

ARTICLES

The First Use of the Law in Biblical Counseling

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Introduction

Early in John Bunyan's venerable classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian encounters one Worldly Wiseman who invites him to entertain his counsel.² The two discussed how to rid Christian of his burden most efficiently. Wiseman counseled him to pursue a man named Legality, who dwelt on a treacherous mountain (i.e., Mt. Sinai). Not long after heeding Wiseman's counsel, Christian realized his error but needed the counsel of Evangelist, who would redirect him toward the strait gate.³ Perhaps no other literary scene outside of Scripture demonstrates so palpably the inherent connection between biblical counseling and discipleship. Indeed, biblical counseling is *discipleship*.

Biblical counseling is the timely application of the truth of God's Word that is occasioned by an important decision, suffering, sin, or a combination thereof. Biblical counselors derive their counsel from the rich treasury of God's Word. Through the careful exposition and contextualized application of Scripture, they exhort counselees to engender God-honoring change in their lives. Because biblical counseling is necessarily biblical, it is also imperatival in shape. Its goal is identical to discipleship, namely, to teach all of the commands of Christ (Matthew 28:19) and to see those commands applied.

This article will examine the first use of the moral law in biblical counseling. Following a concise explanation and defense of the ongoing relevance of the Old Testament moral law, an examination of the use of the first use of the

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² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2014), 15.

³ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 20-1.

law in evangelistic counseling is provided. Thereafter, Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:23-4:7 is explored, with particular relevance to counseling method, the first use of the law, and Christians who struggle with shame related to past sin.

The Immutable Moral Law

While not neatly divided into a three-fold taxonomy, the Pentateuch presents three varieties of laws: moral, civil, and ceremonial. As with broader Christianity, Evangelical Protestantism affirms that the threefold division of the law is a foregone conclusion. Philip Ross observed, "Not uniquely Eastern or Western; Roman Catholic or Protestant; conservative or liberal; Patristic or Puritan; Thomist, Calvinist, or anything else; the threefold division of the law is catholic doctrine."⁴

Although a defense of the tripartite division of the law is beyond the scope of this study, it may suffice to observe that one means through which moral laws and the general equity of civil laws may be discerned is through the application of those principles to those outside of the Mosaic covenant. God did not judge the people of Canaan for their consumption of shellfish, but he did judge them for their detestable sexual immorality (Leviticus 18:24-25). Whereas the prohibitions related to food were specifically revealed and given to Israel (i.e., "They are unclean to you," Leviticus 11:8),⁵ the prohibitions of a moral variety were given to mankind and are a segment of natural revelation (Romans 2:15).

As a facet of natural revelation, the moral law is binding on the whole of mankind and is immutable since it reflects the nature of God. Richard Dabney explained: "[The moral law is] the necessary and unchanging expression of God's rectitude."⁶ The moral standards of God, according to John Frame, are "simply himself, his person, his nature. His acts are righteous because he is a righteous God. Righteousness, therefore, is his desire, his pleasure. The standard of our

⁴ Phillip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis of the Threefold Division of the Law* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Pub., 2010), 1.

⁵ Emphasis added. All English biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁶ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 353.

moral behavior is not an abstract concept, but an infinite person, God himself.”⁷ Therefore, the moral law has an inviolable claim not merely on the Christian, but on the entirety of the human race. If indeed God is man’s environment, then the law is the air man breathes.⁸ The contemporary theological models that defend an abrogation of this or that moral law err in that they assume that the moral law is a convention of divine command and may thus be changed. As Dabney observed, “[Moral] duties are not obligatory and right solely because God has commanded them; but he has commanded them because they are right.”⁹ Thus, the moral law has abiding continuity and relevance to every person.

The magisterial reformers observed the three-fold application of God’s moral law. For example, John Calvin argued that the first use of the law “shows God’s righteousness” and “warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness.”¹⁰ The second use of the law informs “the public community of men,” especially the civil magistrate, in order to curb the depravity of men.¹¹ Lastly, the third use of the law serves to demonstrate how those “in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns” how to live in obedience to their Savior.¹² Whereas both the first and third uses of the law have vast relevance to biblical counseling method, the first use is of particular consequence to discipleship.

The Use of the Law in Evangelistic Counseling

It has been well observed that the modern therapist functions as a secular priest.¹³ In order to define a litany of necessary concepts such as “mental

⁷ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2013), 259.

⁸ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 39.

⁹ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 352.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 354.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 358.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 360.

