

The Law in the Christian's Life

Christians are dead to the law as a covenant of works. Being united alone to Christ who is the end of the law for righteousness, we are justified by faith alone. We are dead to the law, that is, we utterly reject it as a way of being either justified or condemned.

I would like to address the necessary distinction between the law as it is a covenant of works, and the law as it is the rule for the obedience of believers. It is my belief that confusion over this distinction leads into the antinomianism that plagues the churches today.

Before I begin, let me ask you some questions. How long is it since you heard your minister preach a series of sermons on the law? How long since you have found yourself confronted and convicted of sin by the law of God. Have you been slain by the law, and driven to Christ as a penitent soul for forgiveness, crying out with longing for his Spirit to work true holiness of life in you, that we might walk in new obedience to his law as the way of love and gratitude to him? Antinomianism is an attack upon Christianity!

So I'd like to discuss this question of antinomianism, and particularly that distinction between the law as a covenant of works and the law as the rule of obedience. Now when I use the term 'law', I would like you to assume I'm referring to the moral law or the 10 commandments.

The law has a place in our life as sinners and as saints. God wrote the moral law first of all on the heart of mankind at creation. It was again written by the finger of God on the two tables of stone on Mt Sinai; and it is written by the finger of God dipped in the blood of Christ upon the fleshly tables of our heart in regeneration and conversion (Rom.2:14-15, Exo.20, Heb. 10:16, 1 John 5:2-3). We must, therefore meet this law we could say, on both sides of the cross. As unconverted sinners we meet the law in one way, and we meet it again in a different way upon our conversion to Christ.

It is my intention to demonstrate how Christians are, at one and the same time, completely dead to the law in a certain way, and very much alive to the law in another way. It is our contention that Christians are dead to the law as it is the covenant of works, but alive to the law as their rule of obedience and thankfulness.

So let us first of all look at the sense in which we are dead to the law. Paul writes: "we are not under the law" (Rom 6:15), and "through the law and dead to the law" (Gal.2:19). What he means is that the Christian is not under the law as a covenant of works. Here we address the law from a specific view point. This is law as it stands on the dark side of the cross "commanding and cursing the unrighteous law breaker. This is law speaking outside Christ and his righteousness, on the hell-ward side of the cross. This is law as the covenant of works. Unregenerate sinners are, most assuredly, alive to the law as the covenant of works.

So let's work our way through that first point a little bit. As human beings, our prior and most fundamental relation to God is through the law. What I'm getting at is this; the law is not an addendum to the life of man as a rational, moral creature who is related to God. The law is part of our covenantal relation to God. It defines the legal parameters of the relationship. This, we confess in our Westminster Confession, Chapter 19 section 1: God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it: and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

Moreover, the law defines a right relation to God. In the way of personal, entire, perpetual obedience (love for God) there is life under the blessing of the God through the law upon the righteous. But in the way of disobedience (hatred of God) there is only death under God's curse through his law upon the unrighteous. "The man that doeth those things, shall live by them" (Romans 10:5, Gal.3:12) and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom.6:23). That is what we see so clearly in Genes 2:17: "The day you eat of it (in other words, the day you transgress against the revealed will and the law of God) you shall surely die".

Now we understand of course, that the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a particular command, added to the law for a specific purpose. We understand that, but God is laying down a fundamental principle in those words. It is this, "You are related to me through law, and if you transgress my law you die." At this most fundamental level, God defines life in terms of righteousness. A right or wrong legal standing and relationship to God, our creator, law giver and judge, determines whether we have "life" or are "existing in the realm of death". That is so fundamental to what it means to be a human being and to "human life" that it is hard to imagine anybody not understanding it, and particularly to imagine anybody who is a Christian denying it.

Our covenantal relationship to God under the law was not destroyed, nor were its demands diminished when we all fell

into the estate of sin and misery in Adam, our covenantal Head (Rom.5:12-14). It is also what Paul meant in Galatians 3:12, when he said "the man that doeth them," (that is the commands of God in the law, the moral law), "shall live in them". He goes on to say in Galatians 3:24: "Cursed is everyone that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them". On that basis and that understanding of our relationship to God through his law, in Romans 3:19 he writes: "we know that all things so ever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law!"

That is the relationship mankind has to law, outside of Christ. The law speaks to us as "them that are under the law." Romans 3 shows us that this true for Jew and Gentile alike, therefore it cannot be the temporary Ceremonial and Judicial laws. It is the moral law, the law of nature and creation. Paul teaches these things for a purpose; namely "that every mouth may be stopped, and that all the world may become guilty before God." That is the law as a covenant of works. Now on that basis, the Westminster Larger Catechism 93 says this: The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding, everyone to personal, perfect, perpetual conformity and obedience there unto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man soul and body, and in the performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which man owes to God and man, promising life on the fulfilling and threatening death under the breach of it.

