

The Proper Definition and Uses of the Law

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The apostle Paul says “that the law is good if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8). For the apostle, there is nothing wrong with the law, for it is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:12). But the law has often been misunderstood and abused by professing Christians and heretics throughout history. In this section we will consider some common abuses of the law and will see that properly defined and applied, the law is necessary to understand the gospel and is essential for sanctification (personally and corporately).

Before we begin, it is necessary to examine how the term “law” is used in the Bible in order to avoid confusion. A number of errors relating to God’s law can be traced to interpreters failing to consider how the word is defined within its context. (Dispensationalists, for example, like to quote Paul’s statement, “you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14), as proof that Christians have nothing to do with any part of the Mosaic law as a guide or rule for Christian sanctification. To be “under law” in this context, however, means to be under the obligation to obey the whole law in exhaustive detail in thought, word and deed *as a condition of salvation*.) If we understand that there are multiple uses of the term depending on the context, we will not be deceived by the sloppy exegesis of dispensationalists. There are a number of uses of this term. The term “law” (Heb. *torah*) can be used in the general sense of direction, teaching or instruction. “The law [or instruction] of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (Prov. 13:14). “Receive, please, instruction [*torah*] from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart” (Job 22:22). “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness” (Prov. 31:26). In its most basic sense *torah* is similar to its root verb *yarah* (“to project, or point out”) for it points out or instructs us regarding Jehovah’s perceptive will.

The word “*torah*” is also used as equivalent to the covenant between God and Israel (cf. Deut. 22:1, 9). The first series of laws given to the people at Sinai is called “the book of the covenant” (Ex. 24:7-8). The Ten Commandments are called “the tablets of the covenant” (Deut. 9:9, 11). After the five books of Moses are completed they are called “the book of the covenant” (2 Kgs. 23:21; 2 Chron. 34:30). The Torah contains everything Israel was to know, believe and obey. It is not simply a legal code but a relationship or covenant document between God and His people. While all men, by virtue of their creaturehood, are obligated to obey all the moral precepts of the Torah, the nation of Israel and the church are to obey it as a bond of love, fellowship and thanksgiving for redemption. When the Old Testament prophets preached against the apostasy, declension and wickedness of Israel, they brought a covenant lawsuit against the people. God spoke to Israel as an unfaithful wife who had broken her covenant vows.

Paul used the term law in many different ways. It could refer to the summary of the moral law: the decalogue or the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:8ff; 7:7). It could refer to an individual law (Rom. 7:2, 7, 8, 9). The apostle will mention the law and then refer to only one commandment by way of illustration for the whole law. He occasionally used the term to refer to the inscripturated special revelation or the whole Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 14:21 Paul says, “In the law it is written,” and then quotes Isaiah the prophet (28:11-12). After piecing together a number of different Psalm portions he writes, “Now we know that whatever the law says...” (Rom. 3:19). David also used the word in a comprehensive sense, meaning the whole

word of God or the doctrine of the Bible when he said, “The law of the LORD is perfect converting the soul.” Plummer writes, “It is a general name given to Scripture, of which the law is an important part. Besides, all Scripture is a rule, a precept—profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness [2 Tim. 3:16-17]. Rules of life invented by serious men among the heathen and in Christian lands may have produced a civil discipline.... But they were much mixed with error. Nor had they saving power. They were *not* perfect, as is the law of God ‘in doctrine, in precept, in promise, in threatening.’ Nor did they *convert the soul*.”¹ Only God’s perfect word is the instrument used by the Holy Spirit to renew human souls. Thus we see that Rushdoony is correct in referring to the Bible as God’s law-word. (When Jesus spoke of the whole Old Testament He liked to use the expression, “The law and the prophets” (Mt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; 24:44; cf. Rom. 3:21).

The inspired authors sometimes used term law for the five books of Moses. This is likely the apostle’s intent in Galatians 3:21 and 4:21. This is also the meaning in 2 Kings 23:21; 2 Chronicles 34:30; Luke 24:44 and John 1:45. The word law can be used to denote a rule or principle. Paul speaks of “the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27), and James the “law of liberty” (Jas. 1:25). Paul says, “I find then a law, that evil is present...” (Rom. 7:21). He discusses the “law in my members,” “the law of my mind,” and “the law of sin” (Rom. 7:23). The author of Hebrews uses law to denote the ceremonial law (Heb. 9:22; 10:1). This may be our Lord’s meaning or emphasis in Luke 16:16.

