

# THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PORTION

## A Structure for Organizing Biblical Law

by James R. Hughes (1992/09; updated 2002/11)

There are many debates today among Christians that relate to law keeping. These debates cause Christians to call one another antinomians or legalists, cause splits in churches, and disrupt the vital witness of the Church to our increasingly pagan culture. These debates raise questions about the continuing validity of Old Testament (OT) laws, the distinction between moral, civil and ceremonial law in the OT, the relationship of the Ten Commandments to the 'law of love' taught by Jesus, the distinction between being under law and under grace, and the general applicability of Biblical law to all men in a pluralistic society.

There are a number of problems in the Church that make these debates more contentious. The first, and most fundamental problem, may be a general lack of Biblical knowledge within the Christian population. This ignorance causes Christians to rely less on the Bible and more on the opinions of their peers in the world, the secular leaders or the blatantly liberal, and anti-moral media. A second problem is the perceived lack of relevance of the Bible. Even among those who have a general knowledge of the contents of the Bible, its contents are seen to be somewhat removed from the realities faced by the average person struggling to live in this materialistic and pseudo-scientific age.

A third problem is the lack of a systematic understanding of Scripture. As has often been stated, the Bible is not a systematic theology book, although its contents are consistent and appropriate for organizing into a system. In fact, very little of the Bible teaches theology directly. Most of the Bible is composed of historical prose or poetry, or pronouncements (prophecy or law) relating to nations that long ago ceased to exist.

The average Christian does not have a comprehensive framework in which to organize these portions of the Bible. In addition, most preachers do not seem to have their own Biblical framework and therefore are unable to provide insight for those whom they teach. They preach continually to Christians the need for salvation or make general observations that provide moralisms apparently consistent with the vestiges of a 'Christian' culture. But they are unable to lead their hearers from salvation to sanctification in a systematic fashion.

This essay is directed at providing a solution for these three problems. Its purpose is to provide a systematic framework for organizing a specific set of laws found in Scripture. When these laws are organized in a systematic framework, we can begin to clarify the nature of Biblical law in general and, at the same time, show that these specific laws maintain their relevance for Christians living in a post-Christian culture.

The specific area of Biblical law that I consider in this essay is man's payment of tribute to God. This is an area of Biblical law that is largely ignored today. Few Christians consider obedience to God in the context of a covenant treaty and understand their obedience to include the payment of tribute under the obligations of this covenant. And, among those who hold to the view that a perpetual covenant treaty has been enacted by God, few can enunciate the specific obligations of that covenant.

I believe that we can conclude that the general obligations of the covenant apply in two areas. First man must keep the Ten Commandments and all of the laws, made by men, that are legitimately applications of the principles of the Ten Commandments (i.e., they follow the Biblical example of applying the Ten Commandments through case laws). Secondly, man must return to God a portion (a tribute payment) of everything that God gives to him. This is the *Principle of the Portion*. However, it is easier to define the

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Principle of the Portion in general terms than to define it specifically. It is in the specifics that we run into many of the debates that are current in various parts of the Church. But I believe that if we truly understand the principle, the specifics become easier to understand and to apply in our lives.

In order to understand the specifics, I have chosen to organize this essay on the Principle of the Portion around chapter 34 of Exodus. In the account up to this point, Moses has returned from his long stay on Mount Sinai and has found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. In his anger, he threw down the stone tablets and they broke on the ground. Moses pleaded for mercy on behalf of the Israelites and asked God to give him a special measure of assurance that his blessing would go with him. God promised Moses that he would proclaim to him his covenant name (LORD/Jehovah) and make his glory pass before him. Then (in the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus) God told him to chisel out two new stone tablets on which he would inscribe his laws a second time.

Moses went up Mount Sinai a second time and God proclaimed his covenant name to him and passed in front of him, declaring his compassion, grace, love and willingness to forgive. Then God said: “I am making a covenant with you.” (v. 10) We might expect that the next thing God would do is repeat the Ten Commandments. But instead, God goes on to give Moses a series of apparently miscellaneous commandments that appear to have little to do with the Ten Commandments.

After he has completed giving Moses these detailed instructions, he tells him to “write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” (v. 27) We are told that then he “wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant – the Ten Commandments.” (v. 28) Whether God wrote the words of the covenant with his finger as he had formerly (see Ex 31.18) or Moses inscribed the words, is not clear. Although the logical antecedent of “he” is “the LORD”, the context seems to imply that Moses did the writing (compare Josh 8.32). Nevertheless, the important thing to note is that associated with the direct delivery of the Ten Commandments, God gave a series of additional pronouncements that Moses was to record.

In the words given by God on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments appear to be the summary of the requirements for covenantal obedience. The additional pronouncements given at the same time appear to provide a more specific statement of additional obligations of the covenant.

For interpreting this passage, there seem to be two primary views that could be taken:

1. The Ten Commandments and associated pronouncements were given to Israel and were meant for them alone. They do not apply to Christians since Jesus has come and given us his own laws.
2. The Ten Commandments still apply to Christians; but the specific pronouncements given in Exodus 34 do not apply, as they fall into the area of civil or ceremonial laws and were only for Israel.

In the following essay I argue that neither of these views is correct. The first view is wrong because it fails to see the continuity of Law throughout redemptive history. It also fails to do justice to the author of all Biblical Law (Jesus), his exposition of the Law in the *Sermon on the Mount*, and his insistence that those who love him will keep his commands.

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Also, the second view is wrong because it fails to see that the words given by God are additional perpetual obligations of the covenant. They are not just culturally and historically applied instances of the Ten Commandments, given solely to Israel. They are in fact obligations that are binding today on **all** men (not just Israel and not just Christians). However, it is true that they are fully consistent with the Ten Commandments and are at least indirect applications of the principles that are enunciated in the Ten Commandments. But they are more than just applications of the Ten Commandments. They are instances of additional obligations associated with the covenant.

It is true that the specific **circumstances** of these obligations may not be binding today. For example, the observance of the Feast of Weeks and the sacrifice associated with the Passover have clearly been set aside. Christ. But the **principle** enunciated in the obligations is binding today. This principle is the Principle of the Portion. If we can understand the principle that is behind the specific pronouncements in Exodus 34, we will be far better able to understand both the covenant and Biblical law and to determine the application today of the covenant and its laws.

My thesis is that although the Ten Commandments are a summary of the obligations of obedience under the covenant treaty that God made with man, there is an additional (and completely consistent) set of requirements that enunciate the specific tribute that God requires as part of the fulfilment of the treaty. This tribute is to be a portion of all that God has given to us. The Principle of the Portion is a distinct and binding obligation on all men, through all time.

### **EVERYTHING IS THE LORD'S (Exodus 34.1-9)**

God is sovereign. Everything belongs to him. He owns everything in the temporal/physical universe and in the spiritual realm. He owns everything in this world from the rocks on the bottom of the ocean to the moss on the mountain tops. He says that "everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41.11) and "every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills." (Ps 50.10) This includes the lives and possessions of non-Christians as well as the lives and possessions of Christians. No aspect of our beings is excluded. It includes our lives, worship, possessions and time. Nothing that we are, or do, or claim to own, is excluded from God's sovereign ownership.

