

QUESTION 16

The Precepts that Pertain to Faith, Knowledge, and Understanding

Next we have to consider the precepts that pertain to what has gone before. And on this topic there are two questions: (1) What are the precepts pertaining to faith? (2) What are the precepts pertaining to the gifts of knowledge and understanding?

Article 1

Should precepts about having faith been given in the Old Law?

It seems that precepts about having faith should have been given in the Old Law (*in veteri lege dari debuerint praecepta credendi*):

Objection 1: A precept has to do with what is fitting and necessary. But it is especially necessary for a man to have faith—this according to Hebrews 11:6 (“Without faith it is impossible to please God”). Therefore, it is especially necessary for precepts about faith to be given.

Objection 2: As has been explained above (*ST* 1-2, a. 107, a. 3), the New Testament is contained in the Old Testament in the way that what is prefigured is contained in its figure. But explicit commandments about faith are posited in the New Testament, as is clear from John 14:1, “You believe in God, believe also in me.” Therefore, it seems that some precepts about faith should likewise have been given in the Old Law.

Objection 3: Commanding an act of virtue has the same character as prohibiting the opposed vices. But in the Old Law there are many precepts that prohibit unbelief. For instance, Exodus 20:3 says, “You shall not have strange gods before me.” And, again, Deuteronomy 13:1-3 commands that the people not listen to the words of any prophet or dreamer who wishes to divert them from faith in God. Therefore, in the Old Law precepts about faith should likewise have been given.

Objection 4: As was explained above (q. 3, a. 1), confessing is an act of faith. But precepts about confessing and promulgating the Faith are given in the Old Law. For instance, in Exodus 12:26-27 it is commanded that they give an explanation of the Paschal observance when their children ask about it; and in Deuteronomy 13 it is commanded that anyone who spreads a teaching contrary to the Faith should be killed. Therefore, the Old Law should have contained precepts about faith.

Objection 5: All the books of the Old Testament are contained under the Old Law; hence, in John 15:25 our Lord says that it is written in the Law, “They have hated me without cause,” even though this is written in one of the Psalms (34:19). But Ecclesiasticus 2:8 says, “You who fear the Lord, believe Him.” Therefore, precepts about faith should have been given in the Old Law.

But contrary to this: In Romans 3:27 the Apostle calls the Old Law the “law of works” and divides it off from the “law of faith.” Therefore, it was not the case that in the Old Law there should be precepts handed down about faith.

I respond: A law is imposed by a lord only on his own subjects, and so the precepts of any law presuppose that the recipient of the law is subject to the one who is giving the law.

Now the first sort of subjection of a man to God is through faith—this according to Hebrews 11:6 (“One who approaches God must believe that He exists”). And so faith is presupposed by the precepts of the Law. This is why in Exodus 20:2 what pertains to faith is given before the precepts of the Law, when it says, “I am the Lord your God, who led you out of the land of Egypt.” And, similarly, Deuteronomy 6:4 first says, “Listen, O Israel, the Lord your God is one,” and immediately thereafter begins to talk about the precepts.

However, since there are many things contained in the Faith that are ordered to the faith by which we believe that God exists—which, as has been explained (q. 1, a. 7), is the first and most important of all the things to taken on faith (*est primum et principale inter omnia credibilia*)—it follows that, once

faith in God, through which the human mind submits to God, is presupposed, precepts can be given about the other things to be taken on faith.

Thus, Augustine, commenting on John 15:2 (“This is my commandment”) in *Super Ioannem*, points out that we have received many commandments about faith (*quod plurima sunt nobis de fide mandata*). However, in the Old Law there were no hidden aspects of the Faith that had to be explained to the people (*non erant secreta fidei populo exponenda*). And so, with faith in the one God assumed, there were no other precepts given in the Old Law about what is to be taken on faith.

Reply to objection 1: Faith is necessary as a starting point (*principium*) of the spiritual life. And so it is presupposed by the reception of the Law.

Reply to objection 2: Here our Lord is likewise (a) *presupposing* something about faith, viz., the faith in the one God, when He says, “You believe in God,” and (b) *commanding* something, viz., faith in the Incarnation, through which there is one who is God and man. Now this explication of faith belongs to the Faith of the New Testament; and this is why He adds, “Believe also in me.”

Reply to objection 3: The precepts containing prohibitions (*praecepta prohibitiva*) have to do with sins that corrupt virtue. But as was explained above (q. 10, a. 5), virtues are corrupted by particular defects. And so, presupposing faith in the one God, the Old Law had to give precepts containing prohibitions through which men would be held back from those particular defects by which their faith could be corrupted.

Reply to objection 4: Confessing or teaching the Faith likewise presupposes a man’s submission to God through faith. And so in the Old Law precepts about confessing and teaching the Faith could be handed down instead of precepts about faith itself.

Reply to objection 5: In the cited passage the faith through which we believe that God exists is likewise being presupposed. Hence, the passage begins with, “You who fear the Lord...,” and this fear cannot exist without faith. What is then added, viz., “... believe Him,” should be thought of as referring to certain specific things to be taken on faith, and principally those things that God promises to those who obey Him. Hence, it adds, “... and your reward shall not be made void.”

Article 2

Are the precepts pertaining to knowledge and understanding handed down appropriately in the Old Law?