The word “law” can refer to the law as a threatening, condemning document. In John 1:17, “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth come by Jesus Christ.” This verse is designed to show the inferiority of Moses and the law, to Christ and the gospel. The moral law is full of prohibitions and demands that men can never fulfill. It has curses and strong threats against disobedience. Even if one considers the ceremonial law, which is full of burdensome sacrifices, rituals, ordinances and ceremonies, the law never really forgave sin, for it was but a shadow not the reality. Christ, on the other hand, brought grace and truth. He in His person and work is the foundation and source of all grace and mercy in history. Only through His blood, suffering and death are sins expiated and forgiven forever. Jesus, who is the Word and Truth itself, alone reveals the Father in the exhibition of Himself, in His bringing in the finality of revelation and His giving of His Spirit to His people. He is the true sacrifice, the only Mediator between God and man, the true Prophet, Priest and King par excellence. He is the only door or way to the Father (Jn. 10:9; 14:6; Ac. 4:12). “He has revealed His Father’s wisdom, and holiness, and compassion, and power, and hatred of sin and love of sinners, in the fullest possible way. He has brought into clear light that great mystery how God can be just, and yet justify the ungodly. The knowledge of the Father which a man derived from the teaching of Moses is different from that derived from the teaching of Christ as twilight is different from noon day.”² Hendriksen writes, “There was nothing wrong with the law, moral and ceremonial. It had been given by God through Moses. It was preparatory in character. It revealed man’s lost condition and it also foreshadowed his deliverance. But there were two things which the law as such did not supply: *grace* so that transgressors could be pardoned and helped in time of need, and *truth*, i.e., the

¹ W. S. Plummer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1867] 1975), 256.

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John* (Cambridge and London: James Clark and Co., [1885] 1975), 1:41.

reality to which all the types pointed (think of the sacrifices). Christ, by his atoning work, furnished both. He *merited* grace and he *fulfilled* the types.”³

On occasion, Paul uses the term “law” to denote the legal indictment or sentence of eternal death that the obligation of the law as a covenant of works brings. “I through the law died to the law that I might live to God” (Gal. 2:19). In Romans 6 the apostle says, “We are not under law but under grace” (v. 14). In chapter 7 he says you “have become dead to the law through the body of Christ” (v. 4)...“we have been delivered from the law” (v. 6). When Paul says that “he died to the law” (Gal. 2:19), the context (cf. Gal. 5:3; 6:13) indicates that his obligation to keep the whole law (moral, civil and ceremonial) as a covenant of works or means of achieving justification has to come to an end because he has embraced Christ by faith alone. The Judaizers were not advocating salvation only through the ceremonial law but through the whole law of Moses. Paul confirms this view when he warns the Galatians saying, “I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). He points out that “not even those who are circumcised [the Judaizers] keep the law” (Gal. 6:13). While they were very zealous for the ceremonial aspects of the law they were not obeying the moral law perfectly from the heart. Although it is true that some of the main issues at Galatia issued out of a certain ceremonial requirements (circumcision, food laws, feast days), the main problem for Paul was their connection to the Judaizers’ system of justification. They were part of the whole Mosaic system that the circumcision party was adding on to Christ to be a Christian. We know that this interpretation is true, for when Paul dealt with certain ceremonial commandments (e.g., holy days and food laws) that were followed *without* any connection to justification (e.g., Rom. 14, 15) he handled them in a completely different manner. He tolerated them as a practice of weak Jewish Christians. In Galatians, Paul is not arguing for the moral law or a spiritual view of the law against the ceremonial law; but he is contending for justification through faith in Christ alone against any form of human merit.

Note that in Galatians 2:19 and Romans, Paul does *not* say that the law died but that we “died to the law.” Here Paul is not making a *general* statement about God’s abrogation of the law. Instead, he is teaching that, because we have looked *solely* to Christ for our justification, the law holds no power over us at all. We have a complete liberty from it with regard to salvation before God. Jesus has obeyed the whole law in exhaustive detail in our place and He has paid the penalty in full that we deserved for breaking it. Without Christ we are in bondage to the law. As Paul says, “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13). When Paul was a Pharisee, he attempted to reach up to heaven by keeping the law. Consequently, he was a slave to it. But when he renounced the law to embrace Jesus he was freed from its dominion. Those who look to the law for redemption are held captive under its yolk. But, “if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36).

It is very important that we understand what it means to die to the law, for many evangelicals understand such passages as simply a *general abrogation* of the whole law. Such thinking is unscriptural and leads to antinomianism.⁴ If the apostle’s point was that the law has

³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 89.

⁴ William Hendriksen’s comments on the law are needed in our day when dispensationalism and antinomianism are common: “It must never be overlooked that in the writings of the apostle the word law—as is true with respect to so many other great words—has more than one meaning. It is not my purpose at this point to present a detailed study of all the various meanings which this word has in Paul’s epistles. That task would be more appropriate in a commentary on Romans. For the present the following would suffice. On the one hand Paul rejoices in the fact that he is not under law (Rom. 6:14, 15; cf. 7:6). He speaks of being delivered from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). He describes the law as ‘the hand-written document that was against us, which by means of its requirements testified

no application or relevance to the believer in any way, not even the moral law as a standard for sanctification and ethical living (once the Christian is already justified by Christ), then the epistle to the Galatians contains explicit self-contradictions. When Paul begins to discuss a Christian's sanctification he says, "...through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:13-14). Paul backs up his imperative to the Galatians by quoting from Leviticus 19:18. Moreover, Paul's list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 comes directly out of the ethics of the moral case laws of the Old Testament. While it is indeed true that, in the New Testament, the Old Covenant ceremonial laws are abrogated and the political laws that applied only to Israel are set out of gear, Paul is not dealing with these topics in the passage before us.

