

CHAPTER 23

Was the Law Abolished?*

Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. (Romans 3:31 KJV)

We examine Paul's attitude toward the law in this topic. This study looks at the apparent contradiction between Paul's condemnation and approval of the law.

Our immediate concern is to establish the apostle's view toward the Old Testament law in general. Did Paul teach that Christ abolished the Mosaic Law in particular and/or the Old Testament law in general? Did he teach that Christians are no longer obligated to observe them? This has been the predominate view in Christian history and is still strongly defended by numerous churches.

In the "Sabbath or Sunday" debate, it has been customary to appeal to Paul in defense of the view that the Old Testament law in general and of the Sabbath in particular were abolished. In view of the immense importance attributed to Paul's comments regarding the law and the Sabbath, we shall consider Paul's attitude toward the law in general.

To determine Paul's view of the law we will first examine the apparent contradiction between Paul's negative and positive statements about the law. Second, we will attempt to find a resolution to this problem by distinguishing in Paul's writings between the moral and saving functions of the law and by recognizing that his criticism of the law is directed not toward Jewish-Christians but toward Gentile Judaizers.

Various Meanings to the Term "Law"

Paul uses the term "law" at least 135 times in his epistles, but not in a uniform way. The same term "law" is used by Paul to refer to such things as the Mosaic Law (Gal 4:21; Rom 7:22, 25; 1 Cor 9:9), the whole Old Testament (1 Cor 14:21; Rom 3:19, 21), the will of God written in the heart of Gentiles (Rom 2:14-15), the governing principle of conduct (works or faith—Rom 3:27), evil inclinations (Rom 7:21), and the guidance of the Spirit (Rom 8:2).

Sometimes the term "law" is used by Paul in a personal way as if it were God Himself talking: "whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law" (Rom

* * based on the work of Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D., Andrews University "Paul and The Law", *The Sabbath In The New Testament*.

3:19). Here the word "law" could be substituted with the word "God" (compare 1 Cor 9:8).

Romans 3:19: Now we know that what things so ever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (KJV)

1 Corinthians 9:8: Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? (KJV)

A Double Concept of the Law

First, we need to point out that Paul has a double concept of the law, sometimes saying that it is good and has been fulfilled in Christ and sometimes saying that it is bad and has been abolished in Christ.

In Ephesians 2:15, Paul speaks of the law as having been *abolished* by Christ, while in Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law but *establishes* it. In Romans 7:6, he states that "now we are delivered from the law" while a few verses later he writes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12).

Ephesians 2:15: Having **abolished** in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace; (KJV)

Romans 3:31: Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we **establish** the law. (KJV)

Romans 7:6: But **now we are delivered from the law**, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not *in* the oldness of the letter. (KJV)

Romans 7:12: Wherefore **the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good**. (KJV)

In Romans 10:4, Paul writes that "Christ is the end of the law" while in chapter 8:3-4, he explains that Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh . . . that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us." In Romans 3:28, he maintains that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law," yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 he states that neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but "keeping the commandments of God." In 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul designates the law as "the ministration of death" while in Romans 3:2 he views it as part of the "oracles of God" entrusted to the Jews.

Romans 10:4: For **Christ is the end of the law** for righteousness to every one that believeth. (KJV)

Romans 8:3-4: For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That **the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us**, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (KJV)

Romans 3:28: Therefore we conclude that **a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law**. (KJV)

1 Corinthians 7:19: Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, **but the keeping of the commandments of God**. (KJV)

2 Corinthians 3:7: But if the **ministration of death**, written *and* engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which *glory* was to be done away: (KJV)

Compare also the *New Century Version* translation:

2 Corinthians 3:7: The law that brought death was written in words on stone. It came with God's glory, which made Moses' face so bright that the Israelites could not continue to look at it. But that glory later disappeared. (NCV)

Romans 3:2: Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the **oracles of God**. (KJV)

Compare also *The Living Bible* translation:

Romans 3:2: Yes, being a Jew has many advantages. First of all, God trusted them with his laws so that they could know and do his will. *The Living Bible*, 1997.

