

## Christians and The Law

Does the Law of Moses still matter? Should it have any effect on the life of a Christian? Outside of salvation itself, there is no more important question to answer. This is not a matter for theologians to debate; this is at the very heart of what it means to be a Believer.... Gentile or Jew.

If I could oversimplify those mainstream views on the Law into a single general one it would be this: the Law of Moses is not for any who believe that Jesus of Nazareth is their Savior. This is spoken of in a few ways in Churches and Messianic Synagogues, with perhaps the most familiar being that Believers are no longer "under the Law" (a statement that has been translated from the Greek in the New Testament and ascribed to Paul).

Some of the more familiar ways this "no longer under the Law" doctrine is explained is that the Law was 100% abolished and discarded by Christ, nailed to the Cross. Or that the Law was only a dispensation that was meant to last between the times of Moses and Messiah. Another thought is that essentially the New Testament revelation of Christ redefined sin and obedience to no longer be tied to a common set of written Biblical do's and dont's, but instead to whatever the Holy Spirit of God tells us individual by individual. So, sin no longer has a universal meaning, effect or divine standard; sin is somewhat different (customized) for each individual and depends on the occasion and so we can only know what sin is at any given moment according to how "we feel in our hearts". According to Christianity where do we look in the Bible to understand how we are to relate to the Law? Primarily in the various epistles of Paul.

Many post Enlightenment era Bible scholars quietly (a few not so quietly) admit that intellectual honesty demands that as Church leadership we probably ought to no longer refer to the Body of Believers as being the Church of Christ, but rather as the Church of Paul. While no one would suggest that Paul rather than Christ saves, on the other hand the bulk of Church doctrine on almost all subjects is based predominately on Paul's statements. It is Paul's statements that are used to define the fundamental Church doctrine that the Law is dead to Believers and perhaps it is to be regarded as a bad or defective thing, and thus is to be avoided.

In contrast to those doctrinal positions I contend that essentially various Christian teachers and scholars have (for hundreds of years) “cherry picked” through Paul’s many statements concerning the Law, taking the ones that validate their viewpoint and ignoring the ones that plainly contradict them.

It is no secret that Paul presents a frustrating challenge on the issue of the Law as he seems to hold an utterly schizophrenic assessment of its place for Believers by one time seeming to say that the Law has no bearing on the life of a Believer (Believers are not “under the law”) and at another time he venerates the Law and says that a Believer should uphold the Law (“Therefore the Law is holy, just and good”). We even find in chapter 21 of Acts that Paul went to the Temple, and participated in a vow ritual required by the Law of Moses specifically to publically prove that he personally remained devoted to the Law, so that people would STOP accusing him of instructing Jews and gentiles that with faith in Christ they didn’t have to obey the Law of Moses any longer.

Paul has always been controversial and challenging to decipher. Yet there is much he says that is straightforward and consistent enough that it can help set the context for understanding where he is coming from in his dissertations that have become NT Scripture. For instance: I can say with confidence that Paul believes that God sent Yeshua to give salvation to Jews and gentiles alike; that salvation is available to all on the same basis (faith in God); that the Messiah is coming back sooner than later; that Paul felt specially anointed by God to take the Gospel to gentiles; and that followers of Christ should live according to God’s will and commandments. Yet, we need to keep in mind something so many otherwise good Bible teachers and scholars seem to forget: Paul AND Christ were Jews. The society they lived in and the terms they thought and spoke in were Jewish. And the entire Bible, OT and NT, is Jewish literature (Hebrew more technically) written by Jewish (Hebrew) authors.

There are a handful of Christian academics who have made valiant attempts to deal with Paul and the Law while trying to put aside long held doctrinal barriers and the most recent one that I believe offers a strong and balanced view is the venerable E.P. Sanders.

Professor Sanders, Dean of Biblical Exegesis at Oxford, found that indeed there seems to be conflicting instructions about the Law by Paul. And therefore, on the surface, Paul's statements on the matter present the profile of a Biblical Apostle who changes his mind about it from day to day, or circumstance to circumstance, or perhaps he is conflicted on the matter and we are witnessing him wrestle with the Law in light of Messiah's advent. Or maybe we are stubbornly reading and interpreting Paul through the eyes, cultures and literary styles of gentile Westerners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while his meaning is wrapped up in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Middle Eastern Jewish cultural mindset that Christians don't have any idea of.

