with scripture proofs.

94. Q. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?

A. That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry,[1] witchcraft, superstition,[2] and prayer to saints or to other creatures.[3] Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God.[4] trust in Him alone,[5] submit to Him with all humility[6] and patience,[7] expect all good from Him only,[8] and love,[9] fear,[10] and honour Him[11] with all my heart. In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.[12] - [1] I Cor. 6:9, 10; 10:5-14; I John 5:21. [2] Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:9-12. [3] Matt. 4:10; Rev. 19:10; 22:8, 9. [4] John 17:3. [5] Jer. 17:5, 7. [6] I Pet. 5:5, 6. [7] Rom. 5:3, 4; I Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14; Col. 1:11; Heb. 10:36. [8] Ps. 104:27, 28; Is. 45:7; James 1:17. [9] Deut. 6:5; (Matt. 22:37). [10] Deut. 6:2; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Matt. 10:28; I Pet. 1:17. [11] Deut. 6:13; (Matt. 4:10); Deut. 10:20. [12] Matt. 5:29, 30; 10:37-39; Acts 5:29.

Questions 114 and 115 speak to the fact that as fallen yet redeemed people, we still cannot perfectly keep this Law, but fall woefully short of it. Nevertheless it is to be our goal and pursuit to carry out these commandments. They explain that the **Moral Law** teaches us to “*know our sinfulness*” and also to “*more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness.*”

114 Q. But can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly?

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments. [Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 7:14, 15; 1 Cor. 13:9; 1 John 1:8-10, Ps. 1:1, 2; Rom. 7:22-25; Phil. 3:12-16.]

115 Q. No one in this life can obey the Ten Commandments perfectly: why then does God want them preached so pointedly?

A. First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection. [Ps. 32:5; Rom. 3:19-26; 7:7, 24, 25; 1 John 1:9, 1 Cor. 9:24; Phil. 3:12-14; 1 John 3:1-3]

The Heidelberg simply presents the **Moral Law** as not only binding, but the **rule or guide for our life and worship**. This only after there is much instruction given in the first 85 questions concerning our salvation in Christ through the Gospel. In all of the Heidelberg, there is no mention of the Ceremonial or Civil laws of the Mosaic Covenant, but a healthy application of the Moral Law is extensively treated. See then how the Reformed churches of the 16th Century clearly understood the Law and applied it to our life and worship.

The Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is a catechism that was written in the 1640s by English and Scottish divines. The assembly also produced the **Westminster Confession of Faith** and the **Westminster Larger Catechism**. The three documents are considered by many Protestants to be the grandest doctrinal statements to come out of the English Reformation. It was completed in 1647. The purpose of the WSC is to educate lay persons in matters of doctrine and belief. The WSC is in a simple question and answer format to facilitate memorization. Typically, parents and the church would use the shorter catechism to train their children in the ways of the Lord.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is patterned very much after the Heidelberg in its major sections. In questions 39-82 the Westminster Shorter, like the Heidelberg, gives a full treatment to the Moral Law. In it they explain the Moral law as binding commandments and give treatment to each of the 10 Commandments, explaining how they should be applied to our life. For example....

Q40. What did God at first reveal to man for the **rule** of his **obedience**?

A40. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the **Moral Law**.

Q41. Where is the Moral Law summarily comprehended?

A41. The **Moral Law** is summarily comprehended in the **Ten Commandments**.

Q42. What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?

A42. The **sum** of the Ten Commandments is, "to **love the Lord** our God" with all our heart, all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; **and our neighbor** as ourselves.

Q50. What is required in the Second Commandment?

A50. The Second Commandment **requireth** the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in His Word.

Q51. What is forbidden in the Second Commandment?

A51. The Second Commandment **forbiddeth** the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* is patterned very much like the Westminster Shorter Catechism, but is much larger having 196 questions and the WSC having only 107. The Westminster Shorter Catechism was to be "easier to read and concise for beginners" and the Larger Catechism was to be "more exact and comprehensive." It deals with many of the questions at length and is also much longer than the WSC. Compare question 108 below to question 50 above and you'll get a sense of the Larger Catechism's expansiveness.

Q108: What are the duties required in the second commandment?

A108. The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

A Simplified View

Through our study, several key themes have emerged that help us to grasp the Law and how it is to be applied.

1. The Old Covenant **Mosaic Law** is the **Word of God** and stands as the **necessary foundation** for the New Testament and the **Gospel**.
2. It is helpful to **categorize** the Law into 3 parts; **Ceremonial, Civil** and **Moral**. There is a **Discontinuity** in the Ceremonial and Civil Law, but a **Continuity** in the Moral Law.
3. The **Ceremonial Law** with its Priesthood, Offerings, Cleansings, Dietary requirements, Rituals, Ceremonies and Feasts has **ended** and is no longer required as these ordinances were only **types** pointing toward Christ. They have been **fulfilled** in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, who Himself has become the **substance** of what each and every Ceremonial symbol is for us.
4. The **Civil Law** was given to the national state of Israel and expired with it. It is filled with general **wisdom** concerning governing societies and measurements of justice and equity.
5. The **Moral Law** is the true substance and foundation of God's revealed will for our conduct and is forever binding upon the people of God in all ages. It is consistent with the Gospel in every respect as a **rule and guide** for our life and conduct as Christians redeemed by the free grace of God. It is never to be a system of works to be justified or condemned, but a light shining on our path to see clearly what pleases and grieves the heart of God concerning His worship and our conduct. The **Holy Spirit** has written this Law on our **hearts** and empowers us to obey it with a much greater degree of obedience.
6. The **Law** stands in **contrast** to the **Gospel** when seen as a system of works to be justified or condemned. This is because true believers in the Gospel are fully and completely **justified by grace, through faith, in Christ alone**. Condemnation and guilt have been completely expiated by Christ at the cross, and sufficiently replaced by perfect righteousness imputed to us by faith. This righteousness is Christ Himself who is for us our High Priest (mediator), Passover lamb (sin offering), cleansing (laver & dietary), Feast (spiritual nourishment) and **every other Mosaic type**.
7. The **Old Covenant Law** was given by God to Israel, pointing forward to the fulfillment in the **Gospel** in the course of Redemptive History. It was therefore only **temporary**. As it has now been realized in the Person and Work of Christ in this **New Covenant Age** of Messianic Salvation, which is **eternal**. The New Covenant is **effectual** because with it comes the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit in the believer to bring about a greater degree of obedience. God has purposed to spread the Gospel of salvation to all nations in every part of the earth regardless of race, gender, class. This Gospel is received by grace, through faith believing and trusting in Christ alone for righteousness before God, and evidenced by ongoing repentance.
8. Although **no one can keep the Law perfectly** in this life, it remains for us a rule, guide and fervent goal for God's worship and our conduct toward God and others.