### **MAN GIVEN THE VASSAL ROLE (Exodus 34.10)**

Yet the Bible speaks of man owning objects within the created realm and being responsible for his actions. For example, both Abraham and Job are referred to in Scripture as having "owned" great possessions. And a clear expression of man's right to own possessions is given in Acts 5 where we read of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter says that the land belonged to them before it was sold, and the money was theirs to dispose of as they wished after it was sold.

Our responsibility for our actions, such as our offering of worship and use of time, is stated throughout the Bible. Moses, in the delivery of the Law, gives many cases where individuals are responsible for their

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actions. Jesus reiterates this in the *Sermon on the Mount* and teaches that our responsibility goes beyond action to thought. Responsibility in worship as a specific action is shown in many examples, such as in Cain's unacceptable offering, the unauthorized fire of Nadab and Abihu, the usurpation of the priests' position when Saul offered a sacrifice, the words of Jesus about true worship to the Samaritan woman at the well, and Paul's words to the Corinthian Church about propriety in worship. Our responsibility in regard to the use of time is also made clear in the teaching about idleness in Proverbs and Paul's letters.

How are we to reconcile the total and absolute ownership of all things by God and the teaching of Scripture that indicates that man owns his possessions and is responsible for his actions? The reconciliation is of course very simple. Everything belongs to the LORD, but he has made us stewards of his possessions. As God's image bearer and the lord over creation, man has been granted by the Sovereign God the right to a proximate ownership, possession and use of all things in the created realm. But because God retains the ultimate ownership, man is responsible and accountable for the outcome of his stewardship.

Our lordship over the creation is a derived lordship. Our relationship to our LORD is as a vassal king to a Supreme King. God has placed in our hands our lives, worship, possessions and time. What he has done is similar to what an earthly sovereign or state can do. An earthly king, master or state can grant a true ownership of land (a 'freehold') and yet grant it as a *fee tail* (limited) rather than as a *fee simple* (unlimited) right.

This relationship is defined and maintained through the institution of a covenant. The first enunciation of the covenant is found in the creation account where we read that 'God blessed them and said to them ... "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."' (Gen 1.28)

This covenant was repeated after the flood (Gen 9.7-17) and was repeated and expanded throughout the history of God's people until Christ brought it to its final form and statement. The covenant always emphasises that God is sovereign, and that man has been given a role as an appointed ruler over God's world. It also emphasises that man cannot exist without God. Man's existence is derived from and dependent upon God's continuing favour.

God is sovereign, but he has appointed man to rule on his behalf. "The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man." (Ps 115.16) We see this in the first assignments that were given to man. He was given the task of naming the animals, and he was put into the garden of God to tend it. We also see an aspect of the derived rule of man in the words of the first covenant consecration: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."'

As lord over creation, man has a freedom to act responsibly. He can make decisions about his actions. He can decide whether to fence this piece of land or that. He can choose to cut down a particular tree, or to have one lamb for dinner and leave another to grow to produce wool. He can choose to build a bridge, design a new type of television, organize a political party or write a book. He has what appears to be an unlimited freedom to act within the framework God has established for the operation of his universe and within his moral framework. Man cannot step beyond the limits of the physical, temporal, spatial realm in that God has placed him, and he should not step beyond the bounds of the moral limits.

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### **OBLIGATIONS OF THE COVENANT TREATY (Exodus 34.11-28)**

Man has been appointed ruler over God's creation and he has been given sovereignty to act. But his sovereignty is derived not inherent. His sovereignty is conditional not absolute. He must act responsibly under the ultimate sovereignty of God. He must acknowledge the greater king. He must pay tribute to that king.

This requirement has been given in the context of a covenant relationship. This covenant relationship now includes a treaty document that stipulates the conditions of the treaty. The treaty document was expanded and confirmed over a period of about 1500 years. The initial signature was placed on the treaty document by the finger of God. The final signature was placed on the document, on man's behalf, by the blood of the God-man.

This treaty document stipulates for us the obligations of the covenant relationship. These obligations emphatically state that all men must pay a tribute to the Great King. As a lesser king must annually send to the greater king a ship full of the finest wood, gleaming gems and choicest produce, so we must pay our tribute to the Great King. We must pay a tribute to God from our increase and wealth.

God is the Great King. Man is a subject king. God expects and demands a tribute of us. We must pay this tribute to acknowledge our submission to the Great King. Of everything that we produce or have, God must receive a portion. This is the Principle of the Portion.

The Principle of the Portion requires man to pay a tribute. But of what, and how much, and for how long?

### **Obedience (Ex 34.11)**

'And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" (Gen 2.16-17) Here is the first statement of the Principle of the Portion. God placed man in his garden to take care of it for him. Man was to tend it and care for it on God's behalf. But man was also permitted to use any of the Garden for his own needs and pleasures, except for a very small portion.

God owned the garden, but he delegated the management and oversight to man. We see this when God brought the animals to Adam so that Adam could name them. But to ensure that man always remembered that God was the ultimate owner, there was one portion of the Garden that was off-limits to man. Since there is no indication in Scripture that this obligation was temporary, we can assume that it was a permanent obligation.<sup>1</sup> Adam and Eve were to obey indefinitely and, in so doing, acknowledge by their obedience their submission to the Great King. The tribute that they were to pay to God as the condition of the covenant treaty was perpetual obedience to this one command.

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<sup>1</sup> Some believe that this obligation would have continued only during a period of probation.

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Genesis 3 is the account of how Adam and Eve failed to pay tribute to their Great King. They did not keep the Principle of the Portion. They were unwilling to pay their tribute and instead attempted to take as their own the portion that belonged to God.

The Principle of the Portion did not expire when Adam sinned. It still applies to us today. The Principle of the Portion does not apply only to those who claim to be Christians. It applies to all men and women, of all ages, of all social classes, of all races, and of all religious affiliations. Obedience to God is not optional. But man follows in the footsteps of his father Adam and fails to pay tribute to God through obedience.

In addition to the covenant obligation of obedience defined in the Ten Commandments, there are six specific areas of our lives in which God demands that we obey him and pay him a tribute. This tribute is an additional obligation of the covenant and is to be paid with our:

- Life
  - Not to Mix the Unlike
  - Firstborn
  - Blood
- Worship
- Possessions
- Time

### **Life** (Ex 34.12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 25, 26)

God owns our lives – our very beings. As Paul told the Athenians, it is in God that “we live and move and have our being.” He is the author of life, and all life belongs to him. To ensure that we understand this, God has established the Principle of the Portion in a number of aspects of our lives.

#### *Not to Mix the Unlike* (Ex 34.12, 15, 16, 25, 26b)

God is a jealous God, as he himself says. What he sets apart for one purpose is to remain set apart for that purpose. Man is not to usurp God’s right and mix the unlike. With things that God has defined to be of like kind, we are able to do as we wish; but we are not to mix the unlike. We find an example of this principle in Scripture when we read (in Gen 6) of the sons of God (those of the godly line of Seth) who intermarried with the daughters of men (those of the sinful line of Cain). God was not pleased with this and said that his Spirit would not contend with man forever. He was going to put an end to this mixing of the unlike.

Another pre-Jewish example may be shown in the account of Rebekah’s disagreement with the marriage of Cain to women outside of the covenant line (Gen 26.34, 35; 27.46). She seems to have understood the principle that God’s people belonged to him and were not to mix the unlike.

