

Chapter 12

The Formula for the King to Command Himself

This chapter addresses another formula New Calvinists use to avoid making biblical commands to us, and they adopted this from the Forum as well. The basic idea is: *the imperative command is grounded in the indicative event*. Robert Brinsmead stated it this way:

A *historical is* must not be turned into an *ought*. We have no right to turn an indicative historical narrative into imperative ecclesiastical precepts without a clear word from the Lord.⁸⁷

The indicative/imperative schema is a major staple of Forum/New Calvinist thought and doctrine. It teaches that all obedience “flows” (notice the passivity of terms often used) from a deeper and deeper understanding of our salvation and the works Christ accomplished for us. New Calvinist Chad Bresson states it this way:

We cannot make the leap from description to commandment without violating the gist of the text. Once we allow these descriptions their place in the text, we begin to realize that it is our union in Christ and what has been done for us in Christ that is the point of the entire canon. Our actions merely “flow” [emphasis NOT author of this book] from the one great indicative in Christ.⁸⁸

In other words, obedience “merely flow(s)” from understanding the historical salvific acts of Christ. New Calvinists claim that indicative, saving acts of Christ or other redemptive-like texts always precede commands in the Bible to remind us that obedience flows from our union with Christ and not “a leap from

description to command.” In so many words, just focus on what Christ has done for us and wait on the results. This is a third way New Calvinists view the law. *law negative*, *law positive*, and we will call this *law indicative*. So far, everything but “....hear these words of mine and put them into practice” (Matthew 7:24). New Calvinists list many examples of the indicative/imperative in Scripture, but one by the Forum should suffice:

When Christ directed the woman taken in adultery, “go, and sin no more,” He was commanding her to live the new life of holiness and purity. But this new life of sanctification was only possible as she first grasped the hope of justification that was given her in the promise of Christ, “Neither do I condemn thee John 8:11. The liberating decree of “no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1) sets the soul free to run the way of God’s commandments.”⁸⁹

We will pause here to examine this New Calvinist claim starting with an explanation of how the indicative/imperative works in the normal reading of Scripture. The following information comes from pastor Dennis McCallum:

The terms indicative and imperative refer to two different verb moods commonly used by the New Testament authors in their teaching on sanctification....

What is a Verb Mood?

The mood of a verb designates the relationship of the verb’s action relative to reality. The following is a simple list of moods of verbs in the New Testament and what they generally signify:

1. indicative - mood of certainty, actuality
2. subjunctive - mood of probability
3. optative - mood of possibility
4. imperative - mood of command

As the list indicates, the New Testament uses indicative statements when discussing what God has done, is doing or will do. Imperative statements are used when saying what we should do. It is important to realize, not only that both moods are present in the Bible, but that there is a specific relationship between these two moods in the area of sanctification. Namely, what God commands us to do (the imperative) is based upon what He has done, is doing or will do (the indicatives). God is signifying by this consistent pattern that sanctification depends on God, but involves human volition and cooperation.

McCallum further explains with this Pauline example among many:

Philippians 2:12b-13. . .work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

In this example, we see that the imperative command to work out our salvation is based on the fact that God is at work in us. The use of the word "for" indicates dependence or causality. Let me throw in another example by Richard E. Howard:

“Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they were (ind.) sanctified in Christ and ‘holy ones’ by calling (1:2), to whom Christ had become (ind.) righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30) and who had been (ind.)

washed, sanctified, and justified in the Lord Jesus (6:11). He asked them if they did not know that they as a church were (ind.) the temple of God and their individual bodies were (ind.) the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19). Yet, because of the tragic condition in the Corinthian church, he urged (imp.) them to glorify God in their bodies (6: 20) and to pursue love (14:1)."

New Calvinists would not agree totally in regard to this definition. They would agree whole heartily to the massive biblical pattern of imperatives preceded by God's indicatives in the Pauline epistles. But they would disagree with this part: "God is signifying by this consistent pattern that sanctification depends on God, but involves human volition and cooperation." This is where there is a difference in Paul's imperatives being "based" on God's indicative and Paul's imperatives being "grounded" in God's "indicative act."