¹³ London popularized this sentiment: “They [i.e., therapists] take the roles of secular priests who arbitrate the moral dilemmas of secular people.” Perry London, *The Modes and Mordals of Psychotherapy*, Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), xii.

health" or "abnormality," the secular therapist must draw from a preexisting worldview complete with its transcendentals. His worldview provides the basis for his counsel or, in the case of the client-centered therapist, his assumption that his counselees hold the route to self-actualization. Biblical counseling, as a form of discipleship, redirects its audience from the transient mores of the therapist to the High Priest.¹⁴ That is, biblical counseling confronts the errors of worldly thought and practice and directs its participants to what the Creator has revealed.

Within modern society, the vast therapeutic industry has displaced the church as the quintessential soul care provider. Biblical counselors inadvertently draft on the general acceptance and popularity of the therapeutic culture by offering the church and the public counseling firmly rooted in the historic Christian tradition. Subsequently, biblical counselors frequently counsel unbelievers who are entrenched in secular thought. In this context, biblical counseling is problem-occasioned evangelism. Because it is occasioned by a problem, evangelism within counseling necessarily depends upon the correct use of God's law. However, prior to considering the use of the law in evangelistic counseling, clarification is needed regarding the counseling of unbelievers.

Is it Possible to Counsel Unbelievers?

Jay Adams famously argued that one cannot engage in biblical counseling with an unbeliever since true change is only possible through the Holy Spirit's empowerment.¹⁵ He wrote, "Precounseling...that is all you can do for an unbeliever; you precounsel him. And all that precounseling means is that you are going to do some problem-centered evangelism."¹⁶ Underlying Adams' claim is a conventional biblical anthropology that affirms the doctrine of the total

¹⁴ Cf. the "grace-based" model articulated by Fowler and Ford which bifurcates counseling and discipleship: "To disciple someone is to disseminate insights. Counseling, even when using Scripture, is coming alongside someone in the midst of a crisis or life issue as a conduit of help, insight, and encouragement." Richard A. Fowler, Natalie Ford, *Grace-Based Counseling: An Effective New Biblical Model* (Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2021), 121. This perspective neglects the authoritative nature of Scripture to direct conformity to Christ via discipleship in all of its iterations, especially counseling.

¹⁵ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 318.

¹⁶ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 320.

inability of the unconverted person. Since “unregenerate persons can neither understand nor do those things that God requires, it is impossible to counsel them.”¹⁷ Rather, progressive holiness is “part of the sanctifying work of God’s Spirit that takes place only in regenerate persons.”¹⁸

Others have suggested that it is entirely possible to counsel unbelievers. For example, Alistair Groves has asserted that not only may one counsel an unbeliever, the biblical counselor may address issues of a practical nature, such as relationship struggles.¹⁹ Groves confessed, “I sometimes worry that practical advice that is not riveted to the gospel will teach harmful self-reliance, even if it leads to better behavior.”²⁰ However, he rationalized his approach by asserting that his task sows the seeds of evangelism.

Richard Fowler and Natalie Ford offer a similar approach, arguing that while “the one who is lost cannot know the things of God,” counselors should meet “the counselee where he or she is, finding common ground for a positive relationship. Even if a counselee is totally against the things of God, the counselor can still interject truth principles from Scripture without revealing the chapter and verse of the principle.”²¹ This approach seems to neglect the doctrine of the total inability of the unbeliever altogether. Further, there is a tacit contradiction in these claims: If the unbeliever “cannot know the things of God,” what is the point of seeking to incite change through the clandestine interjection of Scripture?

Setting aside the semantics of “precounseling” versus counseling, Adams’ construal effectively encourages counselors to prioritize evangelism before other matters. It is admittedly difficult to understand how one can harmonize the approaches articulated by Groves and Fowler and Ford with the Bible’s description of the unconverted. Since even the most altruistic act of the unbeliever occurs outside of the Lordship of Christ, it is, therefore, sinful.

¹⁷ Jay E. Adams, *I Corinthians and II Corinthians*, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 18. Cf. Adams’ commentary on Romans 8:7: Jay E. Adams, *Romans, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and II Thessalonians*, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 65-6.

¹⁸ Adams, *I Corinthians and II Corinthians*, 18.

¹⁹ J. Alistair Groves, “How Do You Counsel Non-Christians?,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 3 (2012): 62.

²⁰ Groves, “How Do You Counsel Non-Christians?,” 66.

²¹ Fowler and Ford, *Grace-Based Counseling*, 123.