E.P. Sanders concludes that the real issue is that Paul is actually speaking on several DIFFERENT aspects of the role of the Law in the life of a Believer, and they can't be all lumped together. That is, Paul did not usually speak about the Law in general terms, but rather he would address a specific issue about the Law one time, and another but different specific issue about the Law the next time. I couldn't agree more with Dr. Sanders and what we find is that Paul separated the issue of the Law down to two fundamental aspects as concerns Believers: **the first** issue is how the Law relates to justification (salvation), and **the second** issue is how the Law relates to our behavior (that is, the Law as the expression of God's will for His worshippers). The first issue, salvation (justification) is a spiritual matter expressed by our proper relationship with God while the second issue, behavior, is a practical physical matter expressed by our proper actions.

Before we discuss a few points that Paul made about the Law, I would like to present a proposition that I hope can provide a platform to expose the answer to the 2 most basic questions Believers have concerning the Law: **1)** does it still exist for us and **2)** if it does are we to obey it? My proposition is based on a clear, plainly stated instruction that appears around the midway point through Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount. And besides its powerful clarity what makes it so impactful is that the Sermon on the Mount is Christ's seminal speech to ALL of His followers (Jews and gentiles).

### **READ MATTHEW 5:17 - 19**

I don't know which Bible version you might have in your hands, but there is no discernable difference among them other than where most versions say "The

Law” the CJB says “The Torah”. Those two terms are close enough to synonymous for our purposes so there is no need to quibble; either is appropriate.

My viewpoint based on what we just read is that whatever purpose the Law serves today, and however much of it even can be done as prescribed in the Bible, in no way has Christ abolished it or changed it. Therefore Church doctrines on the Law ought to revolve around how Believers are to relate to it rather than declaring it no longer in existence and simply disposing of the problem altogether. Some have argued that to “fulfill” the Law means to end or abolish it; but that is inaccurate. Thus we would have Christ saying that he didn’t come to abolish the Law, but rather to end it. The Greek word being translated as fulfilled is *pleroo* and it means to complete or fulfill in the sense of bringing something to its fullest state (as in saying my wife completes me as a person). But beyond that, the reality is that Yeshua didn’t end His thought there; He supplemented His statement about coming to fulfill the Law by continuing that not only are the Law and the Prophets NOT abolished, but that not one iota of the Law shall change until heaven and earth passes away. And that anyone who teaches that the Law is abolished or even slightly changed will be considered the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. Please note: NOT barred from being a member of the Kingdom of Heaven, just made the lowest possible status as a kingdom member. Pretty definitive.

Because His statement on the uninterrupted continuation of the Law directly contradicts most standard Church doctrines on the Law, I’ve had some students, teachers and Pastors try to solve the problem of Christ’s statement by insisting that heaven and earth DID pass away at the cross, and therefore so did the Law. Of course they say they mean that from a “spiritualized” and/or allegorized view point. Not very convincing, frankly. But far more often their response to what Christ said is to argue that “yeah but here’s what **Paul** said” in Galatians or Romans or Corinthians or some other of his epistles. I am then presented with a well known statement or two of Paul’s that indeed does seem to be quite negative about the Law. When I respond with a statement of Paul that seems to be quite positive about the Law, then once again I’m opposed with yet another one that seems negative. On and on it goes until we reach stalemate. I’ve searched for a

long time for a new approach to this challenge and I have one that I'd like to share with you that I think gets straight to the heart of the matter.

We have at least one rather long, detailed statement by Christ about the Law as concerns His followers (Matthew 5:17-20) that is more than merely positive; it is an unequivocal and forcefully stated instruction to NEVER think or persuade anyone that He has abolished the Law. So, if one accepts the standard Church doctrine that is ascribed to Paul that Christ DID abolish the Law, then we are confronted with the obvious: Paul and Christ disagree. Paul says Christ terminated the Law and Christ says "no I didn't".

What are we to do? The mainstream Church has already decided; more weight is given to Paul than to Christ. Thus we are left with a serious personal dilemma: are we to set Paul against Christ as regards the Law for Believers? And if that is the situation, do we follow Christ or do we follow Paul? Do we believe the Master or do we believe the Disciple? Do we accept the inspired words of God in the flesh, or do we accept the inspired words of a common fleshly human being (Paul)?