Abraham was called out of Ur to be separated unto God, and the Israelites were called out of Egypt to be a separate people. They were not to make treaties with the nations surrounding them, nor were they to intermarry with them (Dt 7.3; Ezra 9.14). They were to maintain a separateness. They were holy to God, owned by him. As signs of this principle of separation they were not to sow two kinds of seed in the same

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field, mix two types of fibre in the same material, mate different kinds of animals, or yoke together different kinds of animals. They were not to mix the unlike.

This principle still applies today. Paul instructs Christians that they are not to “be yoked together with unbelievers.” (2 Cor 6.14) He reminds them that they are to come out of the world and to be separate from it. They are not to touch any spiritually unclean thing, for they are in the family of God. Both Paul and Peter state a number of times in their letters that Christians are to be holy to the LORD. We are not to mix the unlike.

The Principle of the Portion establishes that we are not to mix the unlike, for God has set apart a people for himself – a portion of mankind who will be with him for eternity. This portion is to be holy and separate from the rest of humanity and not to be mixed with it in an intimate way.

*Firstborn* (Ex 34.19, 20)

History is filled with examples of the importance of the firstborn. The rights of inheritance sometimes went exclusively to the firstborn (son), when a will was not available. In some cultures, the right to the use of titles (such as ‘Baron’ or ‘Lord’) also belonged to the firstborn. Practices such as these are found in the ancient cultures. In Old Babylonian, Middle Assyrian, Nuzi and Ugaritic texts, there are references to the importance of the firstborn.

How the importance of the place of the firstborn developed in Middle Eastern society is not clear. However, we cannot conclude that the people of God adapted the practices of the peoples around them as the Hebrew religion developed. Rather, we must believe that God had communicated (possibly not completely) the importance of the firstborn, and the early societies adopted this into their civil and religious institutions. We should understand that the basis for the recognition of the firstborn in civil affairs was derived from the Biblical Principle of the Portion. Because God chose the firstborn as his, men placed a special emphasis on the position of the firstborn. God chose the firstborn (male) of all wombs to be his exclusively in order to demonstrate his sovereign ownership over all of life.

The first example of this appears with Abel who “brought fat portions from some of the **firstborn** of his flock.” (Gen 4.4) We are not told how he knew that this was an action that would please God. Nor are we told how he determined the amount to bring as an offering or why he chose from the firstborn of the flock.

What we can observe, however, is that somehow, he recognized that all the productivity of the flock was from God and that all of it ultimately belonged to God. He realized that God expected a portion to be returned to demonstrate his sovereign ownership. We can also note in the statement that follows in the same verse that his offering was acceptable to God.

That all the firstborn (males) of the human womb also belonged to the LORD is not explicitly stated in the pre-Jewish historical context. However, there are some hints that this principle was in effect. These can be seen in the special attention that seems to be placed on the status of the firstborn.

For example, the civil institution of inheritance is mentioned in the account of Abraham. Abraham was

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contemplating leaving as his heir Eliezer of Damascus, who may have been a servant. Custom at that time apparently allowed a childless man to adopt a male servant to be his heir. But the LORD corrects Abraham and tells him that a son coming from his own body would be his heir. An unsuccessful attempt to produce an heir (Ishmael) is tried with a concubine. But after the birth of Isaac the LORD tells Abraham to disinherit Ishmael for the one to be considered the true firstborn would be Isaac: “through Isaac ... your offspring will be reckoned.” (Gen 21.12).

The importance of the firstborn is also shown in pre-Mosaic accounts, for example:

- Jacob and Esau – Esau sold his birthright to Jacob.
- Reuben – He lost his birthright by committing adultery with Bilhah (Gen 49.4). The birthright passed to Judah (Gen 49.10).
- Perez and Zerah – A piece of scarlet thread was tied around the hand of Zerah.
- Ephraim and Manasseh – Jacob chose to place his left hand on the head of Manasseh even though he was the firstborn, and thus to give the superior blessing associated with the right hand to Ephraim, the younger.

These all seem to indicate that the firstborn had special rights, or a special place both within the society of men and before God. This special place is a recognition of the fact that the firstborn belonged to God.

One additional example should be noted. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, his *official* firstborn. It is true that this sacrifice was to be a test of Abraham’s faith. But it was within the realm of the expected for Abraham. He knew that God owned everything and that he expected to be honoured with the lives of the firstborn.

At this time God provided a ram as a substitute. The ram does point to Christ as the final substitute for men, but more immediately it indicates that God did not expect or desire human sacrifice. Even though he expected the life of the firstborn to be given to him, he provided a means of redemption for its life.

In the Jewish legal specifications, we find that God claimed the ownership right explicitly of all firstborn males from livestock and the human womb. In regard to livestock he said “Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks.” (Dt 15.19) And he emphasized this further when he said: “No one, however, may dedicate the firstborn of an animal, since the firstborn already belongs to the LORD; whether a cow or a sheep, it is the LORD’S.” (Lev 27.26)

With respect to the offspring of the human womb, God is equally explicit. He says: “You must give me the firstborn of your sons.” (Ex 22.29) But he took the entire Levite tribe as a substitute for the firstborn sons of the Israelites: “I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine.” (Num 3.12, 13)

The right of ownership by God of the firstborn is also mentioned in the New Testament (NT). In the city of the living God will be found all the firstborn (ones) of the earth. (Heb 12.22, 23) All the righteous men, everyone who has been made perfect and cleansed of their sins, are those selected from the earth as God’s own special possession. In the NT age, the equivalent of the firstborn of every womb (human or animal) is



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the total assembly of the righteous. It is the duty of every man to render to God his rights in ownership and to repent of his sins and to become part of the firstborn (ones) in the assembly of heaven.

### *Blood (Ex 34.25)*

As another indication of his ownership over life, God requires that the blood of life be preserved for him. There are other portions of a living creature that are equally as important as blood: brain, lungs, heart – without any of these a creature will die. A creature can even lose a large quantity of blood and remain alive. Blood is not the most essential component of life. Nevertheless, God has chosen blood to be the portion that belongs to him as the tribute that we owe him.

It appears that man was a vegetarian (Gen 1.29; 3.18; 9.3b) prior to the Flood. However, Abel kept flocks and Noah was told to bring into the ark seven of the ceremonially clean animals. Sheep, goats and cattle may have been raised for the purposes of sacrifice; and they may have been used for milk, wool, and skins (Gen 3.21). It was not wrong for man to kill animals for his own use, and for worship. But it seems that he had never killed them, or at least been permitted to kill them, to *eat*.

The first explicit instruction about the use of animals for food appears after the flood. God says to Noah: “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you.” (Gen 9.3a) In these words, it appears that God is here initiating a new order, and he is permitting man now to eat the meat of animals.

In this inaugural statement God continues by stating that there was a condition under which this supplement was being added to man’s diet. God placed a condition on man when he said: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.” (Gen 9.4)

This condition required that the blood was not to be eaten. We are told in this condition the reason why the blood was not to be eaten. The blood was a symbol of life (“lifeblood”) and life belongs to God. We have no innate right to take life. However, this is not an absolute prohibition against killing, for God has just said that man could eat the meat of animals. Rather, the killing of animals is to occur only with an understanding of the condition that God has established. Although we have been given the right to kill animals and eat them, the ultimate ownership and right to their lives still belongs to God.

