

Commandment means something that excludes alternative behaviors. It applies to (a) *moral law*, which goes back to first principles for determining right action. Moral law comes from divine purpose and the nature of the case. It distinguishes between natural and unnatural. Since moral commandments reflect purpose and the nature of things based on purpose, people obey moral commandments to bring about a more satisfying life.

Commandment applies to (b) *positive commandment*. Although other possibilities exist, this one is specified—perhaps for “good order.” Positive commandment rests more on authority because it addresses appropriate and more appropriate. (The purpose of positive commandment is nicely put by C. S. Lewis in *Perelandra*, p. 118.) It is a commandment obeyed out of love and deference more than from necessity, fear, or duty.

(c) God’s spokesmen may have no clear divine guidance for proceeding, so they give *practical advice*. In contrast to moral law and positive commandment, advice does not eliminate other possibilities; so doing otherwise does not constitute disobedience. Since advice is given for practical reasons, it is “wise” to do it even though doing otherwise might work. It is wisdom rather than law. It involves a difference between good and better instead of good and bad. When people do not take advice, they do not commit a sin; they take a risk. Advice and commandment differ as to intent: “best do” more than “must do.”

Advice and commandment differ also as to scope. Advice may not be woodenly uniform for everyone, everywhere, all the time; it is consistent with, rather than required by, purpose and the nature of things (Proverbs 23:31 vs. 1 Timothy 5:23). It may not be the same in every circumstance (Acts 15:29 vs. 1 Corinthians 8). Advice is a bigger category than law. Since Christianity is an interpersonal system, advice has increased presence in the faith. That is the reason there is a greater sense of freedom in Christ than under Moses. Under law there is less advice and more commandment.

Wisdom literature goes beyond moral matters. It is wise counsel people do well to heed. It comes from the concern for success and efficiency; advice is governed by expediency and love. Many things are lawful, but not everything is expedient (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23; cp. 2 Corinthians 8:10; 12:1). It may take into consideration social and cultural expectancy. When people give advice, they use the imperative mood with a different intent; they expect the hearer to heed at least the “spirit” of the imperative. Advisors do not stand in an authority relationship with those they address. Advice is a “fitting thing,” not an inherently necessary thing. It is Ben Franklin’s “infallibly safe course.” Perceiving what is expedient and appropriate correlates with the “gift of wisdom,” not necessarily as a supernatural endowment but as a skill honed by Christian experience and maturity.

It may be best to let commandment take precedence over advice in unclear cases. An item is considered commandment unless some consideration suggests otherwise. Since advice does not follow from first principles or the nature of things, it can apply to things apparently at odds with other directives. Paul advised against remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:27 but wanted younger widows to remarry in 1 Timothy 5:14. Old Testament prophets were advisors as well as teachers and predictors. (See 2 Samuel 7 entry below.) Advice addresses procedure rather than morality; it is circumstantially nuanced.

Advice does not controvert inerrancy. “Inspired advice” fits with inerrancy because what the inspired writer calls for is good—though other possibilities might also be

good. Different people might receive different instructions because they can do what others cannot or may not have conscience or self-control to attempt.

So, the following levels of necessity for carrying out the Christian calling under New Testament guidance: (a) example, something done without needing to be followed by subsequent generations; (b) precedent, something done with the intention of being followed later; (c) advice, given out of a concern for expediency in procedural matters; (d) positive commandment, which specifies certain ways of doing what could in theory be handled differently (baptism, the Lord's Supper, Old Testament ceremonial and ritual laws); and (e) moral laws, behavioral directives that are not situationally conditioned, because they arise from the nature of the case—divine purpose and the nature of personal relationships.

**\*\***In 2 Samuel 7 Nathan told David to go ahead with building the temple, but later he had to return and tell him that God wanted to wait and let Solomon build it. Evidently Nathan did not speak presumptuously but considered it a matter of procedure. The matter of having a mobile tabernacle vs. a located temple was a matter of preference rather than necessity. He evidently operated on the premise that, as court prophet, his perception of God's general will could serve him in specific cases.

