

Spirit (pp. 191–92). Under the category of Christology, Millar only lists John Calvin, describing his insistence on comprehending the fulness of Christ which alone leads to the transformation for which the Bible calls. Regarding the category of piety, Millar uses Joel Beeke and Mark Jones’s definition of piety in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*: “Experiencing sanctification as a divine, gracious work of renewal expressed in repentance and righteousness, which progresses through conflict and adversity in a Christ-like manner for all of a believer’s life, anticipating the day when piety will be perfected in eternal sanctification in heaven” (p. 197). Millar identifies Owen, Newton, Wesley, and Warfield under the category of piety, as well as the Biblical Counseling Movement, mentioning Paul Tripp, Tim Lane, David Powlison, Jeremy Pierre, and including a recommendation of Tim Chester and his book *You Can Change*. After this survey, Millar summarizes the complexity of biblical change evident in the various emphases through church history. He highlights these features at the end of chapter 5: biblical change is God’s work (pp. 216–17), is Trinitarian (pp. 217–18), flows from our union with Christ (pp. 218–19), is word driven (pp. 219–20), requires biblical piety (p. 220), and is comprehensive (pp. 220–21).

In his final chapter, Millar aims to distill the key features of personal transformation so that it might be labored for in our ministers. He stresses the Bible’s insistence on transformation that takes place in God’s people by and through God’s work. Millar reviews Scripture’s instruction on the various means God uses to transform his people. With much appreciation from this reviewer, Millar emphasizes the necessity of the local church and its ministry through the means of grace as an essential setting in which God changes his people. Millar also briefly includes other important aspects involved in transformation in this closing chapter: suffering, gospel truths, the transforming effect of God’s revelation both in our knowledge of him and our desire for him, as well as the Holy Spirit’s enabling the response of repentance and faith. Clearly these crucially important subjects deserve more development than Millar had space to devote to them.

As a minister serving in a local church, I find Millar’s book to be a great encouragement. His explication of God’s gracious work of transformation provides freedom to minister with confidence to those God calls us to care for, knowing that he will complete the work he has begun in Christ Jesus.

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REGULAR REVIEWS

Richard E. Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. Pp. xviii + 382. \$40.00, paper.

Richard Averbeck has given us a book about which he has been thinking for more than twenty-five years (p. xiii). The roots extend even further back, to forty-five years

ago, when Averbeck began to pay focused attention to Leviticus (p. 18). So we have here a rich product from long years of reflection.

The central issue in the book is the use of the OT law in the life of the church. Averbeck believes that all of the law applies, but in a differentiated manner.

The book is meant for the benefit of the church (pp. xi, 22). Averbeck has digested a lot of scholarly literature. He adds footnotes and a bibliography for people who want to pursue issues further. But he is writing in ordinary, digestible language for the benefit of a wider audience.

The book is divided into three parts: Part 1, "Covenant and Context"; Part 2, "The Old Testament Law in Context"; and Part 3, "The Old Testament Law in the New Testament." An introduction explains the three parts and lays out in a general way the thesis of the book. The three parts set the books of the Bible in their larger canonical (covenantal) context and socio-historical context. Part 2 on OT law includes attention to the structure and function of Exod 18–23, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. It gives special attention to the Ten Commandments, the themes of holiness, purity, tabernacle, sacrifice, and priesthood, and the function of case law against the background of the ancient Near East and redemption from Egyptian slavery. Part 3 contains chapters on Jesus' view of the law of Moses, on the law in the book of Acts, and on the goodness and weakness of the law. Near the end, chapter 11 reaffirms the unity of the whole law, and shows how "ceremonial" law continues to have relevance for the church.