Our doctrinal standards as Presbyterians not only describe the law as fundamental to the relationship of man to God as first created, but also as fallen and unrighteous. The law addresses us in exactly the same way as is addressed us prior to the fall.

So what does the fall into sin mean then, in relation to the law? It means that is absolutely impossible for we totally depraved sinners, who are fundamentally unrighteous and cursed by the law to live through the law! It is an utter impossibility for us to earn our way back into God's favour through works of obedience done to that law. When the law is as the broken covenant of works! It sets the mount of God ablaze with consuming holiness, our world quakes, there is thunder and lightning "and it denounces righteous indignation and judgment upon us as law-breakers. It threatens, yea promises, to open the mouth of hell to swallow us whole, unless we fulfill its demands! Now that is the relationship in which every single man, woman and child stands toward God under the law, on the hell-ward side of the cross!

That is fundamentally important. If that is denied, or finds no place in our theology, we lose the legal basis for the covenant of grace, and the spiritual backdrop for the gospel of free grace. And we must surely lose something of the determination and urgency to preach the righteousness of Christ alone, and call sinners to him with impassioned faithfulness! The law, you see, defines not only our relationship to God, but our dependence upon his mercy, and our need of Christ and his gospel.

That is the law on the hell-ward side of the cross. It says only one thing to us as sinners, Galatians 3:24 "cursed is everyone that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them". The fact of the matter, and it is a fact, is that none of us by nature can or will keep the law of God. We are lost and cursed, dead and destined for hell "under the law" on the hell-ward side of the cross!

But we are ALIVE to the law in another way on the hell-ward side of the cross! If you are born again, you will think it incredibly stupid "but the unregenerate man embraces the law as his religion of choice! He views the law as a friend, his helper, his hope, his way of salvation! The law might be thundering the wrath and curse of God down upon him, but he hears it saying: "You are unrighteous, you need more righteousness, work harder, do more works, do them more perfectly! earn your way back into life by the works of the law!" That is what he hears! That is what produces this world's religions, and false Christianity too.

The unconverted soul is alive to the law for righteousness. It is, of course, impossible for total depravity to keep God's law (Romans 7:8), but total depravity is religious. It has its religion! It is just so important, to understand this. The law is still very much a part of the human psyche "its working surfaces in or conscience (Rom.2:14-15). By nature our allegiance, as religious creatures, is to the law. That is still our way of relating to God. That is our spiritual default. When a sense of the Divine is evoked, we fire up within the law! We instinctively look to the law and ask what we need to do to be acceptable to God. What do I need to do to appease God? What do I need to do to earn my way into God's favour? These are our questions, because we are alive to the law!

Now that innate, default position of ours as sinners is the false gospel. Now this, I think is crucial to understand; the false gospel of salvation by works lives in our hearts. We are born with it. It is native to us. It is instinctive for us. It is part of the warp and woof of our religious nature. Thomas Boston, had it right when he wrote: "You can't beat a sinner off the law with any argument, only the Holy Spirit who brings conversion, and opens the eyes of the understanding, can ever beat the sinner off the law". We are alive to the law by nature. We are hanging on to it. We are clinging to it. We are desperately trying to climb up those ten commandments into heaven. That is why the way of salvation, in the natural man's view, has to be through the works of the law that he himself performs.

This is the deadly paradox of sin; on the one hand conscience tells us that the law is condemning us, yet we give ourselves over to its demands. It that were not bad enough! We do that with the moral law "and when we hear the call of the gospel we immediately turn faith and repentance into works that we must now keep as well. We instinctively think it is

by willing and running, and not of God that shows mercy! That is, I believe, the root of all "free-willism" and Arminianism is the religion of law Christianized.

Paul is dealing with his deliverance from this, and the true gospel over against it in Romans and Galatians. He describes how he died to the idea that he must be either condemned or justified by his own law keeping. "I through the law," he says "am dead to the law, that I might live unto God" (Gal.2:19). Paul was seeking life under the law as a covenant of works; condemned by it, he was going about to produce his own righteousness. He was a busy little Pharisee "beaving away in his self-religious works; until the commandment came, sin revived, and he died (Romans 7:9) The law slew him and locked him up to God's way of salvation - by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone!