Issuing practical counsel in order to improve an unbeliever's situation is tantamount to a physician removing a splinter from a gangrenous foot. Whatever positive changes the unbeliever appropriates are, apart from conversion, ultimately futile since he does not possess peace with God. While helping unbelievers with practical concerns may serve the greater goal of evangelism and conversion, such a roundabout approach is not reflected in the Scripture (e.g., John 4:1-26; Acts 5:42; cf. Proverbs 27:5). A consistently biblical approach neither ignores biblical anthropology nor the presenting problem but uses the problem to contextualize an invitation to faith and repentance.²² Therefore, inasmuch as evangelism is the introductory component of discipleship, evangelism is the first element of biblical counseling.

Evangelistic Counseling and the First Use of the Law

The first use of the moral law is essential to all evangelism, especially evangelistic counseling. In applying the moral law, one affords the unbelieving counselee a true spiritual audit that divulges his sin and demonstrates his need for Christ. "Just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face," the law reflects our deplorable spiritual condition.²³ Evangelism without the law introduces an antidote without a convincing diagnosis. Suppose a man is confronted by an acquaintance who insists that if he does not immediately inject a syringe full of medication, he will perish in an hour. The man has no reason to believe he is in danger and is inclined to believe the acquaintance is either mistaken or has ill will toward him. Indeed, that man is likely to run from the medication. However, if the acquaintance arrived with the man's personal doctor, who held in his hand a recent test result that demonstrates that his life is in immediate danger, only then will the man entertain the medication. In evangelistic counseling, the counselor applies the law to the unbeliever such that his conscience is awakened: "It awakens their [i.e., the unconverted] consciences, to

²² Robert Jones has articulated this perspective well: "As in the case of Christians, we enter the non-Christian's world, understand their struggles, and bring them Jesus and his gospel-soaked answers; the main difference is that we adapt our goals, strategies, and methods to their spiritual condition. We might call this problem-occasioned evangelism." Robert D. Jones et al., *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2021), 234. Cf. Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, & Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 47-50.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 355.

a conviction of their guilt, and to a dread of everlasting punishment; and so, discovers to them their absolute need of Christ, and his perfect righteousness, for their justification in the sight of God.”²⁴ Thereafter, the counselor invites the counselee to lay hold of the crucified and risen Christ by faith.

The predominant biblical approach of applying the law in an evangelistic context involves confrontation, as with Paul’s response to the idolatry of the Athenians (Acts 17:29-30) or Nathan’s response to David’s involvement with Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1-7). Jesus’ approach with the Samaritan woman demonstrates an initial indirect approach (John 4:16) followed by a more pointed confrontation (vv. 17-18). Whereas the Scripture affords the counselor discretion in the tenor and timing of confrontation, its expectation is that sin will be addressed (cf. Ezekiel 33:1-7).

Some integrationists have argued that confronting sin within a counseling context may be unwise and unnecessary. For example, Mark McMinn argued that it is likely better not to confront a counselee with their sin. To do so, he argued, is to seek mere behavior modification and not substantive personal change.²⁵ He wrote, “Most of the time, in my opinion, it is more appropriate to simply model the fruit of a transformed life with the ultimate goal of helping people find their deep inner cry for intimacy with God and others.”²⁶ McMinn evidently believes that the unconverted person possesses a “deep inner cry for intimacy with God” even though the New Testament claims the contrary (e.g., Romans 3:11). Instead of confronting a self-righteous person, McMinn proposed that the counselor should provide a “safe relationship” wherein the counselee can “begin exploring his feelings.”²⁷ He went on to describe a married woman named “Kate” who was remorseless about her adulterous affair. He stated, “It is unnecessary, and probably damaging, to use Scripture to confront Kate with her sin.”²⁸

²⁴ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022), 120.

²⁵ Mark R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, Rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 2011), 172.

²⁶ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 174.

²⁷ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 135.

²⁸ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 135.

The only biblical justification McMinn gave to warrant his non-confrontational approach is the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11).²⁹ However, McMinn seems unaware of the significant challenges to appropriating this narrative. To summarize, the account has underwhelming textual support as does not appear in all the extant witnesses through the fourth century, including the papyri (𝔓⁶⁶,𝔓⁷⁵, and likely𝔓³⁹), the great codices (e.g., ,& A, B, C), and the fathers (e.g., Tertullian, Origen). The passage first occurs in the fifth-century codex Bezae but is not attested to again until the ninth century. Moreover, the story is found in several locations in both John and Luke within the MSS and is likely not an original part of the fourth gospel but a tradition searching for a home.³⁰

The account's poor textual basis is the main reason why the critical editions of the GNT have enclosed the text in double brackets (e.g., NA²⁸, UBS⁵; cf. ESV; NASB; NIV) or have omitted it altogether (e.g., THGNT). Murray Harris concluded, "If any item of doctrine depends solely on anything in this passage for its support, it cannot claim Scriptural authority."³¹ Therefore, McMinn's uncritical appropriation of this text ignores its dubious canonicity at the expense of the consistent and uncontested teaching of the New Testament regarding the confrontation of sin, especially sexual sin.