It is a generally accepted Christian Theological principle that the Bible contains various levels of inspiration. Not all Bible characters, and not all of their statements, carry equal inspiration, weight or authority. For instance; the wicked King Saul's statements, while accurate, don't reflect the level of truth or inspiration as King David's. And King David's statements don't carry the level of inspiration or authority as do God's oracles given from Isaiah. Thus the statements of Christ, the divine Son of God, (who is deity) carry with them a higher level of inspiration and authority when compared to Peter, James, John, or Paul, because Christ is God and the disciples aren't. In fact, Paul himself pointed out this distinction in 1Corinthians 7.

### **READ 1COR.7:8 -12**

So Paul, being an honest man, says that one statement he's making is from God, but the next statement he's making is NOT from God, but rather from his own personal point of view. It's not that one of his thoughts is inspired and the other isn't; it's that the command from God carries the greater weight and authority.

So if we're to approach this matter openly and honestly this now brings us to another option. Is it possible that just as did Paul, might Christ have also given us conflicting views on the Law and so His statement in Matthew 5 is only the most positive one that He made? To that end, I had some research undertaken and my diligent wife spent several days going through the Gospels and annotating each and every statement Christ made on the Law and on Tradition, whether that statement was negative, positive or neutral. I have a complete listing of those statements to give to each of you. It is every statement of Christ regarding Law and Tradition. Nothing is intentionally held back or left out.

For the sake of our discussion today since we don't have the time to discuss each of His statements I'll summarize: the only negative thing Christ had to say was not against the Law but rather was against manmade Tradition (what we today call doctrines). He was always neutral or positive regarding the Law, and urged His followers to be obedient to it, especially as it comes to the spirit of the Law. Thus as you'll see in your handouts, if one continues to insist that Paul advocated against the Law, there is no option but to conclude that he held the opposite view from Our Lord Yeshua, who is God. I don't know about you, but we were to conclude that Paul indeed is anti-Law, then I have a very easy time of choosing Christ's instruction on the Law over Paul's. I'll take God's word over man's word anytime no matter how inspired that man might be.

That said, I'm going to show you that Paul's occasional negativity was not an anti-Law view at all, but rather he was instructing against misuse of the purpose of the Law. It boiled down to chastising those attempting to use the Law as a means to justification before God (salvation). Regardless, according to Paul DOING the Law was to continue, recognizing that especially for gentiles they were typically living in societies that erected such high barriers against God's ways that for them to precisely observe certain commandments in the same way that could be done in a Jewish society was a practical impossibility, and in some cases unnecessary.

In other words I contend that Paul was not anti-Law and did not teach Believers to ignore the Law, and especially did not teach that the Law was dead and gone. And among his several statements to this effect, one of the most plainly spoken that remains definitive across all Bible versions is found in Romans 3.

### **READ Romans 3:29 - 31**

Thus whatever else Paul might have to say about the Law what we find in Romans 3 is a key principle: it is that even though justification comes ONLY through faith, that faith in no way cancels the Torah (the Law). One doesn't nullify the other, nor does one oppose the other. He emphasizes his contention by saying "Heaven forbid" that such a thing might be, and goes on further to say that in fact our faith (in Christ) affirms and upholds the Law.

But there is also another important principle in this passage; it is that there is one faith, one God, and one Law for BOTH Jew and gentile (the circumcised and uncircumcised). Thus as to the doctrine held by some that there are two covenants for salvation, the Law for the Jews and faith in Christ (grace) for gentiles; or that saved Jews should obey the Law but gentiles don't have to, Paul puts this thought to shame straightaway. There is ONLY one system of justification, faith in Christ, there is only one God, YHWH God of Israel, and there is only one Law, the Law of Moses.

And you have to understand why Paul would say that. Because in his day there was something else called "The Law" commonly. That was Jewish *Hallakah*, we've talked about this alot, tradition.

