

## THE THEOLOGIANS EDWARDS AND STOTT ON THE LAW OF MOSES

Did Jesus retain the Law of God in the first five books of the Bible? Plenty of experts say yes. If he did he should not be respected as a moral authority.

John Stott says that Jesus “kept up the custom of worship in a synagogue every Sabbath. The complaints made about his behaviour as being unconventional for a religious teacher – he and his disciples were willing to heal on the Sabbath, did not fast, did not wash their hands before meals, and ate meals with ‘sinners’ – did not refer to acts which were technically illegal under the written ‘law of Moses’. It is significant that his brother James, who became a Christian, is said to have observed that law piously throughout his life” (Essentials, page 56). Stott says Jesus never contradicted anything in the Old Testament.

However, liberal scholar David Edwards disagrees with John Stott who he accused of going too far when he said that Jesus never disputed any doctrine in the Old Testament (Essentials, page 56).

John 10:8 where Jesus says that all who came before him to teach religion were robbers and were not listened to is taken to be an example. But none of the prophets were perfect. Jesus is accusing them of being bad and liars but that is not the same as saying that God did not speak through them. Jesus was very clear that the revelations given through the prophets could not be broken or ignored but carry the authority of God.

And since the gospel respects the Old Testament it is probable that the robbers were not the Bible-writing prophets at all.

Edwards supposes that if Jesus revered the scriptures well there would be no explanation for the division between the Jews and him. That is nonsense for Jesus sought to add new doctrines to the revelation of the Law. He wanted to form a cult centred on himself as supreme revealer of God and the Jews did not think he was worthy. He told the Jews that they were fanatical about the traditions and customs which he despised. Jesus wanted to add updates to the Jewish religion and be its prophet and they did not want that.

Edwards held that it was very improbable that Christ had a copy of the entire Old Testament for it would have been very difficult to carry and too expensive for him to buy (page 58). The reason for this assumption is that Edwards desires to undermine the doctrine that Jesus respected the Law to the letter and was worried about the exact wording of it for if he had no book he would not have taken the text very seriously. If you don't worry about the exact text then you do not consider the document wholly reliable. Jesus had wealthy friends as the gospels admit. Martha and Mary and Lazarus and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus for example. They could have given him the scriptures. Elders of synagogues would have let him look at their scrolls. He bore the title of Rabbi Jewish minister.

Edwards feels that if Jesus had really been a fundamentalist and not a liberal about the Law of Moses in the Bible he could have been a Sadducee rejecting the doctrines about angels and spirits which are not in it (page 60). But Jesus could have had other reasons for accepting these doctrines. New doctrines do not necessarily imply that the old ones were wrong or are being contradicted.

It does not enter Edward's head that the things he takes as indications that Jesus did to believe all that was written before in the scriptures could have been errors or lies and not intended to do that. That is the most likely thing when the records never state clearly and frankly that Jesus disagreed with some scriptural statements.

Edwards seems to be saying that Jesus stood by most of the Law but had some faults with it.

Stott saw plenty of holes in Edwards' analysis. Stott observes that Edwards' belief that the hostility between Jesus and the Jews indicates that he opposed their scriptures contradicts the biblical evidence that it was their traditions he was against for he cited scripture to defend his opposition (page 86). “Even in the debate over divorce...what Jesus criticised was not Moses but the hardness of human hearts, and the direction in which he led his hearers was not away from the Pentateuch but back to the creation narrative”. Again, in ‘declaring all foods clean’ (Mk 7:19), he was not saying that the Law's dietary regulations had never been God's will, but that they were a temporary divine arrangement, which was now fulfilled in the purity of heart demanded in the Kingdom of God” (page 87).

Jesus is being thought to have changed the laws that were never meant to be permanent. I can accept that that might be true of the divorce law (Deuteronomy 24) for it does not say that divorce is right but that a man should not take back his first wife after divorcing her if she has got married and divorced again in the meantime for she is defiled. The text is implying

that divorce is only tolerated and endured by God. There is no evidence in the Law that the divorce laws were temporary though Jesus might have thought they were. If he made a mistake and thought they were then how he approached Moses' divorce law cannot be taken as evidence that he was contradicting Moses. The laws never permitted remarriage which supports the view that Jesus never undermined or declared the divorce laws changed at all when he forbade remarriage. Stott is wrong to think that Jesus did away with the purity laws. If Jesus made all food clean by a miracle that doesn't mean the law banning the eating of unclean food is wrong or done away. It just means it isn't needed any more.

The Bible does not say that any ceremony of the Law was done away. If a ceremony is fulfilled and no longer observed that is not doing away with it.

The argument that Jesus kept the ceremonial law for us and that it is abolished is unsuccessful.

Incidentally, it is silly to argue that the Sabbath must be celebrated on a Saturday and that God cannot switch it to another day because it would be immoral and that if he does that then he has called bad good! The fact that a Sabbath is needed and should be observed does not mean that it has to be on a certain day. That is why if Saturday is abolished as a Sabbath it does not mean that morality has changed and is arbitrary as long as a new day is designated in its place. To change a day would not infer that the rest of the Law is invalidated or that morality is questionable. The Sabbath was to remember God resting after making the world and the universe in six days. That could be remembered on a Sunday as well. The Sabbath falls at different times in different parts of the world and God is not strict about what day is used as long as it is used to remember the seventh day of creation.

However, there is no evidence of a switch from Saturday to Sunday at all in the Bible.

Edwards uses lies and speculation to try and make Jesus look like a liberal Christian. Stott's approach is intelligent and evidence based.