Is it possible to reconcile Paul's apparently contradictory statements about the law? How can Paul view the law both as "*abolished*" (Eph 2:15) and "*established*" (Rom 3:31), *unnecessary* (Rom 3:28) and *necessary* (1 Cor 7:19; Eph 6:2, 3; 1 Tim 1:8-10)?

Ephesians 2:15: Having **abolished** in his flesh the enmity, *even the law of commandments contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace; (KJV)

Romans 3:31: Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, **we establish the law**. (KJV)

Romans 3:28 : Therefore we conclude that **a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law**. (KJV)

Ephesians 6:2-3: **Honour thy father and mother**; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. (KJV)

1 Timothy 1:8-10: **But we know that the law is good**, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; (KJV)

A popular explanation has been to say that Paul's negative statements refer to the Mosaic, ceremonial law, while the positive ones refer to the moral law of the Ten Commandments. Such an explanation, however, is based on an arbitrary distinction between moral and ceremonial law which cannot be found in Paul's writings. The correct explanation is found in the different contexts in which Paul speaks of the law. When he speaks of the law in the context of salvation or justification (right standing before God), he clearly affirms that law-keeping is of no value (Rom 3:20).

Romans 3:20: Therefore **by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified** in his sight: for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. (KJV)

On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the law in the context of Christian conduct or sanctification (right living before God), then he maintains the value and validity of God's law (Rom 7:12; 13:8-10; 1 Cor 7:19 above). For example, when Paul speaks of the various forms of human wickedness in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 (above), he explicitly affirms "now we know that the law is good" (v. 8).

Romans 7:12: **Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.** (KJV)

Romans 13:8-10: Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for **he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.** For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if *there be* any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore **love is the fulfilling of the law.** (KJV)

The Cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is central to Paul's understanding of the law. From this perspective, Paul both denies and affirms the law. Negatively, Paul rejects the law as the basis of justification. If justification were through the law, then Christ died in vain (Gal 2:21).

Galatians 2:21: I do not frustrate the grace of God: for **if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.** (KJV)

Positively, Paul teaches that the law is good, holy, and just (Rom 7:12, 14, 16; 1 Tim 1:8) because it exposes sin and reveals God's ethical standards. Thus, he

states that Christ came in order “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” through the dynamic power of His spirit (Rom 8:4).

Romans 7:12: **Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.** (NKJV).

Romans 7:14-16: **The law is good, then. The trouble is not with the law but with me,** because I am sold into slavery, with sin as my master. I don’t understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. (*Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996).

Romans 8:4: **That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us,** who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (KJV)

Three times Paul states: "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision" and each time he concludes this statement with a different phrase: "but keeping the commandments of God . . . but faith working through love . . . but a new creation" (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15). Let us look at these verses below.

1 Corinthians 7:19: Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, **but keeping the commandments of God** is what matters. (NKJV)

Galatians 5:6: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **faith working through love.** (NKJV)

Galatians 6:15: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, **but a new creation.** (NKJV)

This similarity suggests that Paul equates the keeping of God’s commandments with a working faith and a new life in Christ. So then, the Christian is under the law as a revelation of God’s ethical standards for his life, but he is not under the law as a method of salvation. Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a standard for Christian conduct.

The Law and the Gentiles

To see Paul’s criticism of the law in perspective, it is important to realize that Paul’s letters were written to congregations made up predominantly of Gentile converts (1 Thess 1:9; 1 Cor 12:2; Gal 4:8; Rom 11:13; 1:13; Col 1:21; Eph 2:11). A crucial problem among Gentile-Christians was their right as Gentiles to enjoy full citizenship with the people of God, without becoming members of the covenant community through circumcision.