Averbeck found a starting point in an earlier book that presents five distinct views about the use of the OT law: *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, edited by Wayne Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) (p. 8n5 and 8n6). The five views are "the Reformed perspective [articulated by Willem A. VanGemeren], the theonomic Reformed approach [Greg L. Bahnsen], the dispensational view [Wayne Strickland], and the modified Lutheran view [Douglas J. Moo]" (p. 8) and "the 'guide for holiness' view" (Walter C. Kaiser, p. 9). Averbeck summarizes each of these views in the introduction (pp. 10–12). He is grateful for their insights, but not satisfied with any of them. So he presents his own view:

As for myself, I am convinced that the threefold division [the Reformed view that the law of Moses contains moral law, ceremonial law, and judicial law, with different fulfillments in the NT] is neither legitimate nor helpful, from a biblical point of view, for resolving the issue of the application of the Old Testament law to the church and the believer. In fact, I will argue that the New Testament applies the whole law, including the so-called ceremonial parts to the church and the Christian life. It is not a matter of *whether* the Old Testament law applies but *how* the New Testament applies it. (p. 13)

In confirmation, in the introduction he cites some cases where the language of sacrifice is used in the NT, not only with respect to Christ, but with respect to Christians. The language of temple and priesthood is also used (pp. 13–14; see also 317–27). He explains further:

If it is true that the whole Law and Prophets hang on the two greatest commandments, then every element of the law supports or works out the implications of those

two commandments in some way. Therefore, we need to understand and work out the details and implications of the fact that it is the whole, *unified* Mosaic law that is to be “written on the heart” of the new covenant believer, not just one aspect of it or another, or some combination thereof. The *whole* law applies to the Christian. As the Lord says it: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). This does not mean we should bring every specific law in the Old Testament over directly into the church and the Christian life. However, every law does contribute to some dimension of the law that, in turn, does indeed apply to the Christian life as part of the “law of Christ.” (pp. 17–18)

It is refreshing and salutary to hear the affirmation of the centrality of the two great commandments, to hear an emphasis on the interaction of various aspects of law in the OT, and to hear about the whole law being applicable to Christians, though not all in the same way (not “directly into the church”). Many aspects of the law, traditionally thought of as “ceremonial,” are fulfilled in a metaphorical or typological way (p. 19). Averbeck gives an orientation by setting forth three theses: “the law is good”; “the law is weak”; and “the law is one unified whole” (pp. 15–17). He sees many of the mistaken views of the law as arising from failure to maintain all three of these theses at once.

To achieve his aim, Averbeck largely prefers the strategy of dealing with individual texts, from both the OT and the NT. He appeals to general statements of continuity: Jer 31:33 says that in the new covenant “I will put my law in their minds” (p. 18); and Jesus affirms the abiding of the whole law, every iota and dot (Matt 5:18–19; p. 15). The book appeals to the two great love commandments (pp. 16–18). It also appeals to many specific examples: “Again, even if one divides the laws into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, the New Testament cites and applies specific laws and principles from all three categories to the life of the church and the believer” (p. 15).

How do we evaluate this approach? The overall conclusion should not be surprising, if we look at the whole issue from a principal point of view. All the law displays the righteousness of God: “*Righteous* are you, O LORD, and *right* are your rules” (Ps 119:137). This verse refers to *all* the law, not just the Ten Commandments, not just some pieces. God’s righteousness is supremely manifested in Jesus Christ. As God, Christ reveals God the righteous One, and as man, he righteously obeys the voice of God. In the application of redemption, the righteousness of Christ is also conveyed to us. We receive righteousness in imputation in the act of justification; we receive it in impartation through our gradual growth into conformity with Christ in sanctification. And we display perfect righteousness when we are free from all sin in the new heaven and the new earth. Hence, all the law, as a display of the righteousness of God, is relevant to us, now and in the future. The law of Moses, as a display of the righteousness of God, is a display beforehand of the righteousness of Christ and also the righteousness belonging to the people in union with Christ. It therefore applies to us.

We may draw the same conclusions if we start with God’s holiness. The law displays his holiness. And Christ is “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). The church is a holy temple (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:21–22; 1 Pet 2:5), with holy people (“saints”).