Not only the “lifeblood” of animals is sacred to God. God’s ownership extends to the life of man. For in the following verse God expands on his ownership of life: “And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.” (Gen 9.5) God strengthens his right to ownership over man as he adds a reason in the next verse: man is an image bearer of God. As such he has the special mark of his Sovereign placed on his nature. Man has no right to take human life because of the “lifeblood” and the “image”.

But again, as with the animals, this is not an absolute prohibition against killing men. For immediately following the statement of the prohibition against killing man, God says that those who kill (murder) will be killed by men as “an accounting” (punishment): “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” (Gen 9.6)

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The ownership of man by God demands that those who murder, have their lives taken in return. This is an obligation of the Principle of the Portion. It is an active demonstration that God is the owner of life and that we owe to him the “lifeblood”.

Notice that the “lifeblood” portion that we owe to God is part of the covenant obligations. The principle of the portion in respect to “lifeblood” is given in the context of the re-statement of part of the covenantal formulation that was first given to man in the Garden (compare Gen 9.7 with Gen 1.28). It is also followed by an explicit statement of the re-establishment of the covenant relationship between God and man. (Gen 9.9-17).

The laws given to the Jews in the Mosaic formulation of the covenant continue to support this aspect of the Principle of the Portion. The Jews were not to eat the blood of any animal or bird (Lev 7.26) but were to drain off the blood (Lev 17.13; 19.26) and to pour it out on the ground like water. (Dt 12.15, 16) Those who did eat the blood were to be cut off from the people of Israel. (Lev 7.26-27) They were considered to be covenant breakers and were to be excommunicated from the people.

Two reasons were given to the Israelites why they should not eat blood. The first was the same as that given to Noah: the blood was the symbol of life. (Lev 17.11, 14) This was the portion that belonged to God. “Eat them as you would gazelle or deer. ... But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat. You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.” (Dt 12.22-24)

The second reason is an extension of the first. Because blood is considered to be a symbol of life, it could be considered to be a substitute for life. The blood could be taken by God as a means of atonement for life. (Lev 17.11) There may be hints prior to the Mosaic ceremonial system that the blood of the sacrifice was necessary for atonement. For example, Abel’s and Abraham’s sacrifice involved the shedding of blood. Also, the Exodus from Egypt was marked by the identification of blood with the Passover. (Ex 12.7) But the first explicit reference to the blood being more than a sign of life and actually a substitute for life is given in the Mosaic ceremonial system. (Lev 17.11) This theme is well developed in the NT, and there it is taught that without the shedding of blood there can be no atonement. (Heb 9.22)

The importance of blood as a portion that belongs to God is universal in nature. Notice that at the time of Noah all plants and animals were given as food. God said that “everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.” (Gen 9.3) There were no restrictions placed on man at this time as to the particular animals that he could eat, as there would later be under the Mosaic formulation of the Jewish ceremonial laws. Yet, even in this unrestricted context, the blood was not to be eaten. It should be remembered that Noah was not a Jew. All men, Jew and Gentile, are descended from Noah, and all were placed under this universal obligation to abstain from the blood of animals.

This obligation was continued, under Moses, for we find the prohibition against eating blood was to apply to both the Jew and the alien. (Lev 17.10, 13; Zech 9.7) If an alien wanted to become a Jew, he had to abide by all the Jewish ceremonial laws, otherwise he was not bound by the ceremonial laws. For example, the

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Gentile was not prohibited from eating pork, whereas the Jew was. However, the prohibition against eating blood was not a ceremonial law as it applied to Gentiles even if they were not interested in becoming Jews. This prohibition is based on a universal principle, the Principle of the Portion.

James, speaking to the council at Jerusalem, shows that the prohibition against eating blood that was given to Noah when he was first permitted to eat animals still applies to all men, Jew and Gentile. He said at that council: "It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." (Acts 15.19-21)

The reference made here to Moses may be to the Mosaic law and may mean those laws that were applicable only to the Jews. But more likely it refers to the writings of Moses, i.e., the Pentateuch. The writings of Moses are often referred to in this way as in the expression "Moses and the Prophets." Although the writings of Moses were the primary source for the laws governing the behaviour of Jews, they are also to be a source, along with the rest of Scripture, for laws governing Christian behaviour. It is only Moses who provides us with the account of creation/Noahic ordinances, and it is Moses who provides us with the codification of the moral law in the Ten Commandments.

James, Paul and the others at the council seemed to be very concerned that no obligation be placed on the Gentiles that was not universally binding. What they decided to focus on was the particular but common behaviour among the pagans that went against the fundamental moral principles of God. In their letter (Acts 15.23-29) to the churches eating blood is in same class as sexual immorality and eating food that has been sacrificed to idols.

Peter's vision in Acts 10 does not contradict this. It does not even mention blood. It does not give man the right to eat blood. It only removes the stricter prohibition that was placed on the Jews under the ceremonial system. It returns us to the order established with Noah and permits the Christian to eat any plant or animal that God has given for food.

But as with Noah, we are to abstain from eating blood because it is the portion that belongs to God. As the symbol of life, it is the portion of life that he has reserved to himself to show his absolute ownership over life.

### **Worship** (Ex 34.13, 14, 17, 18, 22-24)

In his discussion with the woman of Samaria, Jesus tells her that "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4.24) What Jesus means is that all worship offered to God must be consistent with his nature. He is spirit and truth, and the worship brought to him must be spiritual and truthful. This is not optional; it is absolutely necessary. Anything else is not acceptable worship. Thus we learn from Scripture that worship must be given to God alone (Ex 20.3, 4; Mt 4.10) and it must be acceptable in God's sight. (1 Sam 15.22, 23; Isa 1.12-15)

But what is worship? It is that portion of our lives that is specifically set aside as an act of reverence for

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God. This is what God requires of us and is another aspect of the Principle of the Portion. God requires that a portion of our lives be lived in worship of him.

There are some in the Church who argue that all non-sinful actions of a Christian are worship. They claim that the entire life of a Christian, when lived for Christ, is worship. This is a misuse of the word 'worship'<sup>2</sup> and is contrary to the Principle of the Portion.

All of our life is to be lived for the glory of God and in his service. (Ecc 12.13; 1 Cor 10.31) But all of life is not worship, even when it is lived for God. Brain surgery or bridge building; juggling or jam making; and computer programming or chemical analysis are not worship. Even when they are done prayerfully, selflessly for man's benefit and for God's glory they are not worship. Worship is a set of specific acts of men toward God (e.g., Gen 22.5; Ex 3.12; 4.23; 1 Kings 1.47, 48; Mt 28.9) that have been defined by God.

Men are generally unwilling to accept this. They feel that God will be pleased with whatever they choose to offer him as worship. They fail to understand and believe that if they are offering something that has not been required by God as tribute, it is not acceptable. If God has not required a specific act, as worship, he has not defined it as part of worship. And if he has not defined it as part of worship, it is not spiritual or true worship. Man cannot define why, where, or how God is to be worshipped. Nor can he assume that God will respond when he presumes to approach God in his own way.

The Principle of the Portion requires that we pay to God acceptable worship, and only acceptable worship, as tribute. Acceptable worship, spiritual and true worship, can be only that which God has defined as acceptable. We see examples of this principle as we survey the Bible.