Paul says something interesting about how he died to the law. It was *through the law* that he died to the law. This means that the law itself taught him that he needed to abandon the law as a means of justification. He describes this experience in detail in Romans 7. Paul, as a Pharisee, had *externalized* the law to make it much easier to obey. And, as a Pharisee, Paul for quite some time really believed that he was keeping the law and meriting salvation. He was "alive apart from the law" (v. 9). This does not mean that he was totally without the Mosaic law like the Gentiles, but that he had no true understanding of the spiritual-internal aspect of law-keeping. He was self-deceived, self-righteous, arrogant and complacent. Then something profound and amazing happened. The Holy Spirit gave Paul a true understanding of the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," (v. 7) and applied this law forbidding unlawful desires and lusts to his heart. This commandment which the apostle thought could help him earn eternal life, Paul discovered could only bring death (v. 10). "Sin taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me" (v. 11). Without a proper, true understanding of the law (i.e. its internal aspect or the obligation to keep the law perfectly in one's heart or mind), Paul was not aware that he was guilty of sin. Where there is no true knowledge or understanding of the moral law, there can be no true knowledge of one's sin. The apostle's conscience was at ease due to his ignorance and false doctrine. But once he understood the true meaning of the law, all of his hopes and dreams of self-righteousness were dashed on the rocks of sin and general corruption. What Paul the Pharisee wanted the law to do, it could not do. Not because the law was defective or bad, but because the law (in the post-fall world) was not designed by God to secure our salvation. The law did a great service for Paul, for it showed him that he was a rotten guilty sinner and thus pointed him to Christ.

The common evangelical or dispensational understanding that the gospel has come and abrogated the law makes no sense whatsoever if we carefully consider Paul's train of thought. The law, the apostle agrees, reveals to us our sin. (It is like the deadly bite of the fiery serpent that caused Israel to look by faith at the brazen serpent for life.) But, we ask, how does an *abrogated law* define or reveal sin? Earlier Paul noted, "Where there is no law there is no

against us' (Col. 2:14; cf. Eph. 2:15). And in the chapter now under study—see below—he even states, 'If justification (were) through law, then Christ died in vain' (Gal. 2:21). Yet, on the other hand, he also tells us that he is 'under law to Christ' (1 Cor. 9:2), that he 'delights in the law of God according to the inner man' (Rom. 7:22), that 'the law is holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good' (Rom. 7:12), and that love—the very love which is 'the greatest of the three greatest' (1 Cor. 13:13)—is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10; cf. Gal. 5:14; 6:2).

There is no warrant, therefore, to go to any extreme in denouncing the law. Whenever anything is said in disparagement of law, the concept law must be carefully described. The hue and cry of the present day, to the effect that as Christians 'we have nothing whatever to do with the law' has no Scriptural justification at all. It is, in fact, a dangerous slogan, especially in an era of lawlessness!" (*Galatians and Ephesians*, 102).

transgression” (Rom. 4:15). John wrote, “Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 Jn. 3:4). The moral law revealed in the Old Testament must be binding in some way, for if it had nothing to do with us after the resurrection; it could *not* be used to define sin and reveal our guilt. After noting the law’s negative or condemning role in bringing man to Christ, Paul then *praises the law* so that his readers would not misunderstand him and think that he was against the law. He wrote, “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12). The law is not bad or evil. The problem is sin and depravity. Sin is the source of all evil. The moral law is “holy as the revelation of the holiness of God; it is in its own nature right, and it is good, i.e. excellent. In the next verse all these attributes are summed up in one [word], *to agathon*, goodness.”⁵ If Paul believed that the law was bad or that we have nothing whatsoever to do with the law, would he say that he “delights in the law according to the inner man” (Rom. 7:22), or that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10; cf. Gal. 5:14; 6:2), or that “he is under law to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:2)? Consequently, the only way that believers can be dead to the *moral* law is when they are dead to it as *an obligation to achieve justification* (Jesus obeyed the law in exhaustive detail in our place and we receive His perfect righteousness by faith); and are dead to the law’s penalty or curse (Christ endured the curse of the law in our place by His suffering and death on the cross, Gal. 3:13).

The Different Uses of the Law

Not only does the word law have different meanings depending upon the context, but the law has manifold uses as well. A discussion of these uses will help us to avoid two serious errors that have plagued churches from the very beginning: legalism or salvation through law, or faith plus works; and antinomianism (i.e. the idea that Christians are not under the law in any way and thus can essentially do as they please and remain Christians in good standing). There are a number of noteworthy uses.