The law also has relevance beyond the church. By displaying righteousness, it convicts people of sin. It ought to lead to people despairing about their own abilities and seeking

for God to save them. By displaying righteousness, it also to some extent restrains evil-doing in the world abroad, even among those who are not saved. Because of the topic of Averbeck's book, concerning the life of the church, he does not direct focal attention to these uses of the law, but it is worth noting that they are additional uses (p. 265).

The conclusion about the continued relevance of the law is *obvious*, if we see the law for what it is, a display of God's righteous character. Why then the five distinct views? We may hope that advocates of all five views might come to agree with the general principle about the righteousness of God. What they disagree about are the details of the implementation.

If the general principle of relevance is valid, it means that Averbeck's view is correct in affirming a relevance to the whole law. It means also that all the views that appear to reject outright the continuing force of the law, or some parts of it, are subject to qualifications. We may hope that the best representatives of the views will include qualifying explanations that affirm elements of continuity.

Nevertheless, Averbeck's book rejects "the Reformed view" (p. 10). What exactly is it rejecting? On p. 10, the book mentions the Westminster Confession of Faith and lists two important features: (1) the covenant of works and the covenant of grace; and (2) the threefold division into "moral, civil, and ceremonial law."

As indicated in the earlier quote from p. 13, Averbeck rejects the threefold division into moral, ceremonial, and judicial law. In line with most OT scholars, he wants us to see the unity of the whole law (his third thesis). But is he nevertheless much nearer to a Reformed view and its threefold division than he perceives?

We may consider first Averbeck's treatment of symbolic ordinances from the OT law. Averbeck maintains that sacrificial language, temple language, and priesthood language in the NT demonstrates that the NT—albeit in its own way—applies OT law to Christ and the church and the individual Christian. These laws are functioning positively in the life of Christians. Yes, indeed. We may compare this positive function with Averbeck's summary of the "Reformed view," which says, "Everything but the moral law is abrogated" (p. 10). The Reformed view fails.

But a more thorough examination of the threefold division can lead in the very opposite direction. The Westminster Confession of Faith says this about the ceremonial law:

Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, *prefiguring* Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers *instructions of moral duties*. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament. (19.3, italics added)

Because of the final sentence about "abrogated," a hasty reading could conclude that the moral law applies to Christians but the ceremonial laws do not. But what does the Westminster Confession of Faith actually mean? It was written by Puritans who knew that Christ was prefigured. The word *prefigured* occurs in the very paragraph that speaks about abrogation. The Puritans knew, just as Averbeck knows, that the NT uses imagery derived from these OT ceremonies, and applies it both to Christ and to the NT people of God, in union with Christ. The Westminster Confession also explicitly affirms that ceremonial laws contain things pertinent to "moral duties." That is, this body of law

further reinforces the moral law. The word *abrogated* does not imply that the ceremonial law has no function in the church. It affirms only what Averbeck himself affirms, that we are not supposed to apply every law “directly into the church.”

Now consider a second component in the threefold division, namely, the judicial law. The Westminster Confession of Faith has this to say:

To them [the people of Israel] also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which *expired* together with the State of that people; *not obliging* any other now, further than the *general equity* thereof may require. (19.4, italics added)

What the Confession has in mind includes a judicial system for settling disputes (Exod 18:13–27), instructions for judges and kings (Deut 17), and instructions about witnesses and specific punishments (e.g., Deut 19:15–21). In the OT context these instructions had their immediate application to “a body politic,” namely, the people of Israel in the time of Moses. The body politic is not to be conceived as something altogether separate from the people, but rather one dimension in their functioning. The Confession says that these laws “expired.” Its actual point is the same as Averbeck’s, namely, that the laws are not supposed to be applied “directly into the church” (p. 18). Neither are they supposed to be applied directly into modern civil governments. The redemptive-historical context is radically different (p. 315).