Aside from McMinn's problematic biblical argument for his non-confrontational approach, he has assumed that modeling righteousness is a biblically valid and effective form of evangelism. This is an unsupported assumption that, should it be taken seriously, undermines the evangelistic examples of Christ and his apostles. Christ confronted the Samaritan woman with her adultery by enjoining her "Go, call your husband, and come here" (John 4:16). When she claimed not to have a husband, Christ observed that she had "five husbands" and that she was presently in an adulterous relationship (v. 18). Christ's statement is an unmistakable application of seventh commandment

²⁹ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 135-6.

³⁰ Comfort noted, "The inclusion of this story in the NT text is a prime example of how the oral tradition, originally not included in the text, eventually found its way into the written text." Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the Variant Readings of the Ancient New Testament Manuscripts and How They Relate to the Major English Translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 2008), 286.

³¹ Murray J. Harris, *John, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 166.

(Exodus 20:14; cf. Matthew 5:32) and it exposed the breadth of her sin. Given that the woman had come in the heat of the day to gather water, it is likely that her sordid lifestyle resulted in significant exclusion from the other women of her community. Although the woman was a social pariah, Jesus did not believe that confronting her sin was unnecessary or damaging. Instead, he was “shining his light into the darkness of a woman’s soul,” resulting in her conviction and subsequent faith in him.³²

Whatever benefits “Kate” may receive from McMinn’s non-confrontational approach pale compared to the riches available to her in Christ. Her adultery is ultimately the outcome of an idolatrous heart (Matthew 15:19). Kate’s idolatry has distorted her view of life and God and has resulted in disordered desires and disastrous actions (Romans 1:21-22; Ephesians 4:18). The defiling effect of this idolatry may only be counteracted by the work of Christ and, therefore, McMinn’s approach is limited to addressing the symptom and not the cause of Kate’s problem. Whereas confronting Kate’s sin with the holiness of God may be offensive to her, this offense is nonetheless necessary if she is to receive peace with God. Just as the physician offends the flesh through the scalpel to enable healing, the Spirit of grace offends the conscience through the law to enact repentance.

Applying the law to the unconverted redirects the focus from self to God as the law demonstrates how sin is most critically an affront to God. True confession of sin must begin with acknowledging that one has transgressed God. Thus, an awareness of one’s sin in light of the law is the forerunner to repentance. Without using the law as a precursor to the gospel, evangelistic counseling may inadvertently portray sin as merely a horizontal problem. For example, one Christian counselor suggests confronting sin in counseling is to play the role of judge.³³ Instead, she suggests that counselors “empathize with their struggles...and collaboratively develop plans to help them reach their goals.” On this view, sin has effectively become an obstacle to self-fulfillment instead of an affront to the cosmic Lord.

³² Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 241.

³³ Virginia Todd Holeman, *Theology for Better Counseling: Trinitarian Reflections for Healing and Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 86.

The biblical counselor's use of the law in evangelistic counseling does not result in the counselor playing the role of judge any more than that of a physician who diagnoses a severe disease. Instead, the counselor articulates the preexisting judgment of God (cf. John 3:18) in pursuit of another's reconciliation with God (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). However, the correct tone and timing for applying the law is crucial. The New Testament's evangelistic narratives consistently depict gentleness, humility, and truthfulness; therefore, these qualities must be similarly employed. A derogatory, abusive, or cruel application of the law is, itself, a violation of the law (Galatians 5:14). To proclaim as Paul, "Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15), is to implicate oneself as a sinner. The use of the law as preparation for the gospel should be approached not as a judge approaches a defendant but as a freedman tells his fellow slave how to obtain freedom.