The first example of the application of this principle is found in the life of the first family. "In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour." (Gen 4.3-5)

This passage indicates that the offering of Abel was spiritual and true, whereas Cain's was not. The contrast between Abel's and Cain's offerings is not primarily between an offering of animal life and plant life. Rather the contrast is between:

- **Their attitudes** – We are told that "the LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering" (Gen 4.4) and that "by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did." (Heb 11.4) The main reason that God accepted the offering of Abel is that his heart was really in his offering. He as an individual was looked on with favour not because he made an offering but because his offering was made as a real expression of faith. It was his faith that made his offering better.
- **The propriety of their offerings** – It appears that God had designated that a specific type of offering

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<sup>2</sup> Almost every occurrence of the word 'worship' in the Bible refers to a specific act of worship. Romans 12.1, as translated in the NIV appears to support the view that life is worship. However, an alternate translation (see for example the KJV) is 'service' and may be the preferred translation.

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was to be given to him. Therefore, it was necessary for both Abel and Cain to bring that type of offering and not a substitute. Abel followed the requirement. Cain did not, but instead substituted his own form of worship. It was, secondly, Abel's obedience that made his offering better.

Abel's offering was acceptable because he brought his offering in the right spirit and in the way appointed by the Spirit. God looked on him and his offering with favour. Cain's offering was unacceptable because it was brought with the wrong attitude and was not an offering called for, or designated, by God.

Later we find that the godly line, descended from Seth, "began to call on the name of the LORD." This seems to imply an act of worship. Two godly men in this line of descent, Enoch and Noah, are said to have "walked with God", but it is difficult for us to determine what exactly this 'walk' included, although it probably included sacrifice of ceremonially clean animals. We are told that Noah followed the instructions of the LORD exactly as specified when he built the ark. (Gen 6.22) These instructions included the requirement to take "seven of every kind of clean animal" into the ark. Apparently, Noah knew why this instruction was given, and what he was to do with the animals. Immediately after coming out of the ark, Noah sacrificed burnt offerings of some of these clean animals. What he did was consistent with the instructions of the LORD and pleased the LORD.

Sacrifice again appears as a form of worship required by God in the account of Abraham. (Gen 22.1-19) Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Isaac. In the place of his son, God supplies a ram. Abraham is commended for his faith and obedience in offering to God the worship he specified and required. (Gen 22.15-19; Gen 26.4, 5; Heb 11.17-19)

We are not told how Abel and Noah knew what was true spiritual worship. Nevertheless, it is clear that, along with Abraham, they were informed by God about a specific form of worship that was acceptable to God (e.g., the use of only clean animals); and they knew that forms of self-determined reverence were not acceptable as worship. In all three cases the men are given to us as examples of faith and obedience in their worship.

With Moses we also find that spiritual and true worship is specifically constituted by God. However, in the case of Moses, we are told the specifics. We are told how Israel came to know exactly what God required, and we are given the details of that requirement. And as with Noah, (Gen 6.22) "Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded him." (Ex 40.16)

We do not need to consider all the specific instructions that were given to Moses to regulate worship. These can be found in exhaustive detail in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Rather, notice that Moses understood the general principle that only what God had specifically commanded as an element of worship was to be brought to him as worship. As the writer of Hebrews tells us: "the first covenant had regulations for worship ..." (Heb 9.1), and Moses obeyed every one of these regulations. When he did not know what action to take, he did not guess about how to approach God, nor did he make up his own worship. Rather, he enquired of the LORD to ask for his direction. (e.g., Num 9.8)

Everything else, anything not included in the regulations given by God, no matter how proper in its own place, was not to be made an element of worship. Moses, in the Spirit, told the Israelites this specifically

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when he said: “You must not worship the LORD your God in their way ... You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit.” (Dt 12.4, 8) The Israelites were neither to introduce the forms of worship of those around them nor to introduce what they thought fit. But lest there be any doubt, God, through Moses, clearly states this exclusive principle as a summary to what he has been telling Israel about worship: “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” (Dt 12.32) The principle is clear: the Israelites were to bring into the worship of God only what God had prescribed.

The NT does not change this principle. As we noted at the beginning of this section Jesus teaches that valid worship can be only that which is spiritual and true. The writer of Hebrews says essentially the same thing when he states that we are to worship God acceptably: ‘Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a “consuming fire.”’ (Heb 12.28, 29)

Jesus elsewhere shows God’s displeasure of man-made worship, when he says: ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” You have let go of the command of God and are holding to the traditions of men... You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.’ (Mark 7.6-9)

In this quotation from the OT, Jesus states a similar principle to that stated by Moses in Deuteronomy 12.32: “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” Men have a perverse tendency to add to the worship of God or to subtract from it. The more prevalent tendency in the Church seems to be adding to worship, but men both add to and subtract from the worship of God.

There are many examples of vain worship in the Church today. The Roman Catholic liturgy includes the lighting of candles and ‘prayers’ to Mary. These are additions that are condemned by the principle we have been considering. Similarly, the Salvation Army has dropped Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This subtraction is also condemned by Scripture. In many churches a hymn book from the Moody/Sankey era has been used that includes only a handful of Psalms (the God-breathed word of the Holy Spirit) but has almost 1000 compositions written by men who can make no claim to direct revelation from God. Some of these compositions are of dubious quality and theology, and should be condemned as heresy. Also, most Christians, if they know anything of Church history, would have to admit that the celebration of Christmas and Easter are additions to the worship of God, not required by God. Yet few seem to be willing to accept that these are really vain worship.

It is a vain flattery of the creature to think that he can bring whatever he wants into the worship of God. He cannot take his creaturely inventions in worship and call on the name of Christ to make them holy. It is nothing more than pride on his part to think that he can bring his inventions in art, music, song, literature or drama into the worship of God. God will ask of those proudly displaying their human vanity: “When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?” (Isa 1.12) God will not accept such false worship. In fact, any addition or subtraction is not worship, because it is neither spiritual nor true.

Men seem to feel that they are being sincere in their worship of God, and believe that they are worshipping

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acceptably with their additions and subtractions. But in reality, there is no sense of the humbleness of the creature in much of what passes for worship today. The tendency is for fallen man to imagine that he is qualified to establish the principles of worship and to add or subtract as he sees fit.

But we must remember that God does not need us, or our worship. Worship was not invented for his benefit. Worship is one of the obligations of the covenant. It is an aspect of the Principle of the Portion. What God wants is obedience, our tribute payment, not our rebellion. Worship is intended to humble us before God, to remind us that we are creatures serving the great King. Worship is intended to bring us apart from the world and to remind us that God owns everything. Worship is intended to humble the creature, not to elevate him.

If we do not have Biblical warrant for the tribute brought as worship, it must not be brought to God as tribute. An earthly king who asked for tribute payments to be made in gold would not accept piles of limestone instead, even along with the gold. He would tell the one bringing the limestone to stop cluttering up his throne room. And if the person persisted in bringing the piles of stone, no matter how sincerely he believed that he was doing right, he would be thrown into the dungeon for ignoring the king's command. God will not hold anyone guiltless who persists in bringing the limestone of false worship into his house.

God demonstrates the importance of worship that is spiritual and true by the punishment he gives out for false worship. While most Christians would take greater offence at a minister committing adultery than one offering false worship, God takes both seriously; and it seems that at times he was more severe on people offering him false worship than he was on those committing adultery. A few examples will show how seriously God viewed the practice of worship that was neither spiritual nor true.