### **READ Romans 2:25 - 3:4**

E.P. Sanders says this about this passage: "I regard this as one of the most amazing sentences that (Paul) ever wrote". Without doubt this statement of Paul confirms Paul's view that while the Law is not for justification (salvation) it certainly does not follow that the Law is therefore abolished for those who trust God by means of faith in Yeshua. The term "the circumcised" was the common way that Jews spoke of being Jews, and the term "the uncircumcised" was the common way that Jews referred to gentiles. Thus the thought here is that a Jew should stay a Jew and a gentile should remain a gentile when they decide to trust in Christ. But what does that mean? Let's ask ourselves the negative of Paul's statement. How might a Jew cease to be a Jew or a gentile cease to be a gentile in any case? Jewish society in that day saw the act of a gentile being circumcised

as more than accepting the God of the Jews; it also meant that you became a national Jew. You became a legal citizen of Jewish society. You were no longer a gentile; you had given up your natural nationality and identity to become Jewish.

But Paul says no to this as regards salvation; the requirement to be justified through faith didn't involve changing nationalities. If you are a gentile, you may remain a gentile but still be justified through the blood of Christ. If you are Jew, you may remain a Jew and your nationality doesn't change by being justified through the blood of Christ. Jew or gentile it doesn't matter. What DOES matter (after receiving justification through faith)? Paul says it is keeping God's commandments. WHAT commandments? The only commandments that exist in a Biblical context: the commandments that form the Law of Moses. And btw: remember, Paul was speaking and writing in an era in which the ONLY Scripture in existence was what we call the OT. There would be no such thing as a NT for well over a century after his time.

Here is what I'd like you to take from today's talk. If one still insists that Paul preaches that the Law is dead and gone for Believers (Jew or gentile), then you are accepting that Paul is indeed at odds with Christ who preached that the Law would remain perfectly intact down to the last detail until there was a new heaven and earth. And by the way: is there really to be a new heaven and earth or was Christ just spiritualizing or exaggerating as some claim?

**CJB Revelation 21:1** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there.*

Ah, you might say, but John didn't write that until 50 years AFTER Christ's death. True, but then there is this:

**CJB Isaiah 65:17** *"For, look! I create a new heavens and a new earth; past things will not be remembered, they will no more come to mind.*

So the concept of an eventual and actual new heaven and earth (not merely a metaphorical spiritualization) was long established within the Scriptures and thus within Jewish thought. And according to Christ it is when Isaiah's prophecy



(borrowed by John 8 centuries later) is fulfilled that the Law will finally cease and indeed be dead and gone forever.

So what is the solution for us? How should we, as Jewish and gentile Believers, go forward in our lives as to how we are to relate to the Law of Moses? Here is the answer: **1)** Christ, in every statement ever recorded regarding the Law, upheld it and said that His followers are to do the same. **2)** Paul on the other hand made a distinction about the Law in that obedience to the Law does NOT bring salvation; rather faith (in God) brings salvation, and that goes for Jew or gentile. **3)** Paul was not anti-Law, but if salvation is the goal (and it certainly ought to be), then the place to look for salvation was NOT to the Law but rather to Christ. **4)** And yet once saved, according to Paul correct behavior and morality matters (perhaps more than ever), and the definition of correct behavior and morality is specified in the Law. **5)** And finally both Christ and Paul emphasize the Spirit of the Law as more important than the letter of the Law.

Thus in the end, Law and faith (or Grace) are not two different paths to the same end. Nor is there one way for Jews and another for gentiles, or has the older (the Law) been replaced with the newer (faith in Christ). Rather the Law is, and only ever was, to be practiced by the already redeemed of God. Faith and trust in God is, and always was, the only means to redemption. Redemption through Christ and continuance of the Law are not mutually exclusive nor are they opposed to one another: rather they are to work hand in glove in the lives of all Believers. First redemption, then obedience. But never obedience to God's commandments in a legalistic, mechanical, soulless way. Rather this obedience is to always be in love, in faith, and in the spirit it was intended.

How exactly do we do the Law in our day? Which laws can we observe and which can't we observe? That is for another discussion. However know this for certain: sin is defined in the Bible as a violation of God's Laws.

NAS **I John 3:4** *Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.*

The consequence for sin is what the Bible calls the curse of the Law, which is eternal death. The Good News is that our Messiah Yeshua died on the cross as the curse for us; He died to pay for our violations of the Law.

He did not die to END the Law, but rather to enable us to have a deeper devotion to it.