The Law Restrains Crime

First, the moral law (the Ten Commandments and all the moral case laws including the penalties) serves the purpose of restraining crime and scandalous, exceptionally wicked acts in society. Paul is discussing this fact when he says, “The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:9-10). Here Paul is speaking about the role of the moral statutes of the Mosaic law in subduing wicked members of society. The apostle is not speaking of natural law or the law in general, but biblical or revealed law. “In general, when *nomos* [law] is anarthrous in Paul, it refers to the Mosaic law.”⁶ (e.g., Rom. 2:17, 25; 3:20; Gal. 2:19; 6:13; etc.) Knight notes, “A further problem attends the understanding of *nomos* as law in general and the clause here as a general principle, and that is the flow of the argument in vv. 9-11. The conjunction *de* [but] relates this statement about ‘law’ directly to a list of various sins that certainly seems to be based on the Mosaic law, all of them governed by the same verb (*keitai*) as that which governs the

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1835, 64] 1972), 226.

⁶ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 796.

statement of principle.... The statement of principle and the lists of sins are so tightly tied together that it is difficult not to think that they are both dealing with the Mosaic law.”⁷ Moreover, it is not an accident that Paul’s list basically follows the order of the Ten Commandments. The words “ungodly,” “unholy” and “profane” cover the first table of the law and are comprehensive. Then, in his list of sins and crimes, Paul focuses on second table offenses: “against the fifth and sixth commandments, *murderers of fathers and mothers, and manslayers* [murderers, intentional manslaughter]; against the seventh, *whoremongers, and those that defile themselves with mankind* [i.e. homosexuals]; against the eighth, *men-stealers* [a kidnapper or slave dealer]; against the ninth, *liars and perjured persons*.”⁸ Note that in this list (which is only a sample and is not intended to be comprehensive) virtually every moral offense cited is a serious or flagrant transgression which is defined as a crime by the judicial law of Moses. The only exception is “lying”; but the concepts of lying, swearing falsely and cheating a neighbor are combined in Leviticus 19:11-16 (especially verses 11, 12).

When Paul says that the law is not made for a righteous person, he is not speaking of sinless perfection but of people who are law-abiding citizens. That is, those who respect the law and thus are self-governed. They do not need the external restraint of civil laws or the threat of punishments (i.e. the sanctions of the moral case laws) to restrain them, for they have self-discipline. Here Paul is not discussing the law as a revealer of sin to lead one to Christ, or even the law as a guide or rule of sanctification, but merely as a coercive force to restrain crime out of fear of punishment and the removal of such persons from society who commit death penalty offenses.

The law does not have any intrinsic power to change men’s hearts; to cause them to be holy; to instill a fear or love of Christ; or make bad people good. It is only through regeneration by the Spirit and faith in Christ alone that men are justified and the dominion of sin is broken. Only then will a person sincerely love God’s law from the heart and want to obey it out of love for Christ. But, the law (biblically defined) used properly by the civil magistrate can restrain crime in society. The gospel can change a person’s beastly nature, while the law can only chain up or kill the beast.

The law’s sanctions applied consistently and faithfully will keep many of the wicked from putting their evil lusts and murderous plans into action. For example, a nation that puts homosexuals to death and actively suppresses sodomite bars, bathhouses, clubs and fraternities will drive this deviant behavior deep underground. It will not eliminate it completely, but it will make meeting other sodomites, recruiting new perverts and spreading this abomination in society much more difficult. If murderers were publicly executed instead of being put in prison, or even on occasion paroled, people would think twice before killing someone out of hatred, anger or during a robbery. Watching color television, getting a free education and free health care will not suppress murder near as effectively as having one’s body and soul permanently removed from society through the death penalty. “Public stoning forces citizens to face the reality of the ultimate civil sanction, execution, which in turn points to God’s ultimate sanction at judgment day.... Because most people, including Christians, do not want to think about God’s final judgment, they prefer to assign to distant unknown executioners the grim task of carrying out God’s judgment in private. The privatization of execution is immoral; it is itself criminal. It is unjust to the convicted criminal [who should be allowed to confront witnesses and his

⁷ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 82.

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n. d.), 6:808.

executioners], and it is unjust to the surviving victims, who do not see God's justice done in public."⁹

National Security

Second, the law of God serves the purpose of establishing justice in the land which protects the nation from the wrath of God in history. In Numbers 35:30-34 we read,

Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not sufficient testimony against a person for the death penalty. Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. And you shall take no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the priest. So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the children of Israel.

The point of this passage is to warn Israel regarding what will happen if they *do not execute murderers*. To not render the justice that God requires will involve the land, nation or people in guilt. This guilt will certainly bring down God's vengeance upon the covenant people and nation. Crimes such as murder, if not punished by the death penalty, pollute or defile the land. While the expression "the land" refers to Israel, which contains the temple and special presence of God, Leviticus 18 speaks of the Canaanite nations defiling the land by their many sexual perversions. This passage (along with the many other passages where Jehovah proclaims judgment against heathen nations for their wickedness, e.g., see 2 Kgs. 17:24-41; Ps. 119:118-119; Prov. 14:34; 16:12; 17:15; Isa. 10:1; 24:5-6, 15; Dan. 4:24-25; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; etc.) teaches us that God punishes every nation for flagrantly breaking His moral law. Since the resurrection of Christ, the theanthropic Mediator is in charge of dispensing the sanctions of the moral law in history. To argue that God only cared about Israel's obedience to the moral law and that the norm today should be pluralism (which allows the open practice and propagation of idolatry) is to ignore the universal sanctions of the law upon all the nations. If Christians are to love their countries, be patriotic and care about things like economic prosperity and peace, they should be advocating the Lordship of Christ and the adoption of biblical law.