- “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” (Lev 10.1-2) Surely their attitude was right. But the form was wrong. It was fire they used, but the fire was not from the right source. As a result, they were consumed with fire from God.
- When Saul became impatient waiting for Samuel, he decided to offer a sacrifice on his own. Just as he did it, who do you think arrived? Samuel, of course. ““You acted foolishly,” Samuel said, “You have not kept the command the LORD you God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.”” (1 Sam 13.13-14) Saul lost his kingdom because he did not do what was proper in worship.
- Do you recall another instance with a king? “But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the alter of incense.” As a result God caused leprosy to break out on his forehead. “King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house – leprous, and excluded from the temple of the LORD.” (11 Chron 26.16-21)

Does God care about correct worship? Is it an important matter to him? The answers are obvious. We are not dealing with a trivial matter. We are not dealing with a single text. The pages of Scripture speak loudly.

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God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

It is no argument to say that God appears to be blessing churches that conduct false worship. God may be dealing differently today with the disobedient within the Church than he did at many times in the past. We have Moses and the Prophets, and we must listen to them. We are not to seek a sign, even a sign of punishment for the disobedient. But not only do we have Moses and the Prophets; we also have the Gospels and the Epistles. We have a complete revelation, we know that God wants, and demands, worship that is both spiritual and true. Who knows how God might bless the Church if we all sought to honour him according to the teachings of Scripture and not according to our own inventions.

Christ did not leave the building of his Church to chance or to the whim of sinful creatures. He prescribed its doctrine and its practice. He left instructions through his Apostles, for the doctrine, government, discipline, and worship of his Church.

But what is acceptable worship? So far, as we have looked at various aspects of the Principle of the Portion, we have seen that God has stated in exact terms what portion of our lives we are to pay as tribute. Similarly, we find that he has defined the elements of worship that we are to bring to him. What he has defined as worship, is worship. Anything else, no matter how beneficial or beautiful, is not worship.

Let us identify these elements from the Bible. However, since the letter to the Hebrews (primarily chapter 10) indicates that the old system of worship was only a shadow to be discontinued with the coming reality of Christ, I will draw only on NT passages to define what constitutes worship in the NT age.

I believe that we can find in the NT eight<sup>3</sup> elements of the worship of God. These are acts of worship wherever and whenever they are performed in a proper spirit. When brought together in the assembly of God's worshipping people, they are not to be intermingled with any other activity of man, no matter how commendable the activity may be at other times.

- **Prayer** – “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Eph 6.18)

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Saviour.” (1 Tim 2.1-3)

- **Public Reading of the Bible** – “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” (1 Tim 4.13)
- **Preaching, Exhortation, and Teaching** – “I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.” (1 Tim 4.1, 2)

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<sup>3</sup> More accurately *ten* elements, when Benedictions/Blessings and Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows are included.



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- **Lord's Supper** – “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread ... For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11.23, 26)
- **Baptism** – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Mt 28.19, 20)
- **Fasting** – “When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. ... But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Mt 6.16-18)

‘While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.’ (Acts 13.2, 3)

- **Tithes and Offerings** – “... not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only ... I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” (Phil 4.15, 18)

“Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income ...” (1 Cor 16.1, 2)

- **Singing (unaccompanied) Psalms**<sup>4</sup> – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs<sup>5</sup> with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Col 3.16)

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (Heb 13.15)

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<sup>4</sup> I will not defend the exclusive Psalm-singing position here, as it would deflect from the purpose of this essay. Regardless of your belief on this matter, you will undoubtedly agree that the NT encourages the singing of Psalms in worship. The view that these are to be unaccompanied by instrumental music will also remain undefended at this time. However, I will ask you to consider that almost every reference to musical instruments in the worship of God occurs in the context of the sacrifice and the Temple. The sacrifice and all associated elements (e.g., sprinkling with hyssop, incense burning, dabbing of blood, and the use of musical instruments) are not to be continued today.

<sup>5</sup> These three terms refer to various types of songs found in the collection of writings used in the sung worship of God by the Jews. Paul was speaking of the Psalter when he used these terms. See for example the use of all three terms in the title to Psalm 76 in the Greek version which Paul probably used. We should not impose late 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretations on these words but understand them as Paul used them.

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### Possessions (Ex 34.20b, 22, 26a)

As part of his vision about the national restoration of Israel, Ezekiel communicates a requirement of the LORD. This requirement states: “when you allot the land as an inheritance, you are to present to the LORD a portion of the land as a sacred district, 25, 000 cubits long and 20, 000 cubits wide; the entire area will be holy.” (Ezek 45.1; see also 48.9)

We can derive a number of applications from this statement:

- An inheritance is given to men. Men are given a right to own property to allocate as they see fit.
- A portion belongs to the LORD. He even uses the word ‘portion’ in this requirement.
- The portion that he wants is to be ‘sacred’ and ‘holy,’ set apart from the common uses of man, wholly belonging to the LORD.
- The portion given to the LORD was to be at the very heart of the inheritance, not a left-over piece at the edge. (Ezek 48.9) In addition it was to be a portion from the best of the land, for it was to be bordered by the portion for the prince. (Ezek 48.21)

These applications of God’s instruction through Ezekiel are consistent with what we have seen thus far in respect to the Principle of the Portion. However, this passage adds an additional dimension – the dimension of property or possessions.

When God gives to men an inheritance of earthly wealth from his great storehouse, he expects that a portion be returned to him. This portion is not to be selected from the remnants or left-overs after we have done as we please with the inheritance. Rather it is to be selected from the firstfruits of our inheritance. The portion that we give to God is to be made from the best that we have. “Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops ...” (Prov 3.9)

The Principle of the Portion as it applies to possessions is first shown by the offerings made by Abel and Cain to the LORD. They both understood the principle that a portion of their possessions was to be brought to the LORD. Abel brought the fat portions, of his firstborn. These were considered to be the best portions that could be offered. That the fat portions are mentioned seems to imply that Cain brought only inferior produce to offer to the LORD. He knew better (Gen 4.7) but was not willing to return the best portion to the LORD.

Abraham also seems to have understood that a portion of his possessions was to be returned to the LORD. After his battle with the kidnappers of Lot, he met Melchizedek “priest of God Most High.” He had a meal with him and was blessed by him and “then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” taken in the battle. (Gen 14.20)

Abraham gave a tenth of the increase in his possessions to the LORD by giving it to the LORD’s priest. This seems to have been the amount to be returned to God by the people of God at the time of the patriarchs.