That is the context of this antithesis between being "under the law" and "under grace". God's way of salvation you see is an adaptation of the covenant of works. It is not our works helped along by God's grace! Nor is it God's grace helped along by our works! God's way of salvation is an opposite, antithetical way. It is by way of the covenant of grace. That is a covenant made not with all mankind in the first Adam, but with Christ as, the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed. God's way of salvation, you see, locks salvation up into Christ alone! Justice looks away from sinners to their Surety! Mercy sends that Surety, the Son, Jesus Christ, to fulfill all the demands of the broken covenant of works in their behalf. He, not they - Christ, and Christ alone, must fulfill the law and bears its curse. He and he alone must work for them a complete and eternal righteousness. And it is that righteousness - his righteousness which God imputes to ungodly sinners for their justification. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness! God's way is to take his righteousness (as the only and complete basis of justification), and reckon it to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly" through faith alone (Rom.4:5).

That is God's way of justification. It is based upon the works of Jesus Christ alone. It is for him that worketh not but believeth! And that faith itself is a gift bestowed in regeneration (Ephesians 2:1-9). God's way of salvation is rightly called the covenant of grace! For it bestows salvation as the freest gift, to the most undeserving sinners, on no other basis than the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Now in that context, the distinction between the law as the covenant of works and the covenant of grace and salvation freely given in Jesus Christ, is where the law and the gospel meet. That is where the evangelical work of the law fits. The law in the hand of the Spirit is one instrument used in converting the soul from striving for self-righteousness under the covenant of works, unto the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace. The law wielded by the Spirit of God serves that critical function. It brings the soul to despair of its natural religion of works. It breaks, slays and ploughs up the proud soul. It brings the convinced sinners to Jesus Christ through true conversion, as one who renounce self and all its own works of every sort to believe upon Jesus Christ alone for righteousness. So in Larger Catechism 95 we confess: the moral law is of use to all men, to inform them of the holy nature and will of God, and of their duty, binding them to walk accordingly, to convince them of their disability to keep it, and of the sinful pollution of their nature, hearts and lives, and to humble them in the sense of their sin and misery, and thereby help them to a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ and of the perfection of his obedience.

In this relation, the law is a cruel task master. The law knows no mercy. The law terrifies, breaks, kills; it strips us of every vestige of self-reliance and self righteousness, and it drives us relentlessly to Jesus Christ as the end of the law for righteousness (Romans 10:4). The law is the school master to bring us to Jesus Christ that we might be justified by faith alone. That is the law. And that is its work as a covenant of works. The law can't produce a saving knowledge of God or Jesus Christ that belongs to the gospel. The Holy Spirit uses the law to show us our inability and guilt, and to shut us up to faith in Christ alone.

So we say, without any equivocation, we believe, and we teach, that having been brought by the law to the gospel, and handed over into the righteousness of Jesus Christ received by faith alone, the Christian is dead to the law, as a covenant of works. The Christian is not under the law in that sense anymore, he is not under the law to be either justified or condemned by it. In this sense the Christian is most emphatically not under law, he is under grace.

So when it comes to the Christian's legal state and standing before God, the law has nothing to say. It cannot condemn the justified sinner. Christ has forever silenced it! Christ has zipped the mouth of the curse. The Christian, you see, having received the righteousness of Christ imputed to him by grace alone, through faith alone, is as righteous as he will ever be. Even when he arrives in heaven, and through the resurrection is made perfect in holiness, he will never be more righteous than he is right now! Why? Because he has the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to him in its totality "he appears in Christ, clothed in the righteousness of God". Now that is the truth. In that sense the Christian is dead to the law "he has nothing to do with law in that sense. The law cannot speak to him "he is deaf to its voice. The law is not dead. He is dead to it, both to its curse and to its demands that he produce his own righteousness for justification before God. His confession is: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ that I might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16). He exults: "I conclude that I am justified by faith, without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28). "For I through the law and dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law,

then Christ is dead in vain (Galatians 2:19-21). Under grace, (but with Satan, his own sins, his accusing conscience, and the world calling the curse of the law down upon him - he cries: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for me. Who shall separate me from the love of Christ? Nay, in all these things I am more than a conqueror through him that loved me" (Rom.8).

The Christian is dead to the law in that sense. He is dead to it as a covenant of works, and cannot be either justified or condemned by it. So that in the first place.

