



*Law and the Bible: Justice, Mercy and Legal Institutions*  
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## Delighting in the Law and the Lord

What the Bible has to say about law is important for all the reasons that what the Bible has to say about anything is important. The Bible shows us God's will and character as it reveals him to us. The Bible reveals that God is our creator and that law springs from his will and reflects his holy character. The great hope of the Scriptures is that all God's works – including law – will praise his name. The Bible reveals that God is a God of love, justice and mercy – all qualities that are conveyed in his law and the stories of law in Scripture. God shows his *love* to us by teaching us the law as his intention for human life and action; his *justice* is manifested in his law as it protects and guides us; and his *mercy* saves us when we fail to abide by his law.

The Bible is full of law. It includes the laws of Israel given at Sinai (Ex 20), natural law (God's law made known in creation itself and perceived through the conscience), the laws of the Medes and Persians (Dan 6:8), and the law of Rome. It tells stories of faithful Israelite kings administering God's law and unfaithful Israelite kings ignoring it, of Israelites who are ministers of the law in pagan courts, and of Israelites and Christians suffering under tyrants' abuse of law. Biblical poets, as in Psalm 19, write about the law with fervent eloquence.

The focus of this book is on the *civil* law or *positive* law – that is, the law that orders human societies and is implemented and enforced through human government. The Bible, in one way or another, addresses almost all areas of civil law, including evidence, civil and criminal procedure, court administration, and welfare regulations. What inspired light does Scripture shed, we ask, on Christians' participation in contemporary legal systems?

Many readers seeing a book on the Bible and the civil law may feel an instinctive skepticism. Christians along the full range of the political spectrum at times quote the Bible on behalf of (sometimes contradictory) legislative proposals. Often such use of Scripture pays little attention to the context of passages quoted or to the history of their interpretation. We fear that some Christians, on all points of the political spectrum, cherry-pick verses of Scripture to justify already-existing political opinions. This is a temptation of which all Christians ought to beware. Reading Scripture in both its immediate context and the context of all of Scripture will help to avoid such abuse. Ultimately, of course, by being attentive to all of Scripture we are attentive to God himself, who speaks in and through the Scriptures, judges our faulty assumptions and unbelieving propensities, and gives us greater insight into what all of life, including law, should be.

Another mistake made at times by Christians who enter the political arena is to assume that if Scripture gives a moral exhortation, it should be enacted into civil law. Moral exhortations in Scripture do not necessarily have immediate application for a human legal system since civil law is not designed for (or even capable of) enforcing all of morality. Nor is every piece

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## BOOK EXCERPT

**David VanDrunen** (Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago; J.D., Northwestern University) is Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California. A minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and an attorney, his books include *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* and *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions*.

of civil legislation in Scripture appropriate for civil law today; we should not assume, for example, that the civil laws of Moses promulgated to Israel as an Old Testament theocracy are fitting for the modern nation-state. In this volume, the authors have tried to pay careful attention to questions of context and the purposes for which texts were written, and this should help to guard against the illegitimate use of texts for one's own agenda. . . .

The subject of civil law and the Bible is vast, and this project could have taken different forms. Our objective is not to provide a comprehensive biblical theology of law or to engage in technical biblical scholarship aimed only at Old or New Testament specialists. Nor do we seek to elaborate a biblical model for an ideal civil law code appropriate for every time and place. Instead, we survey the most relevant portions of Scripture and examine some of the fundamental questions Christians should consider as they explore their relationship to civil law, justice and government.

— Adapted from the introduction