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For we find that Abraham's grandson planned to give this same tenth portion of the increase of his wealth: 'Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'" (Gen 28.20-22)

How they knew that they were to return a tenth of their possessions to the LORD is not stated in Scripture to this point. But under Moses the regular giving of at least a tenth of one's increase was encoded in the formal laws of Israel. The Israelites were told to give a number of miscellaneous offerings that formalized the Principle of the Portion, such as a sheaf of the first grain harvested and an associated burnt offering (Lev 23.10, 12), the first few crops of an orchard (Lev 19.23-24), a regular offering of bread to be set before the LORD (Lev 24.8), and the allocation of cities for the Levites from among the inheritance of the Israelites. But they were also specifically instructed to give one tenth of all the general increase in their possessions: "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD." (Lev 27.30)

Under the Mosaic law, there were two ways in which the portion returned to the LORD could be given to him. The first was through destruction of the portion offered (e.g., burnt offerings, cities given to destruction). The second was through the priests. When a portion was given to the priests (and Levites) for their use, it would be considered to have been given to the LORD himself. Some examples of this latter means of returning a portion to God are:

- The tribute (from a battle) set apart for the LORD was given to the Levites. (Num 31.41)
- The daily tithes and offerings (or at least a portion kept from the fire of destruction) of the Israelites was for the use of the Levites. (Num 18.8-24)
- Designated cities from the land given to the Israelites as their inheritance. (Num 35.1-5)

In the context of the Mosaic law, giving a portion of one's possessions to the LORD was one of the obligations of the covenant. For example, the bread given to the LORD was to be "a lasting covenant." (Lev 24.8) And the first cities of the conquest were to be given to the LORD as a covenant obligation. (Josh 7.11) The covenantal aspect of the Principle of the Portion is emphasised further by the use of God's covenant name (e.g., Lev 19.10, 25), and by inclusion of the obligation, to return a portion of one's possessions to the LORD, within the broader covenant obligations found in the Ten Commandments (e.g., Lev 19).

The Principle of the Portion applied to man's possessions is carried through into the NT. Paul gives instructions concerning how the portion of our possessions is to be given to the LORD. He indicates that our giving of this portion is to be:

- Regular – "on the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16.2)
- An act of worship – "on the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16.2)
- Proportionate to the increase of our possessions – "in keeping with his income" (1 Cor 16.2)
- Administered by persons appointed in the church (Deacons?) (1 Cor 16.3)
- Generous (at least a tithe?) (2 Cor 9.6-9)
- For the support of those who preach the gospel (1 Cor 9.14)

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- For the benefit of needy in the Church (2 Cor 9.12)

It seems to be clear that we are today under obligation to continue returning to the LORD a portion of our possessions. But there are many who argue that the NT does not specify what portion this should be, and that the amount of the portion should be left to an individual's discretion. Further, they feel that the requirement of a tithe (tenth) was cancelled with the abolition of the ceremonial laws of the OT. They also argue that it is a form of legalism to impose the tithe on NT Christians.

Contrary to this argument, it is likely that the NT does in fact support the continuation of the requirement to return an explicit tithe (tenth) to the LORD. Jesus says: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone." (Luke 11.42) By this instruction to the Pharisees Jesus indicates that it is correct (and necessary) to continue tithing. Of course, as he states, tithing alone is not representative of true holiness!

In addition, the following should be considered:

- Since Abraham (a non-Jew) paid tithes to Melchizedek a non-Aaronic priest, shouldn't we pay tithes to a greater than Melchizedek?
- Why is the requirement to pay a tithe (tenth) considered to be a form of legalism when the requirement not to murder is not?
- What is the reason for questioning the requirement for a tithe? Is it really to protect the gospel from legalism, or is it to rationalize being cheap?
- Can we really state that the requirement to give an explicit portion (e.g., a tithe) was only ceremonial, while the requirement to give a portion is still binding?
- When did it cease being a serious sin to rob God of his right to his required portion of our possessions? (Mal 3.8-10)
- Would God leave the specification of the amount to be given to him to man's discretion?

Whether or not one agrees that a tithe is to be paid by Christians today, no one can deny that the Principle of the Portion still stands, and Christians are required to return a portion of the increase of their possessions to the LORD.

### **Time (Ex 34.21)**

The Principle of the Portion extends to the allotment of time that we are given by God. Just as some people are given the responsibility of stewardship over more possessions than others, some are given more time than others. Yet God requires that we each pay tribute with the same portion of our time. He holds forth his sovereignty by requiring that we return to him one seventh of all the time he gives to us.

There are some in the Church who argue that the requirement to keep holy one day in seven is nothing more than a Mosaic requirement that is to be abandoned in this new-covenant age. The onus is on them to demonstrate that the Principle of the Portion is not perpetually binding in the use of time.

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Scripture indicates otherwise. The Principle of the Portion in respect to the use of time was established long before the Mosaic version of the law was delivered. At the very edge of time-past God established the principle in the order of the universe. He blessed and made holy the seventh day by resting from his labours of creation. In making it holy, he set it apart for a special use. There is no meaning in the words of Scripture if this expression does not establish a principle for man's use of time.

The fact that God established this as a principle for all mankind is supported from Scripture in a number of ways:

- The record of the institution of the Sabbath in the account of creation implies the universality of the requirement to keep the day holy. Man in Adam, not Jew in Moses, was given the Sabbath as an obligation of tribute to the Sovereign creator.
- In Exodus 16 God gives instruction about the gathering of manna. At this point in the flight from Egypt Moses had not yet delivered the summary laws from Sinai nor the associated case and ceremonial laws. Yet Moses makes reference to the Sabbath. He was not instituting a principle here; he was just reminding the people that they were not to look for manna on the Sabbath, because the next day was to be a holy day set apart (from work) to the LORD. They were reminded of a principle that had been established before there was a distinction between Jew and Gentile.

There may be a second aspect in the reference to the Sabbath in Exodus 16. It may refer to the **re-institution** of the **practice** of Sabbath keeping. During their stay in Egypt, the Israelites may not have been able to keep the Sabbath under the repressive regime of slavery. Thus they may have forgotten the proper day on which the week began, and may not have known the correct reckoning for the week. This is probably

- the reason that the fourth commandment starts with the word 'remember,' (Ex 20.8),
- the explanation for the different reasons given for keeping the Sabbath in Exodus 20.11 and Deuteronomy 5.15, and
- why Nehemiah says in his prayer, "You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses." (Neh 9.14)
- The fourth commandment establishes that the Principle of the Portion did not apply only to the Jew but also to the Gentile (slave or free) within the context of Jewish society. Jewish laws (for example requiring circumcision or sacrifices) were not made universally applicable, but the Sabbath was.
- The fourth commandment is not likely to be the *institution* of the Sabbath, since it refers to the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. Exodus 20 does not impose a new institution; it reiterates one that can be traced from the beginning of time.
- The fourth commandment indicates that man is to imitate his maker by observing a day of rest. Man, Jew and Gentile, is created in the image of God. Man, not just Jew, is to imitate God as he bears the image of God.

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- Isaiah, in speaking of salvation for the Gentiles, indicates the requirements for those who will be brought to God's house. It is not those who are circumcised or who forsake leavened bread. Foreigners who "keep the Sabbath without desecrating it" (Isa 56.6) are those who will be acceptable to God. Gentiles, not just Jews, must keep the Sabbath to come into God's house.
- Nehemiah told the merchants of Tyre that they were not to sell their goods on the Sabbath. In a Gentile society under a Gentile king Nehemiah would have a right to impose the Sabbath law on Gentiles only if it is a universal law of God applicable to all men. We do not see him requiring that the men of Tyre bring sacrifices to the temple or that they wear tassels on the hems of their garments.
- Jesus teaches (Mark 2.23-28) the universal nature of the Sabbath in his use of the generic term 'man'. In using this term, he implies that the Sabbath was made not just for Israel but for all mankind. In this he appeals to creation as the basis for the Sabbath, rejecting the idea that it is only a Jewish ceremony.
- Jesus kept the Sabbath holy while he walked among men. And his Church continued this principle by setting apart one day in seven, as they followed the Apostles by observing the memorial of the new creation – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Jews of course had other sabbaths in their ceremonial law. These feasts could possibly be understood also to be cases of the Principle of the Portion. However, they may have had only ceremonial significance, pointing to the rest that was to be obtained in the Saviour.