Defines and Reveals Sin

Third, (as noted) the moral law was given so that men would know what sin is and that they are sinners in need of Christ and His perfect redemption. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who were under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20). Instead of thinking of the Old Testament moral law as something negative or bad that only belonged to the Jews, Christians need to see that the law is the great servant of grace, if used properly.

The Jews had perverted the proper use of the law by thinking that they could earn salvation and God's favor by keeping the law. This was a system of works salvation that led to

⁹ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 44, 45.

great arrogance on the part of the Jews and caused them to reject their Messiah. Paul says that the law was never intended to be a path to achieve merit or forgiveness. It rather shows us that we have sinned and have fallen short of what God requires in every conceivable way. When applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, it reveals to us that we are wicked, depraved creatures under a mountain of guilt. By this knowledge the sinner is humbled, terrified, bruised and broken and thus is driven immediately to seek grace at the foot of the cross. The law reveals the divine diagnosis of our tragic fallen condition. Our heart is depraved, in rebellion against God and cannot do one thing to merit God's favor. Moreover, our record is foul, black and damning. We are under the just sentence of eternal death for our sins. We have no merit to plead and no excuses to make. The law renders us speechless, for our mouths are closed in guilt. Our only hope is to acknowledge that what the law says about us is true, admit that we are under the just judgment of God and place all of our hope and faith in Jesus Christ, who obeyed the law in our place and died on the cross for our sins.

It is clear that Paul is not just speaking about the law's role in the Old Testament, but the New Covenant era as well. He is not just speaking of the law's purpose for the Jews, but also for *the whole world* (Rom. 3:19). Therefore, when modern dispensationalists and evangelicals denigrate the Old Testament moral law and refuse to preach the law as a revealer of sin and guilt, they actually end up distorting the gospel message in a number of ways.

(1) The forensic nature of justification is replaced with a general message of forgiveness. If the Old Testament moral law has been abrogated, then why did Christ need to come to earth and obey that law perfectly and then die on the cross to satisfy divine justice by enduring the curse of that law? If dispensational concepts of the Old Testament law were true, the atonement was not really necessary. If the law were not based on God's nature and character but was arbitrarily imposed on the Jews as a covenant of works, then the cross was *not* indispensable. "If the [moral] law were subject to change, or replacement, then it was futile for Christ to die if the law given to Moses has no permanently binding character. Where the law is denied, justification is eventually denied, because an antinomian religion has no need of a judicial act of God to effect salvation."¹⁰

(2) The gospel message is romanized by the elimination of the concepts of imputation for the modern idea of asking Jesus to come and live in one's heart. According to Scripture, we have failed to meet the standard of God's moral law in two ways. We have not fulfilled the positive aspect of the law by rendering a perfect obedience unto it. Moreover, we have not endured the penalty of eternal death for breaking it. As guilty men, we owe God both penalty (the curse of the law) and a perfect, positive, perpetual obedience. The law tells us what the Mediator had to do to pay the penalty and merit our salvation. The gospel teaches that when we lay hold of Christ by faith, our sins (past, present and future) are imputed to Him on the cross and His perfect positive righteousness (Jesus's fulfillment of God's law in exhaustive detail) is reckoned to our account. Our sins have been expiated, covered, washed away forever and the Savior's perfect obedience is regarded as ours by imputation. As guilty sinners, we must look to and depend solely on Christ's perfect righteousness: His active and passive obedience. "God declares us righteous by virtue of the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to our account."¹¹

This teaching, which is dependent on a biblical understanding of God's law and our relation to it, is almost unheard of in evangelical circles today. It has been replaced by "accept

¹⁰ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1983), 272.

¹¹ Robert Morey, *Studies in the Atonement* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Pub., 1989), 178.

Jesus as your personal Savior” or “let Jesus into your heart.” There are a number of serious problems with the modern presentation of the gospel.

a) The idea of being saved by allowing Christ into one’s heart is totally compatible with Roman Catholic theology, for it is not forensic but subjective. The biblical passages which refer to the indwelling of Christ in the individual believer are never used in the context of an evangelical formula, but instead are always used in the context of Christian sanctification and assurance (e.g., see Rom. 8:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:5). Evangelicals unwittingly have adopted an evangelistic formula that any Roman Catholic priest could use, for Romanists teach that a person is justified by a work of Christ *in the believer*. Perhaps the gross ambiguity regarding their definition of the gospel is why many evangelical leaders now regard Roman Catholics and the pope as our brothers in Christ. The perversion of the law and the gospel has put professing Christians back on the road to Rome and its damnable heresies. The Bible teaches that Christ’s work of redemption for His people is objective. It takes place in history outside the sinner. When a person believes in Jesus and His work, he or she is justified or declared righteous by God the Father in the heavenly court. This declaration is objective and outside the sinner as well. To reduce the gospel message to the unbiblical slogan of “letting Jesus in” unwittingly redefines salvation and makes it compatible with humanistic forms of existentialism and new age mysticism.