The First Use of the Law and the Obstinate Counselee

In the event that a counselee rejects the application of the law to his life either through refusal to acknowledge the validity of the law or the reality of his own guilt, the biblical counselor must rely upon intercessory prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit to convict. Since the Scripture is replete with warnings about refusing repentance, the counselor should similarly warn his counselee of the dire consequences of rejecting God. Christ appealed to the calamity of those who died at the hand of Pilate and those who perished in the tower of Siloam in order to call his audience to repentance: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). The counselor may similarly appeal to the uncertainty of life through contemporary examples of tragedy and death.

A refusal to acknowledge one's sin should not preclude further sessions since this affords strategic opportunities to demonstrate the counselee's need for Christ. Continued appointments provide the counselor with additional time to appeal to the counselee's conscience and for the Holy Spirit to work. In between sessions, the counselee may reflect on his experience in light of the counsel he has received.

Counseling, Shame, and the First Use of the Law

As in discipleship, sins of the past, especially sins that occurred prior to one's conversion, may serve as a considerable stumbling block within biblical counseling. Whereas Christians may have to deal with the ongoing worldly ramifications of past sins, these sins invite reflection on the sufficient grace of God. While comprehensive pardon from sin is found in Christ, believers may grapple with great shame and regret over past sins. Paul's treatment of the law in Galatians 3:23-4:7 has considerable relevance to dealing with shame in the believer's life. In this pericope, Paul utilizes a layered analogy to explain how God wielded the first use of the law to bring about the redemption of his people. While an exposition of this passage would exceed the permitted space, a concise explanation of the text and its counseling implications is provided below.

Paul wrote, "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed" (Galatians 3:23). The first-person plural pronouns in vv. 23-24 require that this statement is not an allusion to redemptive history and the incarnation but the history of every believer before their conversion. Prior to their receipt of faith, every Christian was inescapably imprisoned by the law. However, this legal incarceration was God's means of drawing his elect unto himself: "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24). Remarkably, Paul characterizes the law as a *παιδαγωγός*. The term is defined as "one who has responsibility for someone who needs guidance."³⁴ Ceslas Spicq notes that *παιδαγωγός* refers to a "servant working as a child's guardian and tutor... the one who shows the way to a child, thus teaches a child how to behave."³⁵ Children among the Greek-speaking ancients did not go out in the city alone but were supervised by a *παιδαγωγός*. Spicq notes further that the *παιδαγωγός* was typically a trusted slave who functioned as a teacher-instructor.³⁶ An *au pair* or even a legal guardian are the approximate modern

³⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 748.

³⁵ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), 1.

³⁶ Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2-3. Tenney states that the term referred "usually to an old slave, who was charged with the responsibility of preparing them [children]

counterparts. Paul's optimistic depiction of the law and his use of the conjunction of purpose (*ἵνα*) implies that God had determined the law to oversee his children-to-be as a caretaker, instructing them of righteousness, showing their need for Christ.³⁷ However, following their conversion, believers are no longer under the law but are now in Christ and share in his Sonship (v. 25).

Beginning in Galatians 4:1, Paul added another layer to his characterization: “I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything.” In Christ, the believer is a co-heir to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (3:29), but he does not receive the covenant benefits until his conversion. Even though a son will inherit his father’s property as he is “owner of everything” (lit. “lord of all”), his youth requires that he is treated “no different from a slave.” That is, while Christians enjoy “every spiritual blessing” in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), prior to their conversion, they possess a significantly inferior status. During that pre-conversion period, the believer is “under guardians and managers” (*ἐπίτροπος καὶ οἰκονόμος*) (Galatians 4:2). *Επίτροπος* refers to those who oversee the operations of a property.³⁸ The same term is used for Herod’s “household manager” (Luke 8:3) and the “foreman” of the vineyard in Jesus’ parable of the laborers (Matthew 20:8). The term *οἰκονόμος* refers to an administrator the father placed in charge of the entirety of the estate, particularly that of wealth (i.e., a treasurer).³⁹ These terms serve to expand Paul’s depiction of the law as guardian in 3:23-25, characterizing the law as the divine servant who prepares the unconverted elect for grace.

for school and of hurrying them safely off to the schoolmaster lest they loiter on the way or be endangered by the traffic of the streets. When they reached the schoolmaster the responsibilities of the *paidagōgos* ended. So with the law, its authority ended when it had brought men to Christ.” Merril C. Tenney, *Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 127.

³⁷ Dunn similarly notes, “So what Paul had in mind was almost certainly protective custody.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 197.

³⁸ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 385.

³⁹ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 698. Cf. Luke 12:42; 16:1, vv. 3, 8; Rom 16:23.

