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The Old not contrary to The New

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In the ongoing dispute about homosexual practice it is not uncommon to find an argument something like this: "Christians no longer worry about wearing mixed fibre garments, or about eating sea food but both these things are forbidden in the Old Testament. Therefore it is wrong to tell people to abide by the commands about sexual practice." This is clearly a piece of defective reasoning but when those presenting it are clergy or Bishops of the Church of England it takes on a whole new dimension.

The Church of England, as opposed to those who pretend to speak for it, is very clear as to why some commands in the Old Testament are binding on Christians whilst others are not. This is spelt out in Article 7 of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Despite the lame words now used in the Oath of Allegiance clergy and Bishops are still required to affirm their allegiance to the faith which finds expression in Article 7. At the very least it might be imagined, therefore, that clergy and Bishops would have some idea about what Article 7 says and why.

Article 7 can be divided into two parts. The first part concerns the underlying message of the Old and New Testament, the second the relationship of the Christian to the Old Testament Law.

The article states that *The Old Testament is not contrary to the New*. This does not mean that they are equivalent, rather that they do not contradict one another. To set the Old against the New is a grave error. But why is it that they stand together?

The article explains that their unity rests on the fact that in both Old and New everlasting life is offered to mankind through Christ. Moreover the article asserts that this unity of their message flows from the nature of Christ as both God and man and therefore from His work as mediator.

If Christ were not fully God and man he could not be our saviour! If He were not fully man then He could not have died in our place, He could not be our substitute and therefore we would still be under judgement. If He were not fully God then His would be just another sacrifice, inadequate and insufficient for our salvation. It is only because Christ is both God and man that He can be our saviour, our mediator. Therefore, there can be no other mediator because there is no other who is fully God and fully man. Article 18 spells this out but it also underpins Article 7.

If Christ is the only mediator then it follows that He must be THE mediator of both the Old and the New Covenant. There cannot be a different means in Old as against New otherwise Christ would not be the sole mediator.

So it is that the Old Testament concerns Jesus (Luke 24.27), it testifies about Jesus so that people may come to Him for life (John 5.39) and it bears witness that through His name whoever believes will receive remission of sins (Acts 10.43).

What is more the hope which the Old Testament people had was not just for this life, but for the eternal future. Evidently when the Articles were first drafted there were some who were teaching that in the Old Testament the promises were only 'transitory', for this life alone. Such a view is still common today. Many will argue that a belief in eternal life evolved through the Old Testament

period. But Article 7 refutes this by saying that the people of the Old Covenant, like us, had a hope that was more than just transitory. This is akin to the assertion by the Lord Jesus, in the face of the Sadducees who denied the resurrection, that God, being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of the living not of the dead (Matthew 22.31).

Article 7 therefore asserts first that in terms of its message the Old is not Contrary to the New. Under both covenants the way of life is through the mediating work of Christ alone. The two covenants are not the same but they do not contradict.

The Article then turns its attention to the **relationship between the Christian believer and the Old Testament Law**, the Law given *from God by Moses*.

The article identifies the three strands that are to be found in the law.

First, there are the ceremonies and rites. This is all the law relating to the tabernacle, to sacrifices, to festivals, the altar and so on. These commands, the article states, do not bind Christian men.

This is hardly contentious. It is a matter of historical fact that within 30 years of the death of Jesus the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. However, the real end of the Temple came when Christ died and therefore the need for the Temple sacrifices was gone.

This is not to say that the ceremonial law has no value to Christians. We recognise that despite the outward differences the mediator was still Christ, therefore these commands teach us about Christ and point us to Christ who is both our High Priest and sacrifice. The law also stands as a powerful testimony to the holiness of God, the horror of sin and the fact that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness. It also shows that we can only approach God on His terms, by the means He has provided.

The second part to the law is civil precepts. These are the rules and regulations that govern the nation, the people of Israel. Because no nation today stands in the same relationship to God as Israel did these laws are not binding on any nation.

Spiritually speaking the Church is the equivalent of Israel today. However, the Church is to be a society of people from every nation whose citizenship is not of this earth but of heaven. Consequently the Article asserts that these commands, the civil precepts, are not to be followed as a matter of necessity. They will and do provide useful guidance and models for nations today but they are not binding.

Again we must say that the civil law still has a vital role. It shows us something about the nature of God and His purposes in providing structure and order. It shows us about the role of civil government as God's agent. It provides important guidance as to what a good ordered society might look like. Moreover, we recognise that many of the commands in the Old Testament had a solid grounding in good sense and sometimes the reasons behind laws have only become apparent as scientific knowledge has increased. Many of these commands were intended to safeguard the people of God, as a nation, in an alien environment.

The third part of the law is the moral law, which concerns our conduct as individuals. Article 7 asserts that Christians are not free from obedience to the moral commandments.

This is not to say that the Christian is in the same relationship to the law as were people in the Old Testament. The Old Covenant believer was under the law, but now that the law has been fulfilled in Christ we are no longer under law.

What we find therefore is that for the Christian the law can be both positive and negative, for us and against us. It is positive because the law shows us what is pleasing to God, it shows us the conduct that honours and delights our Creator and Redeemer. But by showing us what God desires the law condemns us because it shows the fact of our sinfulness and sins. The law shows that we are hopeless under law but therefore it should drive us to Christ the Saviour.

What does the New Testament teach about the status of the moral law of the Old Testament?

Consider by way of contrast some of the commands that are not part of the moral law; for example the rules concerning food. The experience of Peter, the letters of Paul and the teaching of Jesus show that the Old Testament food laws do not apply to Christians. Or take the practice of circumcision, it is clearly taught in the New Testament that this is not necessary for the Christian, it was part of the identity of the people of Israel.

What about the moral law? In general in the New Testament we find the Old Testament commands made stronger, not weaker. So, whereas the Old says 'you shall do no murder' the Lord says we should not even be angry with or disparage a brother (Mtt 5.22). Whereas the Old Testament allowed polygamy Jesus sets out the ideal that was from the beginning and is now to be modelled by Christian ministers. Whereas the Old allowed divorce and remarriage the Lord tightens the former and apparently rules out the latter. Whereas the Old forbids adultery Jesus taught that even the lustful look can be adulterous in the heart. In none of these areas is the moral law annulled, in all of them it is made, if anything, more stringent. Therefore the Article rightly states that the Christian is not free from obedience to the moral law. Jesus says that our righteousness should exceed that of those who went before.

What bearing does all this have on the issue of homosexual practice? This practice is quite clearly condemned in the Old Testament and is described by the Lord as an abomination. In the New there is not even the slightest hint that this law is to be disregarded. What we do find is that Jesus upheld forcefully the ideal of (heterosexual) marriage. Likewise the rest of the New Testament affirms and upholds the teaching of the Old Testament about the wrongness and seriousness of homosexual practice.

The position set out, that the moral law is still binding, is not the argument of a particular group within the Church, it is the position of the Church of England clearly taught in the Thirty-Nine Articles. It is deplorable that some who have apparently declared on oath their allegiance to this teaching should seek to undermine it. But those who are authentically Anglican will continue to uphold this teaching as plainly setting out the teaching of scripture.