The relationship of Israel to the Gentile world was the foremost theological problem of Judaism in the first century. Basically the problem for the Jews consisted in determining what commandments the Gentiles had to observe in order for them to have a

share in the world to come. No clear-cut answer to this question existed in Paul's time. Some Jews held that Gentiles had to observe only a limited number of commandments. Other Jews insisted that Gentiles had to observe the whole law, including circumcision. In other words, they had to become full-fledged members of the covenant community to share in the blessings.

The fact that a certain group in the early church was referred to as "the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12) reflects how deeply controversial the ancient practice of circumcision had become by the first century A.D. Originally mandated by God as a sign of His covenant relationship with Israel (see Gen. 17:9–14), circumcision became a mark of exclusivity, not only among the Jews, but also among the early Jewish Christians. The Hebrew people came to take great pride in this rite. In fact, it became a badge of their spiritual and national superiority. This attitude eventually fostered a spirit of exclusivism instead of compassion to reach out to other nations as God intended. They came to regard Gentiles as the "uncircumcised," a term of disrespect implying that non-Jewish peoples were outside the circle of God's love. Thus the term "circumcised" and "uncircumcised" became charged with emotion, as is plain from the discord the issue brought about in the early church.

A crisis erupted at Antioch when believers from Judea, known as Judaizers, taught the believers, "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). In effect, the Judaizers insisted that a person from a non-Jewish background must first become a Jew ceremonially by being circumcised before he could be admitted to the Christian faith. A council of apostles and elders was convened at Jerusalem to resolve the issue (Acts 15:6–29). Among those attending were Paul, Barnabas, Simon Peter, and James, leader of the Jerusalem church. To insist on circumcision for the Gentiles, Peter argued, would amount to a burdensome yoke (15:10). This was the decision handed down by the council. Years later, reinforcing that decision, the apostle Paul wrote the believers at Rome that Abraham, the "father of circumcision" (Rom. 4:12), was saved by faith rather than by circumcision (4:9–12). He declared circumcision to be of no value unless accompanied by an obedient spirit (2:25–26).

Paul also spoke of the "circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11), a reference to his atoning death which "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3) and nailed "the handwriting of requirements" to the cross (Col. 2:14). **In essence, Paul declared that the new covenant of Christ's shed blood has made forgiveness available to both Jew and Gentile and has made circumcision unnecessary. All that ultimately matters for both Jew and Gentile is a changed nature—a new creation that makes them one in Jesus Christ**

¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders by birth. You were called "the uncircumcised ones" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from God's people, Israel, and you did not know the promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you belong to Christ Jesus. Though you once were far away from God, now you have been brought near to him

because of the blood of Christ.¹⁴ For Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us. ¹⁵ By his death he ended the whole system of Jewish law that excluded the Gentiles. His purpose was to make peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new person from the two groups. (Eph. 2:11–15 *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996.)

Through the death of Christ, the wall between Jews and Gentiles was broken down. Jews and Gentiles become one in Christ at the moment of new birth:

But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace (Eph. 2:13–15 KJV).

Among the Jews, circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God established with his chosen people Israel. But in Christ, God established a new covenant, open to all people. (1 Cor. 11:25). It was because of this unclarity that legalism, the doing of certain works to win God's favor and be counted righteous, became a Gentile problem and not a Jewish problem. Salvation was for all who were members of the covenant community, but since the Gentiles were not under the covenant, they had to establish their own righteousness to gain such an assurance of salvation.

The phrase "works of the law" is not found in Jewish texts and designates the adoption of selected Jewish practices by the Gentiles to ensure their salvation as part of the covenant people of God. Recognition of this legalistic Gentile attitude is important to our understanding of the background of Paul's critical remarks about the law.

The Jewish problem of whether Gentiles were saved within or without the covenant, soon became also a Christian problem. Before his conversion and divine commission to the Gentiles, Paul apparently believed that Gentiles had to conform to the whole Mosaic law, including circumcision, in order for them to be saved. The latter is suggested by the phrase "but if I still preach circumcision" (Gal 5:11), which implies that at one time he did preach circumcision as a basis of salvation.