Once again, a hasty reaction could be to say that they are “abrogated” and therefore have no relevance to either the church or the civil government. But that is not what the Confession says. Rather, it supplies the expression “the general equity thereof may require.” In other words, within the special situation of ancient Israel and its “body politic,” the laws display abiding principles of general equity, general justice. These principles remain valid. The Confession does not further elaborate. But we may consider an example: can we apply the principle of two witnesses (Deut 19:15) to civil cases and to ecclesiastical trials today? At the level of general principle—general equity—the judicial laws could find application both in civil government and in the church. The Confession does not deny this application, but rather affirms it.

Finally, consider the moral law. Averbeck is right in saying that the Reformed tradition has tended to use the expression *moral law* to designate permanent principles of righteousness for human behavior (p. 10). The Ten Commandments are then seen as a specific embodiment of that law. This nuance allows that the Ten Commandments can include aspects that are specific to Israel, such as the reference to the land of promise in Exod 20:12. Deuteronomy 5:15 contains a reference to former slavery “in the land of Egypt.” As a result, the Ten Commandments and indeed any other specific expression of moral principles in the OT law need to be treated with attention to the immediate context. The expression “moral law” does not dissolve this context and the need for thinking hard about how OT law applies in a new context in the NT, a context that is not the same.

With respect to all three divisions of the law, the Westminster Confession in practice wants to do the same thing that Averbeck wants, namely, to use all the resources of Scripture in order to assess carefully *how* each particular text applies to Christ and to the church and to Christians. Averbeck focuses on only one aspect of the Confession,

namely, the negative aspect that denies that some kinds of law apply directly. Not surprisingly, Averbeck himself has the same negative aspect in his expression, “directly into the church” (p. 18). But Averbeck does not appear to do justice to the positive affirmations in the Westminster Confession that relate to prefiguration and general equity. He rejects the threefold distinction completely. In the introduction, Averbeck refers not once but repeatedly to the threefold division, and repeatedly makes the point that this division is “neither legitimate nor helpful” (p. 13; see also 15, 17, 21–22, 293, 313, 314, 316). Why? One reason appears to be that he misunderstands the threefold division; he thinks that it rejects applications of the ceremonial and judicial law.

Averbeck’s book appears to have a second reason for rejecting the threefold division. The book says, “Although there are various units of law in the Torah, the categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial law never appear in the Bible. They are artificial and misleading” (pp. 21–22). It appears that Averbeck expects the three divisions to correspond neatly to “units of law in the Torah,” such as the literary units for the various kinds of sacrifices in Lev 1–7, or the units on the curses in Deut 27–28. The Puritans who wrote the Westminster Confession were not *claiming* to provide a ready-made division of OT legal material into distinct textual units. Like Averbeck, they recognized that the Ten Commandments had a unique, central role in the Mosaic administration of law. They recognized that there were special instructions concerning holiness and concerning priestly activities in Leviticus. But they, like him, read through the whole of the law. They knew that the “moral” commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) stood right next to another piece of text that was not a commandment at all, but a solemn affirmation: “I am the LORD.” Then in the next verse the text has a “ceremonial” instruction, “You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material” (v. 19). And then v. 20–21 have a “judicial” instruction concerning the proper punishment for illicit sexual relations with a slave woman. The Puritans were familiar with this literary phenomenon simply because they read the OT. In the Westminster Confession, the threefold division is *not* a claim about the literary organization of the Pentateuch. What is it, then? It is a sketch of *how* the law applies.

Let us explain it a little. The Westminster Confession does not undertake to say everything that could be said on the issues. Without closing off the possibility of complexities and difficult cases (WCF 1.7), it means to say that there are three principal modes of application.