b) The new methodology reduces the gospel to a humanistic act of man’s sovereign will. Instead of being told to place one’s faith or trust in the sinless life and sacrificial death of Christ, people are trained to place their trust in the choice of autonomous man. Man allows Jesus, who is helpless and waiting, to come into his heart. Such thinking has more in common with a magic formula than biblical Christianity. “It is expressly declared that God cannot bless us in any way until we open the way for His action by an act of our own will. Everywhere and always the initiative belongs to man; everywhere and always God’s action is suspended upon man’s will.”¹² But that only shows that our dependence must ultimately rest on our choice; on our allowing Jesus to come within us. This is not a looking away from self and a looking solely to Christ which characterizes the instrumental nature of faith. It is rather an Arminian, humanistic substitute.

c) When men do not have the law preached to them and are not fleeing to Christ as a refuge from the curse of the law, the gospel message becomes hedonistic and pragmatic. The gospel is often presented today as something that enables a person to find happiness, prosperity, and self-fulfillment. The gospel is accompanied with all sorts of hedonistic, materialistic promises: “Allow Jesus into your life so that you can live your life to the fullest; so that you can be all you were meant to be; so that God will bless you with abundance. Accept Christ and all your problems will evaporate. Your self-esteem will be what it should be. You can have the good life now.” Jesus is presented as a cosmic Santa Claus, a kind of Baal deity who is there to meet our needs, to give us better jobs, bigger cars and nicer houses. Christianity, in this mindset, is all about *me*. The Savior came to earth, not to obey the law and satisfy divine justice, but to make people happy and self-fulfilled. This pragmatic version of the gospel has infected virtually everything in anti-law churches today: the doctrine, the preaching, the worship, the style of the building, etc. Without the law to humble us and make us naked beggars in the dust, Christianity becomes anthropocentric and humanistic. Modern Arminian evangelicalism with its antinomian, human ability, subjective gospel and its church growth, entertainment-oriented preaching and worship is a modern Americanized counterpart to medieval Roman Catholicism.

¹² B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1932] 1983), 608.

We have seen that the proper preaching of the law is crucial to one's understanding of the gospel. The law convinces and convicts of sin. It completely humbles us and shows us that in redemption we are nothing and Christ is everything. The law in its Mosaic form with the ceremonial laws also served as a tutor (*paidagogos*, lit, a "child leader," a "supervisory guardian") to lead the Old Covenant church to Christ. The ceremonial laws instructed and prepared them for the coming redemption of the Messiah. The object of the Mosaic administration of the covenant of grace was to keep the people of God in line and prepare them for the time when Jesus will usher in a new, superior, more glorious age by His death, resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As Matthew Henry notes, "The great advantage of the gospel state above the legal, under which we not only enjoy a clearer discovery of divine grace and mercy than was afforded to the Jews of old, but are also freed from the state of bondage and terror under which they were held. We are not now treated as children in a state of minority, but as sons grown up to a full age, who are admitted to greater freedoms, and instated in larger privileges, than they were."¹³ Thus the law not only taught the Jews that they were guilty, polluted sinners but that a sinless Mediator was needed who could obtain eternal redemption by His own sacrificial blood. Once the Messiah came into history, the Jews should have embraced Him as the object of their faith—the One who conquered sin and death. A biblical understanding and use of the law causes us to look solely to Jesus and His righteousness for salvation. True faith looks unto, rests upon and trusts in the person and work of Christ and nothing else at all.

The Law Is a Rule for Life

Fourth, the moral law was given as a rule for sanctification or a direction of life. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep Your righteous judgments" (Ps. 119:105-106). "For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Prov. 6:23). The Holy Spirit regenerates a man's heart, gives him the gift of faith (Eph. 2:8-9) and repentance (Ac. 5:31; 11:18) and then in progressive sanctification He works upon the conscious life of a man through the word of God. "Sanctify them by Your truth" (Jn. 17:17). "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit..." (1 Pet. 1:22). "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby..." (1 Pet. 2:2). Although the whole Bible is our law-word unto sanctification, since growth in godliness is focused on an ethical conformity to God's word, it is wise and proper to focus on God's moral law as a means of grace for spiritual growth. The law defines sin and tells us what we must do and not do to please God. Thus, we must learn the law and meditate on it in order to die unto sin and live unto righteousness. Consequently by the Spirit David wrote, "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11, 15). While the Holy Spirit employs the *means* of grace (plural), all of these means are dependent upon and subordinate to God's law-word. The Bible defines prayer, tells us how to pray and even what to pray. Apart from the Scriptures, the sacraments are meaningless rituals. That is why in reformed churches the Lord's supper is part of public worship and *always* accompanies the preached word.

As we consider the law's function as a crucial means of sanctification, we need to make an important distinction to avoid confusion and the leaven of dispensationalism.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:663.