Galatians 5:11: Dear brothers and sisters, if I were still preaching that you must be circumcised—as some say I do—why would the Jews persecute me? The fact that I am still being persecuted proves that I am still preaching salvation through the cross of Christ alone. *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996.

After his conversion and divine commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul understood that Gentiles share in the blessing of salvation without having to become part of the covenant community through circumcision. To defend this conviction, Paul appeals in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to the example of Abraham who became the father of all who believe by faith before he was circumcised.

Romans 4:1-3: Well then, what can we say about our ancestor Abraham? **2** If he

became acceptable to God because of what he did, then he would have something to brag about. But he would never be able to brag about it to God. **3** The Scriptures say, "God accepted Abraham because Abraham had faith in him." *The Contemporary English*, c1995 by the American Bible Society.

Galatians 3:1-11: You stupid Galatians! I told you exactly how Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross. Has someone now put an evil spell on you? I want to know only one thing. How were you given God's Spirit? Was it by obeying the Law of Moses or by hearing about Christ and having faith in him? How can you be so stupid? Do you think that by yourself you can complete what God's Spirit started in you? Have you gone through all of this for nothing? Is it all really for nothing? God gives you his Spirit and works miracles in you. But does he do this because you obey the Law of Moses or because you have heard about Christ and have faith in him? The Scriptures say that God accepted Abraham because Abraham had faith. And so, you should understand that everyone who has faith is a child of Abraham. Long ago the Scriptures said that God would accept the Gentiles because of their faith. That's why God told Abraham the good news that all nations would be blessed because of him. This means that everyone who has faith will share in the blessings that were given to Abraham because of his faith. Anyone who tries to please God by obeying the Law is under a curse. The Scriptures say, "Everyone who doesn't obey everything in the Law is under a curse." No one can please God by obeying the Law. The Scriptures also say, "The people God accepts because of their faith will live." *The Contemporary English*, c1995 by the American Bible Society.

In proclaiming his non-circumcision Gospel, Paul faced a double challenge. On the one hand, he faced the opposition of Jews and Jewish-Christians because they failed to understand that through Christ, God had fulfilled His promises to Abraham regarding the Gentiles. On the other hand, Paul had to deal with the misguided efforts of the Gentiles who were tempted to adopt circumcision and other practices to ensure their salvation by becoming members of the covenant community (Gal 5:2-4).

The Law as a Document of Election.

To counteract the double challenge from Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul was forced to speak critically of the law as a document of election. Several scholars have recently shown that the concept of the covenant—so central in the Old Testament—came more and more to be expressed by the term "law". One's status before God came to be determined by one's attitude toward the Law as a document of election and not by obedience to specific commandments.

The law came to mean a revelation of God's electing will manifested in His covenant with Israel. Obviously this view created a problem for the uncircumcised Gentiles because they felt excluded from the assurance of salvation provided by the covenant. This insecurity naturally led Gentiles to "desire to be under law" (Gal 4:21), that is, to become full-fledged covenant members by receiving circumcision (Gal 5:2). Paul felt compelled to react strongly against this trend because it undermined the universality of the Gospel.

To put an end to the Gentiles' desire to be under law, Paul appeals to the Law, specifically to Abraham, to argue that the mothers of his two children, Ishmael and Isaac, stand for two covenants: the first based on works and the second on faith (Gal 4:22-31); the first offering slavery and the second resulting in freedom. The first, Hagar who bears "children of slavery," is identified with the covenant of Mount Sinai (Gal 4:24).

Galatians 4:21-31: Listen to me, you friends who think you have to obey the Jewish laws to be saved: Why don't you find out what those laws really mean? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave-wife and one from his freeborn wife. There was nothing unusual about the birth of the slave-wife's baby. But the baby of the freeborn wife was born only after God had especially promised he would come.