In fact we can see from the book of Hebrews that the OT law contains symbolic things, events, and institutions that set forth instructions about holiness *at the level* of shadow. They symbolized the heavenly reality in Christ, which was still to come. Now that Christ has come, the symbols are at an end, as far as the direct, literal imitation is concerned. But they still do function to instruct us about Christ and the church, and Hebrews is itself an example of this very kind of instruction. Colossians makes a similar point:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a *shadow* of the things to come, but the *substance* belongs to Christ. (Col 2:16–17)

When used in the Confession, the term “ceremonial law” is meant to designate those laws that set forth the shadow. The Confession’s paragraph 19.3 on ceremonial law has footnotes that provide biblical support. The footnotes cite Heb 9, 10:1, Gal 4:1–3, and Col 2:17; and, concerning “moral duties,” 1 Cor 10:7, 2 Cor 6:17, and Jude 23. Colossians 2:17 tells what some of the ceremonies are: “questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” Following Hebrews, we could add to the list “animal sacrifice or priesthood or temple.” This level of shadow is distinct from the level of permanent moral standards. Averbeck’s own applications are going to show the same difference, because he knows about the same passages in the NT. Once one takes into account the passages cited in the Confession’s footnotes, the point of the Confession about the function of the “shadows” can hardly be evaded.

The book’s emphasis on continuity of the law is useful. But the lack of explicit discussion of the distinction between shadow and reality means that in the overall tone, the book runs the danger of overplaying continuity and underplaying discontinuity:

This [the entrance of Gentiles in Acts] called for some transformation of the law to accommodate the needs..., much like the transformation that came with the change from travel through the wilderness to the occupation of the Promised Land in ancient Israel. (p. 254)

This explanation makes a positive point about the Gentiles. But the passage is disappointing in what it does *not* say. It does not appeal to the climactic work of Christ and the consequent *supersession* of the shadows: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13). Having been captivated by a reading of Matthew along the lines of pure continuity, the book does not articulate effectively the radicality of the change in moving from shadow to reality. The book does quote from Col 2:16–17, Gal 4:9–11, and Hebrews, but does not build on them (pp. 252–53).

The book of Hebrews discusses the law more extensively than any other part of the NT. Does it make sense for Averbeck’s book to have a chapter on the Mosaic instructions on the priesthood and the tabernacle (ch. 6), but no chapter on Hebrews?

Averbeck’s rhetoric strongly repudiates any division into kinds of law. But at the endpoint of interpretation, he, like everyone else, is going to deal differently with the shadows in the OT than the verses that near the surface articulate permanent moral principles. His enthusiasm for a holistic treatment of the law has many benefits. But in the end, it has to be qualified in the direction of the old threefold distinction.

And it should be noted that the Westminster Confession also believes in holism, a holistic treatment of the whole Bible, not only the law:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (1.9)

The threefold division of the law may be seen as an application of this general principle, using Hebrews and Col 2:16–17 as instructive contributions to the interpretation of “the true and full sense” of passages in the OT law.

Averbeck is not alone in his expectation that the threefold division would do what it does not claim to do. People think that it offers us a hermeneutical technique according to which, early in the process of examining particular laws, we cut up the law as if with a cookie cutter, and divide the scraps into three piles. And then only the one pile (the moral pile) has relevance. But this is a misunderstanding. Rather, the threefold division offers a preliminary sketch to form the large-scale expectations that we should have about the *manner* of NT fulfillment, given the teachings in Hebrews. Averbeck himself has his reading of the OT shaped by Hebrews. And so, without realizing it, his endpoint in practical application is going to look not so different from what Reformed people are doing in our day.