Notably, the guardianship of the law ends precisely when God intends: “But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father” (4:2). The language Paul employed has a startling import to counseling the Christian dealing with shame. The term translated “date set” (*προθεσμία*) is a hapax that refers to “a point of time set in advance.”⁴⁰ John Eadie observed that “the word is a legal term found often in classical writers, as meaning the time defined for bringing actions or prosecutions...and it also denotes the period allowed to a defendant for paying damages.”⁴¹ The implication is that God was using his law redemptively, even through the errors of pre-conversion sin, in order to bring his elect unto faith at precisely his foreordained time (cf. vv. 4-6). Paul then resolved his analogy by describing the pre-converted elect as “children” who were “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world” but who were redeemed at precisely the right time (vv. 3-7).⁴² Consequently, however regrettable, past sins were the divinely ordained pathway (in conjunction with the law) through which God brought his people to faith in Christ.

A Case Study Dealing with Sins of the Past

Rich came to faith in Christ well into his forties. He met his wife through his small group, and they have been married for nearly three years. In his early

⁴⁰ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 869.

⁴¹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), 292.

⁴² There is a vast debate in the literature regarding the identity of the “elementary principles of the world” (*στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*) in Gal. 4:3. *Στοιχεῖα* refers to actual physical elements (e.g., earth, wind, fire, water) most of the time in ancient Greek texts. See J. Blinzler, “Lexikalisches zu dem Terminus *τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* bei Paulus,” in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961*, vol. 2 (Rome, IT: The Pontifical Biblical Inst., 1963), 430. It is unlikely that Paul is referring to physical elements, as these are never described this way in the text of Scripture. Other interpreters understand *στοιχεῖα* to be a reference to non-human persons (e.g., angels or demons) as noted in Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, Galatians*, 295-6. However, given that v. 3 is the explanation of the analogy, Paul afforded a contextual key to identifying the *στοιχεῖα*. In 3:23 Paul wrote that prior to their salvation, God’s people were “held captive” and “imprisoned” by the law. The pre-converted were subjected to the law a legal guardian (3:24) and as “guardians and managers” (4:2). When Christ came, a legal guardian was no longer needed (3:25-26; 4:4-5) because the elect are united with Christ (3:27; 4:5). Paul’s analogy depicts this transition, from slave and future son to son in union with Christ. Subsequently, the analogy implies that the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* is a reference to the law. See also Gordon D. Fee, *Galatians*, Pentecostal Commentary Series (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2011), 146-7.

twenties, Rich had a child with his long-term girlfriend. However, the relationship ended after his girlfriend discovered that Rich was sexually involved with another woman. Following the breakup, Rich did not consistently seek out a relationship with his son. While he and his wife are growing in Christ, Rich feels tremendous regret over his failures as a father. He cannot help but grieve the years he was not involved in his son's life, and he blames his son's unbelief on himself. Rich has reached out to his now-adult son in recent months, but his son has no interest in a relationship.

Rich's counselor invited him to testify about how he came to know Christ. It was a story in which the providence of God was writ large. After years of seeking material possessions and pleasure, he found that this pursuit left him desperate and disgruntled. Rich's sister and brother-in-law had unsuccessfully invited him to their church several times over the years. Rich remarked that he always rejected the invitation because he believed "churches were out for money." When Rich's young niece was in a Christmas play, he set aside his reservations and attended a service. The sermon confronted Rich with his sin and invited him to find salvation in Christ, and he believed.

Rich's testimony was interspersed with expressions of the shame and regret he felt due to his failure as a father. He consistently reflected on what he should have done and how foolish his actions were. During his second session, Rich's counselor noted how he viewed his pre-conversion life as a total loss. He directed Rich to Galatians 3:23-4:7, and in carefully unpacking the passage, the counselor demonstrated how God used Rich's sin to bring him to himself. He noted that through his failures, God used his law to draw Rich to repentance and faith. Moreover, his counselor explained that just as God's sovereignty is depicted in Rich's testimony, the same sovereign Lord is fully capable of redeeming his son.

Conclusion

The moral law of God reflects God's unchanging holiness and holds every person accountable to its standards. Applying the law in its first use is the means through which both discipler and counselor awaken the conscience and demonstrate one's need for the substitutionary ministry of Christ. Though some have sought to evade the application of the law in counseling, such efforts do

not adequately account for the biblical depiction of the unconverted soul or the evangelistic examples of the New Testament. Moreover, the first use of the law, as depicted by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:23-4:7, has vast utility in aiding the Christian who struggles with shame due to sins of the past.