Of course, we must go on to see how this does not mean that the law has no place in the Christian's life. We must proceed to show how the justified believer is very much alive to the law in another, different sense. We must go on to see how he meets the law on the heavenward side of the cross! How he meets it as a new creature and in a whole new relation. How, from the bloodstained hands of Jesus he receives the law into his heart as his way of thankfulness. How he sees the way of new obedience and gratitude stretching out before him as the highway of holiness all the way to the gates of the celestial city! How he has the one he loves and to whom he owes all calling him each step of the way: "Take up your cross and follow me... be more and more conformed to my gracious image, walk more and more closely with me with a tender conscience being led by my Holy Spirit, walk as I walked, walk in new obedience with me, in love to our Father in heaven. For this is the way we show our love to our Father, we keep his commandments, and the commandments of God are not grievous to us" (1 John 5:3). How he is kept by grace and in grace! How his Lord is saying to him, when you err into sin "do not rush back under the law to try to make amends" remain in the light, hold fast to grace, stay in the gospel way, "confess your sins, for he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

That is his new way of living. He walks as a justified sinner (not under the law), upon the law, as Christ's highway of holiness, gratitude and love - all the way to heaven.

The apostle Paul goes on to instruct us about the Christian's relation to the law. He places us, as justified saints, on the heavenward side of the cross. We are justified by faith and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and given access by faith into this grace wherein we stand (Romans 5:1-2). "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). That is our blessed position in Christ Jesus.

In this blessed position, Jesus Christ introduces us to the law as our rule of thankfulness. From the blood stained hands of our Lord Jesus, we receive it. Our Redeemer has placed us in the highway of holiness, to walk in the Spirit with Him, all the way to heaven. He compels us by love to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him in this way of new obedience! The law of God has not changed, but we and our relation to the law certainly have. We now obey "not in order to be saved, but because we have been renewed in the image of Jesus Christ. We have become disciples of the Holy One, and that makes all the difference.

Our life has become a response to the One who says: "If you love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We are not legalists "we know we fall short. But we do want to render wholehearted, universal, gospel obedience to our Saviour God! Law and Love

A strand of Antinomianism is teaching that when Jesus says "my commandments" He is doing away with the ten commandments and replacing them with "the law of love." That is a foolish and dangerous error. When Jesus commands His disciples to love one another, He is demonstrating the spirituality of the law. That is evident from Romans 13:8-10, where we read: "love is the fulfilling of the law." The apostle explains himself: For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

The law is love in practice. We should forever banish the notion that law and love are opposed. Union and communion with Christ makes it possible for us to begin to love again. That explains why gospel obedience is an evidence of saving faith. By this we know that we know Him. How? If we keep His commandments. Whoever says I know Him and keeps not His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him (1 John 2:3,4).

Our Westminster Larger Catechism teaches us to confess, therefore, that, the law of God is of special use [to the regenerate], to show them how much they are bound to Christ, for his fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness, and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves thereunto as the rule of their obedience.

Christian freedom obliges us to take even greater care to conform ourselves to our rule of thankfulness! Under Law to Christ

The New Testament scriptures unfold a decidedly spiritual perspective on law keeping. In the time of the law[1] the call was to walk in the "statutes, commandments and judgments" of God, whereas in these gospel times the call is focused

upon following Christ, walking in, and being led by, the Spirit.[2] Christ's coming and the outpouring of the Spirit into the church has brought the church into its spiritual maturity (Galatians 3 and 4:1-7).

Now, two things can be said about our blessed relation to the law in and through Christ. First, our connection to the law as Christians is as new creatures; recreated in the image of Christ and indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. Our law keeping, as does our whole life, takes place in union and communion with Christ and His grace through faith. He is the fruitful vine, we are the branches. Second, we receive what Jesus Christ has unfolded into all its searching spirituality. Think about what that means for you as a Christian. You meet the law, in Jesus Christ, as a new creature "as a free man or woman. You now embrace the law as "the perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25). The law of the Spirit of life in Christ has made you free from the law of sin and death. You stand before God as righteous and justified; you are a free born child of God. But now we see that this freedom has more to it. You are not only justified, you are also sanctified! Yes, you are free from the guilt and the curse of the law; but in Jesus Christ as a new creature you are free from bondage and slavery to sin also. Christ has equipped you with newness of life through His Spirit and grace to walk in new obedience. You are free from bondage and slavery to disobedience.

That does not mean that you are free from all remaining corruption and sin; that is a different thing. But you are no longer totally depraved and incapable of responding in faith and obedience. You are a new creature "wonderfully new. You walk abroad in God's kingdom, favour and love, and you meet the law there as your friend, not your enemy; as your counsellor, not something to be feared and fled from. You can embrace the law, as one who is justified, covered in the righteousness of Christ. You can set yourself, as a new creature in the assurance of God's love and favour, to pursue holiness. You desire so to walk in the Spirit of Christ that the perfect law of liberty is worked out into godliness in every nook and cranny of your life. And you do that in the knowledge that your failures will not condemn you, but rather that in the way of daily confession and repentance under the Fatherly chastening of God, you will be led on the highway of holiness all the way to heaven. Every step of the way on that highway of holiness you can say with David: "O how love I thy law!" You are free to love and serve your Saviour God!