The Westminster Confession today remains a confessional standard in conservative American Presbyterian churches. But Reformed interpretation of the Bible has not remained completely static. Averbeck seems not to have reckoned sufficiently with additional developments within the broad Reformed tradition, especially the development of biblical theology in the line of Geerhardus Vos. Geerhardus Vos, Meredith G. Kline, Herman Ridderbos, Edmund P. Clowney, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., and O. Palmer Robertson are some of the names that come to mind, as pioneers in the study of progressive revelation and the themes of biblical theology. This tradition has developed a rich appreciation of the meaning of fulfillment in Christ and in the church. All except Herman Ridderbos (who worked in the Dutch Reformed tradition) subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Yet they did not see it as inhibiting the kind of careful hermeneutics and multifaceted fulfillment and application that Averbeck sees as virtually antithetical to the threefold division. Averbeck's selective bibliography is intended to allow readers to explore further. It is to be regretted that the bibliography contains only one entry for one of the aforementioned authors—a book review by Meredith Kline. One could wish that Averbeck had realized that this body of work unfolds a Reformed view different from what he envisions.

The book also overlooks the fact that in its own pages, without admitting it, it develops the equivalent of a twofold division, in its treatment of shadow ordinances in the OT. The judicial division does not come into play as much, because the “general equity” of OT law extends beyond the bounds of the church (but see pp. 265, 315).

We can see the misunderstanding summed up in another place in the book, which expresses hermeneutical disappointment with the threefold division:

Third and finally, the law is a unified whole. It is neither biblically correct nor useful in interpretation of the Bible to separate out one type of law from the others as a means of understanding the law or applying it today in the church and the Christian life. We should not be dividing it into “kinds of law”—for example, moral, civil, and ceremonial—and deciding what applies or does not apply to us based on that. The Bible does this nowhere. There is a better, more holistic and biblically sound, way of handling the law and its application today. (p. 17)

The quotation here appears to repeat the two misunderstandings already observed.

First, the quotation rejects the attempt “to separate out one type of law from the others,” apparently thinking of the separation as occurring on the level of textual units. The expression “to separate” can easily lead lay readers to picture the hermeneutical process as a cookie cutter approach that removes verses from their textual context. That is different in thrust from the act of distinguishing between shadow and substance as one aspect of the process of analyzing a verse *within* its biblical context. Such an analysis would follow the distinction between shadow and substance that Col 2:16–17 articulates.

And second, the quotation rejects the idea that, on the basis of such a separation, one would decide “what applies or does not apply to us.” This second point would be a legitimate complaint about the Confession, if the Confession said that the moral law *does* apply, while the ceremonial and judicial laws do *not*. But Averbeck’s book is making the same mistake we mentioned earlier, of thinking that the threefold division gives us a yes or no about application, rather than a guide to *how* the various laws apply.

Biblical interpreters may of course disagree about details in how we treat the application of particular verses within OT law. Not everything in interpretation is equally easy (WCF 1.7). But the goal of the Confession is substantively the same as Averbeck’s. The Confession promotes the interpretation of the whole Bible in its wholeness, and within that whole the whole Pentateuch in its wholeness. The whole law has applications, but these are differentiated in the *how* of application. And Averbeck, like the Confession, recognizes the propriety of identifying shadows and prefigures in the OT (though he does not use this terminology).

Averbeck’s book also underestimates the value of another contribution of the Westminster Confession, namely, the twofold covenant structure of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace (WCF 7). The book mentions the covenant of grace on p. 10, within its summary of the Reformed view. But it does not return to it. It does have a negative evaluation of “covenant theology” and a broad use of the concept of covenant: “In my view, this is too monolithic and simplistic” (p. 36). It is simplistic if a broad concept of covenant smashes out the particularity of the textures of particular covenants, on which the book focuses. But this dismissal neglects the opportunity to see that the broader general patterns and the particularities should be treated as complementary to each other. Averbeck’s dismissal does not characterize him alone, but a number of OT scholars as well, because their training and their focus is very much on the particularities.

Averbeck’s book is in most respects a good book, very helpful for people who have not yet appreciated the continuing value of the OT for the Christian life. But in what the book says about the threefold division and the covenants, it shows a misunderstanding. It does not interpret the Westminster Confession sympathetically in its own historical context, and as a platform for further development, but rather in terms of a simplification.

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