Dispensationalists will argue that Christians are not sanctified by the law and that the law has nothing to do with New Testament believers. This is a blatant misreading of Scripture. To have a proper view, we need to keep a few theological points in mind. In one sense, it is certainly true that the law does not sanctify. The law, *apart from* the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ and an internal work of the Holy Spirit that flows from that efficacy, cannot make a person holy. Without regeneration, faith in Christ and union with Him in His redemptive work, the law is a dead letter. It can produce self-righteous Pharisees, hypocrites and arrogant men but it cannot produce a genuine God-glorifying righteousness. However, when a person is truly converted and baptized with the Holy Spirit, the moral law becomes the standard, guide or rule by which the Spirit of grace directs his behavior. When Paul describes himself after his conversion, he says that as a Christian he has a “delight in the law of God according to the inward man” (Rom. 7:22). The apostle’s regenerate mind consented to, approved of, and delighted in the moral perfections of God’s revealed moral law. His fight against sin as a saved individual involved a heartfelt commitment to the moral law. Because the Holy Spirit had illuminated his mind and had given him a new heart, he viewed the law as God did. He stopped twisting it as a Pharisee and acknowledged its spiritual, internal nature. He now loved what God loved and hated what God hated. In our battle against the flesh, our renewed soul recognizes the moral law as our ally in personal sanctification. It identifies those things (thoughts, words, and deeds) that we are to put off and the holy, righteous counterparts that we are to put on. Yes, it is true that the law *without Christ* cannot make a person holy. But, with Christ, that same law is used by the Holy Spirit as a standard of holiness and thus is a chief means of grace. The Holy Spirit within sends us to the law as to the rule without and it writes God’s law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34) so that God’s law is our principle and way of life.

If we keep the proper use of the law and the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ in mind, we now understand what Paul meant when he said, “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31) This verse is connected to the preceding statements of Paul by the word “then.” Paul had just argued that men could not be justified by obedience to the law (vs. 21-30). Men are not justified by doing, but by believing. In context, it is obvious that Paul is discussing the Mosaic law (e.g., “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified” [v. 20]; “the righteousness of God apart from the law” [v. 21]; “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” [v. 28]). Since the apostle is making universal statements about all mankind (e.g., “every mouth...all the world” [v. 19]; “no flesh” [v. 20]; “to all and on all” [v. 22]) and is comparing two kinds of righteousness: the righteousness obtained by faith and attempts to achieve righteousness by observing the law, Paul’s focus here is on the revealed Old Testament moral law. Interestingly, in the Greek, “law” in this question is in an emphatic position: “the law do we nullify?” The apostle raises this hypothetical question at the end of this chapter precisely because he, at some length, has been speaking strongly against the law as a means of justification. If the keeping of the law serves no role in our justification, then is the law irrelevant for New Covenant believers? Doesn’t Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from works, render the law of God superfluous?

The apostle answers this question with his strongest, most emphatic formula of denial: “God forbid!” or literally, “Let it never be!” He views the idea that the gospel results in an abrogation of the law for daily living with shock and abhorrence. “On the contrary,” he affirms, “we establish the law.” “The forceful character of the answer must probably be explained in the light of the fact that there were those who were saying, ‘Let us do away with the law. All we

need is faith. Let us continue in sin, that grace may abound.”¹⁴ Here Paul anticipates the main objection to his argument and deals with it in brief. He will take up this subject in much more detail later on when he discusses the work of Christ as it relates to sanctification, in opposition to the accusation of antinomianism.

The verb (*histomen*) translated “we establish” means “to cause to stand” or “confirm.” Although the Christian never obeys the law as a means of justification, he is still obligated to obey the moral law in order to live a sanctified or godly lifestyle. An imputed righteousness apart from a personal obedience to the law does not mean that believers can ignore the moral demands of the law as the proper, ethical, Christian way to live. Paul says that the moral requirements of the law are still in effect as the authoritative will of God for New Covenant believers. John Owen notes that “faith does not render void, or nullify the authority, the use and sanctions of the moral law, but on the contrary, sustains and confirms them. Though it does what the law does not, and cannot do, inasmuch as it saves the sinner whom the law condemns; yet it effects this without relaxing or dishonoring the law, but in a way that renders it, if possible, more binding, and more honourable, and more illustrious.”¹⁵ The doctrine of justification by faith establishes the law

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 137.