Instead of a view of dependent work with God, New Calvinism holds to a monergistic substitutionary sanctification, which states that Christ not only died a substitutionary penalty for sin, but obeyed perfectly in fulfillment of the law for our works and obedience as well. In other words, Paul's imperatives are a picture of what Christ has already done for us and our obedience is a "mere natural flow" of obedience that occurs from the finished work of Christ.

Some even go as far to say that the works that flow from us are not even really our works at all, but the works of Christ who indwells us. New Calvinists call this "new obedience." Dana L. Stoddard, in his treatise on Gospel Sanctification in the Journal Of Biblical Counseling (CCEF) entitled *The Daily Christian Life*, put it this way:

It is by virtue of Christ's perfect life, death on the cross and resurrection-plus nothing-that we are justified (made and declared right with God) and sanctified (set apart, kept, and viewed as right

with God) and sanctified (set apart, kept, and viewed as right in the Lord's eyes by virtue of His obedience). Christ is our holiness. Christ is our sanctification.

Therefore, sanctification is by virtue of His obedience alone and not ours. Stoddard further drives this point home by quoting John Murray who calls this view "definitive sanctification" (Sanctification by virtue of the indicative alone), "Being made and declared holy is a definitive act of God alone in Christ." So, we are "made" holy as an act of God "**alone.**" That obviously excludes us from the process.

Let's stop here and now begin to address the indicative/imperative question.

One wonders why God's indicatives could not be considered as assurance to the believer that the battle is won and he or she has all of the resources they need in Christ to please Him. In other words, an encouragement to put the imperative into action. Hebrews 10:19-25 is an example of this. The imperative is underlined:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

There is no indication here that the imperative is "grounded" in this indicative. It is certainly based on it, but not grounded. Besides, this verse is one of many that actually does violence to the New Calvinist indicative/imperative. Advocates are quick to point out the imperative preceded by the qualifying indicative or indicative—imperative. But the Bible is replete with indicative—imperative—indicative as in the above Hebrews verse. So what? Well, the problem is the following: this imperative is sandwiched between two indicatives and the latter is not based on the "finished work" of Christ, it is based on something that Christ has not done yet. Another example of this is 2Peter 3:11,12:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

Peter's incentive for not becoming part of the world (Imp.) is the fact that it will all be burned up in the end (Ind.). Advocates of COG can protest all they want that it is still a work of Christ, but their supposed *coup de grace* is the "finished" works of Christ always preceding the imperative (ie., the constant mantra: "Not what we have done, but what Christ has done").

Another biblical literary scheme that does extreme violence to this argument is the necessary implementation of a command (imperative) in order to "experience" the indicative. Dennis McCallum's explanation of this is virtually perfect:

The New Testament also teaches that, although the imperatives are based upon the indicatives, in many cases the experience of the indicatives is dependent upon our willingness to respond to the imperatives by faith. In other words, if I fail to act in faith based on what God has commanded, I may not experience the reality of my position in

Christ. Of course my position is no less real, but I may not experience it in the way God wants me to.

This is exactly what Peter is saying in 2Peter 1:3-15.

Furthermore, we have reversed indicative/imperatives throughout Scripture (imperative—indicative) where the implementation of the command or the yielding to the warning determines the indicative work of God:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you (Imp.), your heavenly Father will also forgive you (Ind.). But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14,15).

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him (Imp.), so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins [Ind.](Mark 11:25).

These examples are just as numerous in Scripture as the other.

Another concern is God's promise of rewards (indicative) in response to performing in regard to behavior (imperative):

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (Matthew 5:46).

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:6).

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they

have received their reward in full. 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 (Matthew 6:16-18).

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Hebrews 11:26).

In regard to God's promise to reward good behavior, the reverse indicative/imperative dwarfs the former. Also, New Calvinism presupposes that when Christ says: "Well done faithful servant," He is not really giving us credit. New Calvinism is in defiance to the plain sense of Scripture.

Next, we will look at how New Calvinists describe the experience of the indicative/imperative and how it works. How does gospel contemplationism yield results? What is the practical application?