Regardless of the particular obligations imposed on the Jews during the OT theocracy, the weekly Sabbath is an obligation binding on all men under the Principle of the Portion. The universal application of this principle calls for a cessation of all (unnecessary) work and of all activities that cause others to work on our behalf. In addition, it requires that we rest physically and worship/fellowship in the assembly of the saints.

- "For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it must be put to death. Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day." (Ex 35.2, 3)
- "These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies. There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD." (Lev 23.2-3)

### WITH THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (Exodus 34.27, 28)

The obligations of tribute in Exodus 34 are given by God as the obligations of the covenant: "for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." They were not given later by Moses as interpretations of the Ten Commandments or as applications of them for the nation of Israel. They were given by God on Mount Sinai. Also, they were given at the same time as the Ten Commandments, and in the enactment of the same covenant with which the Ten Commandments are

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associated.

To the extent that the Ten Commandments apply to us today, to that extent the obligations of tribute also apply. Since the Ten Commandments are a perpetual obligation, so also are the obligations of tribute. To the extent that we obey the obligations of tribute, to that extent we keep the covenant. To be covenant keepers and not covenant breakers we are required to pay a tribute: a portion of all that God gives to us is to be given back to God. This is the Principle of the Portion.

### PURPOSE OF THE TRIBUTE OBLIGATIONS (Exodus 34.29-35)

When Moses came down from the mountain, his face continued to shine. It was giving off a temporary reflection from the glory of the LORD that he had seen. This reflection was a sign to the people of Israel that God was pleased with Moses and that he was with him in a special way. Moses was the mediator of the covenant and brought to man, words (vs 27) from God. These words stated the covenant obligations of obedience and tribute. But the reflection of glory in Moses gradually disappeared. As with the reflection of glory, so with the form of the covenant. The form of the covenant delivered by Moses was temporary. (Heb 8)

Jesus, the Word, also came reflecting the glory of God. With him the Father also was well pleased, and he delivered the words of God (e.g., Mt 5-7) as the mediator of a covenant. (Heb 8) But in contrast to Moses, in Jesus the glory is permanent. (John 1.14) And like the glory he reflected, his covenant is permanent and of much greater glory. (2 Cor 3.7-18)

When men see the reflection of the glory of God in the mediator, they are afraid to approach him. (Ex 34.30, Luke 5.1-10; Mark 4.35-41) But the mediator calls them forward to himself to declare to them the requirements of the covenant. (Ex 34.31, 32; Mt 11.25-30) This is a fearful and humbling experience. Nevertheless, men are required to approach him to receive the laws. These laws are intended to remind us that we are finite creatures who are vassals—subject of the great King.

In both instances of the covenant (under Moses and Jesus) the obligations are essentially the same. God did not change the principle of obedience or the requirement to pay tribute.

He established the Principle of the Portion to remind us that we are creatures before a sovereign creator. We are finite, whereas he is infinite. We do not live of ourselves or to ourselves, as he does. We live and move and have our being only because he so wills it. Ultimately, we do not own our lives, possessions, worship, or time. Nothing that we are, or do, or claim to own is excluded from God's sovereign ownership.

Yet we are responsible for the things that he has placed under our feet and in our hands. To the extent that we are faithful in bringing our tribute to God, to that extent he will bless us. His commands and promises are clear in each area of our existence in which we are to render a tribute:

- **Life** – “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the

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pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom 12.1-2)

- **Not to Mix the Unlike** – ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”’ (2 Cor 6.14-16)
- **Firstborn** – “You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn [ones], whose names are written in heaven.” (Heb 12.22, 23)
- **Blood** – “As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” (Acts 21.25)
- **Worship** – ‘Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”’ (Heb 12.28, 29)
- **Possessions** – “Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” (Prov 3.9-10) “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1 Cor 16.2)
- **Time** – “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” (Isa 58.13-14) ‘Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”’ (Mk 2.27-28); “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people ...” (Acts 20.7)

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PORTION

Is the OT law relevant today? Do the obligations of the covenant apply today? Did the obligation to return a tribute to the Great King cease with the first physical coming of Christ? Or does it continue until he returns again to usher in the New Heavens and New Earth?

In this essay I have been arguing that while the Ten Commandments are a summary of the obligations of obedience under the covenant treaty that God made with man, there is an additional set of specific requirements that enunciate the tribute that God requires as part of the fulfilment of the treaty. This tribute is



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to be a portion of all that God has given to us. The Principle of the Portion is a distinct and binding obligation on all men through all time.

The Principle of the Portion did not die with Adam. It still applies to us today. It does not apply only to those who claim to be Christians. It applies to all men and women, of all ages, of all social classes, of all races, and of all religious affiliations. Obedience to God is not optional.

Now for the application! But rather than preach a sermon about how we should apply the Principle of the Portion in our lives, I will instead leave you with some questions that I hope will encourage you to apply this Principle as you walk in holiness before God.

- **Life**
  - Have you addressed seriously the fact that you exist not of yourself or for yourself?
  - Have you overcome the selfishness of the natural man that encourages you to live without concern for anyone but yourself?
  - Is the glory of God your primary purpose for existence?
  - Do you pay tribute to God with your life?
  
- **Not to Mix the Unlike**
  - How do you show that you are part of the separate and holy people of God?
  - Is it your desire and your joy to be with those who are truly Christian?
  - Have you assessed all of your alliances and partnerships to ensure that they are consistent with the covenant obligation to be separate from the world?
  
- **Firstborn**
  - Have you accepted the offer of salvation by the saviour to become part of God's holy household?
  - Are you among those called to be part of the assembly of firstborn ones?
  - Have you believed the message of the Gospel?
  - Is your hope of gaining an inheritance placed in heaven, rather than in this life?
  
- **Blood**
  - Do you abstain from eating blood?
  - Do you appreciate the significance of 'lifeblood' as a symbol of God's sovereignty over life?
  - Have you considered your obligation to the 'lifeblood' as it applies in areas such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment?
  - Do you understand the importance of blood in the atonement?
  
- **Worship**
  - Have you conducted a careful study of the Bible to determine what God is seeking as tribute in worship?
  - Have you assumed that how things are done in your congregation or in the general evangelical church is in fact glorifying God?
  - Do you really seek to honour God in worship as he requires it?
  - Do you really believe that God cares about how you worship him?

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- **Possessions**
  - Are you caught up with the spirit of material acquisitiveness so visible in our culture?
  - Do you have more than you need of the trinkets of this world?
  - Do you tithe from the first fruits of your prosperity?
  - Are you using all that God has given you, as a faithful steward?
  - Would you be willing to give it all up for Christ?
- **Time**
  - Do you work and rest as God requires?
  - Do you use time wisely?
  - Can you say honestly at the end of each day that you have not wasted time in idleness?
  - Do you have a balanced approach to spending time on all the things that place demands on us: family, work, church, social activities, recreation, etc.?
  - How much time do you spend alone with God?

“How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?” (Ps 116.12) Ultimately, I cannot. But in a personal, physical and temporal way I can, by applying the Principle of the Portion in all that I do. By bringing to the LORD the tribute that I owe to him, as a creature, as a saved creature, and as a saved creature who is full of thanks, I acknowledge him to be my Sovereign King. Amen!