**\*\***Proverbs 23:31 advises, "*Do not look on the wine when it is red.*" Paul tells Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake (1 Timothy 5:23; cp. Romans 14:21, 17; Colossians 2:16).

**\*\***Would "*casting pearls before swine*" be a sin (Matthew 7:6)? The text relates to going to receptive fields. It is not wrong, however, to go to an unreceptive field and labor for a lifetime. That may be the way to turn a resistant people group into a receptive one in the long run.

**\*\***In Matthew 18:15-17 the procedure for dealing with difficulties between Christian brothers might have some elements of advice in it. It may not be a formula to be followed rigidly, but an attitude toward the offender and the offended. Not taking it to the church, for example, would not necessarily be disobedience. In regard to the binding and loosing, perhaps it is within such procedural matters that Jesus gave the disciples "*the keys to the kingdom.*" God promises to stick by his people when they make decisions about how to handle certain issues in church life and mission on which God has given no revelation or clear guidance. In such cases believers have to do something; this promise authorizes their use of sanctified understanding to cope with Christian life and work. There is, then, a series comprised of three parts: seek first an answer (a) by reading scripture, then (b) by praying for guidance, and finally (c) by using sanctified imagination. (See above on 2 Samuel 7.)

**\*\***The prohibition against eating meat offered to idols in Acts 15:29 is a matter of advice lest more mature believers create unnecessary resistance between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the church and between Gentile Christians and the as-yet unbelieving Jewish community. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul approaches it more leniently because he is thinking about it from the standpoint of weaker brothers (converted from among the Gentiles) who might be tempted or misled into eating such meat with a different intent.

**\*\***Paul and Barnabas disagreed over taking Mark with them on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-41).

**\*\***Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14 tell the readers to greet each other with a holy kiss.

\*\*1 Corinthians 7:2 says for each man to have his own wife. This case is obviously not a commandment against celibacy since later Paul speaks favorably of the single state for those who have continence, and even advises against getting married because of the “present distress” (1 Corinthians 7:29-35).

\*\*Is Paul’s statement about not marrying an unbeliever a matter of commandment or advice (1 Corinthians 7:39; cp. 2 Corinthians 6:14)? Elsewhere in the same chapter (7:12-17) he indicates that marriage is not a church ordinance; marriages between believers and unbelievers are valid; a Christian in a mixed marriage does not occupy a sinful position. In most situations, the arrangement would not be wise to enter.

\*\*In 1 Corinthians 16:1ff. Paul tells the readers to lay by in store on the first day of each week as an advisable procedure for having their offering ready when he comes through Corinth on the way to Jerusalem. Taking the offering to church leaders on a Thursday night would not have been wrong.

\*\*Is the ban against women teaching men in 1 Timothy 2 a matter of advice or requirement?

\*\*Is the qualification in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 on “husband of one wife” advice rather than requirement (or meant in a character sense—blameless)?

\*\*The approach outlined in James 5:13-15 need not be considered a formula to be followed to a “t.” It is a pattern that could add or subtract some elements in the procedure—or be replaced altogether by going to a doctor.

Issues resolved through this mechanism may include the following:

(1) The question about total abstinence (Proverbs 23:31 + Romans 14:21, 17; Colossians 2:16; 2 Timothy 2:25)

(2) Eating meat offered to idols (Acts 15:29 + 1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

(3) Certain marriage considerations: marrying or giving in marriage during times of distress, continuing to live with an unbelieving spouse, giving a daughter in marriage to an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7)

(4) Procedural issues: Matters of procedure on which God has not spoken, and divine guidance does not specify are matters of indifference. (See comments above on Matthew 18:15-20; 2 Samuel 7.)

(5) Women teaching men

(6) Marriage requirement for elders and deacons

(7) Slave relationships to their masters

(8) The holy kiss for salutation

(9) Paid ministry

(10) Veil wearing

(11) Order of service from Acts 2:42

(12) Healing as per James 5

In choosing how to act and operate, Christians have several items to consider: commandment (moral commandment, positive commandment), practical advice, approved precedent, appropriate inference, and significant silence.