You meet the law also as somebody who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God sent to you from the Father and the Son. Just think of Him. He is the Spirit of God, the holy God. The Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of holiness He is called. He is the Spirit of sanctification, the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of freedom. You have this Holy Spirit within you to influence, guide and lead you into new obedience. That is His work. He is the sanctifier of the people of God. He operates in answer to Jesus Christ's prayer: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

A further element of your newness as a Christian is that you are designed to step into the law as your delight. All the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ are led by the Spirit in such a way that they hear their Redeemer calling them to "deny yourself, and take up your cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). That cross is, of course, the cross of total self-denying dedication to the revealed will of the Father. That is what our life is as Christians, on the heavenward side of the cross. The spirit of law keeping

There is a definite spirit to the Christian's law-keeping. It is not legalistic "but it is conscientious. The legalistic Jews said, a man does not put away his wife without a cause, or commit adultery, he is free of any transgression of the 7th commandment. The Lord Jesus says, in effect, "No, that is not true. Let me tell you about the law. This is what it always meant, and I have come to bring it to light. "If any man looks upon a woman, to lust after her in his heart, he has committed adultery already with her in his heart." Now that is the law. Its demands are much deeper and more spiritual than the unregenerate is want to allow. It searches the heart. It requires that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbour as ourself. The Lord Jesus brings us to the spiritual significance of the law. And we must see that the Spirit of Christ is poured into the Christian church so that we might never deny reality. That leading of the Spirit makes full conscience of God's law in its searching, spiritual demands; and, in the process, it moves us to abide in Christ alone for both pardon and grace.

This is true for us as Christians in a way that was not possible for the Old Testament saints prior to the outpouring of the Spirit. We see more. It is like looking into the deep, clear pond and seeing further and further down into what holiness and love actually is. The Spirit leads us into that life in Christ. He shows us what it means to live as lovers of God. Now that is what Jesus was doing when He expounded on the law. That is what He hands to us. We receive it not as legalists thinking that we can keep it and become proud. We receive it with a deep gratitude to the One who has fulfilled it for our righteousness, and with a wholehearted commitment to walk in gratitude to Him.

As new creatures we come upon the law of God, through Jesus Christ. He puts it in our thankful hands. His own blood stained and pierced hand holds it forth, and we reach out to take a hold of it because we are His disciples. Follow me, says He. And we walk with Him in the way of love for God "the way of obedience. That transaction between the law and our life takes place in the blood of Christ. In this light we ask: "How then shall I live?" And the answer is given by Christ: "I have redeemed you from sin. And what is sin? Sin is the transgression of the law." (1 John 3:4). Those words are written over our life. "I have redeemed you from sin." That truth fills our consciousness, pervades our souls, and enlivens our conscience. And we respond: I want to obey God. I hate to offend and disobey God. Why? Not because I'm trying to earn my salvation, not because I want to somehow get to heaven by my obedience, but because Jesus Christ, God become flesh, has redeemed me from sin and restored me to the love of God.

If you ask the Christian: "Are you serious about keeping God's law?" the answer should be: "Of course I am, because transgression of that law, and all its holy spiritual depth and significance, is sin and a display of hatred of the God who so loved me." How can I respond that way to such love? How can I sin against the One who hands me the law with His own blood stained hand, and says to me, "Do you love me? Do you understand what I've done for you? Do you understand what you are in me?" How can I trample under foot the precious blood of the Lamb? The response of the Christian is: "Speak Lord, for your servant hears. Lord, show me how to love and live."

Christ leads us by His Spirit into obedience. He places us upon a highway of holiness that stretches all the way from conversion to heaven's door. As we walk in that way, we walk in a blood sprinkled way "in thankful obedience. That is what motivates gospel obedience. That is what strengthens against temptation in the way. That is what brings us back again, and again, and again, through repentance to Jesus Christ "for He abides in the love for God!

"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous." (1 John 5:3)

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FOOTNOTES

1. Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 By "law" in this place is meant the Mosaic ceremonial and judicial laws which were given to Israel, for a time, as a church in its infancy to teach what sin is and to lock them up to faith in Christ to come; see Galatians 3:19-4:7.

2. Romans 8:1-16; II Corinthians 3:6-8, 17 -18; Galatians 3:3-5, 5:16-25, etc.