It seems that the precepts pertaining to knowledge and understanding are not handed down appropriately in the Old Law:

Objection 1: Knowledge and understanding have to do with cognition. But cognition precedes and directs action. Therefore, precepts pertaining to knowledge and understanding should precede precepts pertaining to action. Therefore, since the precepts of the Law are the precepts of the Decalogue, it seems that there should have been some precepts pertaining to knowledge and understanding handed down among the precepts of the Decalogue

Objection 2: Learning (*disciplina*) precedes teaching (*doctrina*), since a man learns from another before he teaches another. But in the Old Law some precepts are given about teaching, both affirmative—e.g., Deuteronomy 4:9 commands, “You shall teach your children and your children’s children”—and negative—e.g., Deuteronomy 4:2 says, “You shall not add to the word which I speak to you, and you shall not take away from it.” Therefore, it seems that some precepts which induce a man to learn should have been given.

Objection 3: Knowledge and understanding seem more necessary for a priest than for a king. Hence, Malachi 2:7 says, “The lips of the priests safeguard knowledge, and they seek the Law from his

mouth.” And Hosea 4:6 says, “Because you have rejected knowledge, I will likewise reject you, lest you execute your priesthood for me.” But as is clear from Deuteronomy 17:18-19, the king is commanded to acquire knowledge of the Law. Therefore, it should have been commanded all the more in the Law that the priests learn the Law.

Objection 4: Meditation on what pertains to knowledge and understanding cannot take place in one’s sleep (*meditatio non potest esse in dormiendo*). It is likewise impeded by extraneous actions. Therefore, it was inappropriate for Deuteronomy 6:7 to command, “You shall meditate on these things while sitting in your house and walking on your journey, while you are sleeping and while you are rising.” Therefore, the precepts pertaining to knowledge and understanding are not appropriately handed down in the Old Law.

But contrary to this: Deuteronomy 4:6 says, “Everyone who hears these precepts will say, ‘Behold a wise and discerning people!’”

I respond: There are three things that can be considered concerning knowledge and understanding: (a) their *acquisition*, (b) the *use* made of them, and (c) their *conservation*.

The *acquisition* of knowledge and understanding comes about through teaching and learning. And both of these are commanded in the Law. For instance, Deuteronomy 6:6 says, “These words that I command you shall be in your heart,” and this has to do with learning, since it belongs to a learner (*discipulus*) that he should fix his heart on what is being said. On the other hand, what is added, “And you will tell them to your children,” has to do with teaching.

Now the *use* of knowledge or understanding consists in meditating on what one knows or understands. And it is on this score that it is added, “You shall meditate on these things while sitting in your house, etc.”

On the other hand, *conservation* is effected through memory. And on this score it adds, “And you shall tie them as a sign on your hand, and they shall exist and move between your eyes, and you shall write them on your doorpost and on the doors of your house.” All these things signify the perpetual memory of God’s commandments, since it is impossible for things to slip from our memory when they are continually present to our senses—either by touch, as with things that we hold in our hand, or by sight, as with things that we have continually before our mind’s eye—or when they are things to which we have to return often, like the door of our house. And Deuteronomy 4:9 says more explicitly, “Do not forget the words your eyes have seen, and do not let them slip from your heart all the days of your life.”

And these commandments are found even more abundantly in the New Testament, both in the teaching of the Gospel and in the apostolic teaching.

Reply to objection 1: As Deuteronomy 4:6 says, “This is your wisdom and your understanding before the peoples,” from which we gather that the knowledge and understanding of God’s faithful ones has to do with the precepts of the Law. And so first the precepts of the Law had to be proposed, and then afterwards men had to be led to the knowledge and understanding of them. And so the precepts in question here did not have to be posited among the precepts of the Decalogue, which come first.

Reply to objection 2: As has been explained, in the Law there are precepts that have to do with learning. Still, teaching is commanded in a more explicit way than learning is. For teaching belongs to the preeminent people (*maiores*), who are their own masters (*sunt sui iuris*) existing directly under the Law and to whom the precepts of the Law have to be given. Learning, on the other hand, belongs to the ordinary people, to whom the precepts of the Law have to come by the mediation of the preeminent people (*per maiores*).

Reply to objection 3: Knowledge of the Law is so closely connected with the office of the priest that being called to that office is understood together with also being called to have knowledge of the Law. And so it was unnecessary for special precepts to be given about the instruction of the priests.

By contrast, the teaching of the Law of God is not as closely joined to the kingly office, since it is in temporal matters that the king is set over the people. And so it is specifically commanded that the king

be instructed by the priests about what belongs to God's Law.

Reply to objection 4: The precept in question should be understood to be saying not that a man is to meditate on God's law while sleeping (*quod homo dormiendo meditetur de lege Dei*), but that he is to meditate on God's law while sleepy, i.e., while going to sleep (*dormiens, idest vadens dormitum*). For men have better phantasms because of this, since, as the Philosopher explains in *Ethics* 1, the relevant movements pass from being waking movements to being movements in sleep (*pertranseunt motus ab vigilantibus ad dormientes*).

Similarly, it is likewise commanded that one is to meditate on the Law in each of his acts, not in the sense that he is always to be thinking of the Law in actuality, but in the sense that everything that he does is to be moderated by the Law.