¹⁵ John Owen, as quoted by the editor in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 151-152, footnote 1. The interpretation that Romans 3:31 teaches the continuing validity of the Old Testament moral law for the sanctification of believers is common among the best Protestant interpreters. Calvin writes, “For the *moral* law is in reality confirmed and established through faith in Christ, inasmuch as it was given for this end—to lead man to Christ, by showing him his iniquity; and without this it cannot be fulfilled, and in vain will it require what ought to be done; nor can it do anything but irritate lust more and more, and thus finally increase man’s condemnation; but where there is a coming to Christ, there is first found in him the perfect righteousness of the law, which becomes ours by imputation, and then there is sanctification, by which our hearts are prepared to keep the law; it is indeed imperfectly done, but there is an aiming at the work.... Let us then also bear in mind, so to dispense the gospel that by our mode of teaching the law may be confirmed; but let it be sustained by no other strength than that of faith in Christ (*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 152). Matthew Poole says, “It is indeed abolished as a covenant of works, and in this sense is made void to believers; and it is done away as to the form of administration of it by Moses; and it is destroyed as a yoke of bondage; and the people of God are free from the malediction of it, and condemnation by it, and so from its terror; yet it remains unalterable and unchangeable in the hands of Christ; the matter of it is always the same, and ever obligatory on believers, who, though they are freed from the curse of it, are not exempted from obedience to it: wherefore the law is not made void, so as to be destroyed and abolished in every sense, or to be rendered idle, inactive, useless, and insignificant; but, on the contrary, is made to stand, is placed on a sure basis and firm foundation, as the words used signify (*Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3:498). Matthew Henry concurs, “*Do we then make void the law through faith? A very material objection is here to be anticipated and answered, viz. that by establishing justification by faith alone the law is rendered useless, and the obligation thereto destroyed. God forbid: yea, we establish the law:* having rejected this objection, by his usual note of abhorrency, he proceeds to show, that nothing more establisheth the law, inasmuch as by faith we attain a perfect righteousness, we are interested in the most complete obedience of Christ to the moral law; and that hereby every type, promise, and prophecy is fulfilled; see Matt. v. 17; Luke xvi. 17: and we ourselves also being enabled thereunto by a gospel spirit, have a more exact conformity to the law, though we cannot reach to a fulfilling of it (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:388). John Gill’s commentary reads, “He obviates an objection (v. 31), as if this doctrine did nullify the law, which they knew came from God: ‘No,’ says he, ‘though we do say that the law will not justify us, yet we do not therefore say that it was given in vain, or is of no use to us; no *we establish the right use of the law*, and secure its standing, by fixing it on the right basis. The law is still of use to convince us of what is past, and to direct us for the future; though we cannot be saved by it as a covenant, yet we own it, and submit to it, as a rule in the hand of the Mediator, subordinate to the law of grace; and so are so far from overthrowing that we establish the law.’ Let those consider this who deny the obligation of the moral law on believers” (*An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:440). Charles Hodge writes, “If it means the moral law, which no doubt was prominently intended, still it is not invalidated, but established. No moral obligation is

because justified believers who live according to the Spirit fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (cf. 13:8, 10). Paul makes this point explicit in Romans 8:3-4, “What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Jesus not only destroyed sin and guilt judicially at the cross but also conquered the enslaving dominion of sin over our lives (cf. Rom. 6:2-14).¹⁶

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weakened, no penal sanction disregarded. The precepts are enforced by new and stronger motives, and the penalty is answered in Him who bore our sins in his own body on the tree” (*Romans*, 102. See also John Murray, John Stott, R. J. Rushdoony, William Hendriksen, Thomas R. Schreiner, etc.).

¹⁶ The common view of older commentators, that verse 4 is only forensic, has rightly been rejected by the vast majority of modern commentators. Some reasons for this are as follows. First, the fact that verse 3 is discussing the sacrificial death of Christ (contrary to Hodge) does not necessitate a strictly forensic view. Paul in Romans 6 and 7 had just explained how the efficacy of Jesus’ death *extends* to deliverance from the power of sin. Murray writes, “It will have become apparent why it was maintained at the outset that ‘condemnation’ should be interpreted more inclusively than freedom from the guilt of sin. As it has been shown, it is the judicial aspect that is in view in God’s condemnation of sin in the flesh. And it is this same judicial aspect of our enslavement to the power of sin that comes into view in verse 1. Our enslavement to sin is properly viewed as the judgment to which we are consigned and there can be no release from this bondage, contemplated in its judicial character until sin as power receives its judicial condemnation in the cross of Christ and until the effectual application to us takes effect. Hence freedom from condemnation must embrace freedom from the judgment of sin’s power as well as the judgment of sin’s guilt” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:282).

Second, the strictly forensic view must interpret verse 4 as teaching that in a certain sense our justification is subjective for Paul says plainly, “the law might be fulfilled in us.” The problem with this view is that it contradicts the Scriptural teaching that justification is *objective* to the sinner. It takes place in the heavenly court, not in our souls or our flesh. In addition, our Lord’s perfect obedience to the law takes place outside the sinner. Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed or reckoned to the sinner’s account even though personally he is still a sinner.

Third, in verse 4 Paul describes the fulfillment of the law in us as walking in the Spirit and not according to the flesh. This statement clearly refers to personal behavior. Because of Christ’s redemptive work, the Christian’s lifestyle is directed by the Holy Spirit and not the sinful flesh. The Spirit indwells believers, breaks the power of sin and more and more enables them to obey God’s holy law (cf. Gal. 5:18, 25 where walking in the Spirit refers to sanctification).

Fourth, the objection that the phrase “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” implies sinless perfection and thus cannot refer to sanctification (e.g., Calvin and Hodge) is refuted by the analogy of Scripture. When the Bible speaks of certain believers as being righteous, upright, faithful or blameless, it is understood that this does not mean a perfect obedience to the law. When Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) in his discussion of sanctification, no one believes this refers to a perfect and perpetual love of our brethren this side of heaven.