Now this true story is an illustration of God's two ways of helping people. One way was by giving them his laws to obey. He did this on Mount Sinai, when he gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Mount Sinai, by the way, is called "Mount Hagar" by the Arabs—and in my illustration, Abraham's slave-wife Hagar represents Jerusalem, the mother-city of the Jews, the center of that system of trying to please God by trying to obey the Commandments; and the Jews, who try to follow that system, are her slave children. But our mother-city is the heavenly Jerusalem, and she is not a slave to Jewish laws.

That is what Isaiah meant when he prophesied, **"Now you can rejoice, O childless woman; you can shout with joy though you never before had a child. For I am going to give you many children—more children than the slave-wife has." You and I, dear brothers, are the children that God promised, just as Isaac was. And so we who are born of the Holy Spirit are persecuted now by those who want us to keep the Jewish laws, just as Isaac, the child of promise, was persecuted by Ishmael, the slave-wife's son.** But the Scriptures say that God told Abraham to send away the slave-wife and her son, for the slave-wife's son could not inherit Abraham's home and lands along with the free woman's son. Dear brothers, we are not slave children, obligated to the Jewish laws, but children of the free woman, acceptable to God because of our faith. *The Living Bible*, 1997.

The Sinai Covenant.

Why does Paul attack so harshly the Sinai covenant which, after all, was established by the same God who made a covenant with Abraham? Besides, did not the Sinai covenant contain provisions of grace and forgiveness (for example, tabernacle—Ex 25-30) besides principles of conduct (Ex 20-23)? The answer to these questions is to be found in Paul's concern to establish the legitimacy of the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles.

To accomplish this goal, Paul attacks the understanding of the law (covenant) as an exclusive document of election. This does not mean that he denies the possibility of salvation to Jews who accepted Christ as the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. On the contrary, he explicitly acknowledges that just as he was "entrusted with the gospel to the

uncircumcised," so "Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised" (Gal 2:7).

Galatians 2:4-5: Even that question wouldn't have come up except for some so-called "Christians" there—false ones, really—who came to spy on us and see what freedom we enjoyed in Christ Jesus, as to whether we obeyed the Jewish laws or not. They tried to get us all tied up in their rules, like slaves in chains. But we did not listen to them for a single moment, for we did not want to confuse you into thinking that salvation can be earned by being circumcised and by obeying Jewish laws. *The Living Bible*, 1997.

Galatians 2:15-20: You and I are Jews by birth, not mere Gentile sinners, and yet we Jewish Christians know very well that we cannot become right with God by obeying our Jewish laws but only by faith in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And so we, too, have trusted Jesus Christ, that we might be accepted by God because of faith—and not because we have obeyed the Jewish laws. For no one will ever be saved by obeying them."... Rather, we are sinners if we start rebuilding the old systems I have been destroying of trying to be saved by keeping Jewish laws, for it was through reading the Scripture that I came to realize that I could never find God's favor by trying—and failing—to obey the laws. **I came to realize that acceptance with God comes by believing in Christ. I have been crucified with Christ: and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** *The Living Bible*, 1997.

He had renounced all hopes of justification by the works of the law, and was not willing any longer to continue under bondage. But he was far from thinking himself discharged from his duty to God; on the contrary, he was dead to the law that he might live unto God. The doctrine of the gospel, which he had embraced, instead of weakening the bond of duty upon him, did but strengthen and confirm it. Therefore, though he was dead to the law, it was only in order to his living a new and better life to God. Such a life as would be more agreeable and acceptable to God than his observance of the Mosaic law could now be, that is, a life of faith in Christ, and under the influence thereof, a life of holiness and righteousness towards God.

Romans 7:4-6: So this is the point: The law no longer holds you in its power, because you died to its power when you died with Christ on the cross. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, you can produce good fruit, that is, good deeds for God. When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced sinful deeds, resulting in death. But now we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now we can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit. *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996.

Romans 6:1-15: **What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer**

therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. **Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.** Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. **What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.** *The King James Version, 1769.*

Paul acquaints us that, as he was dead to the law, so he was alive unto God through Jesus Christ (v. 11): *I am crucified with Christ*, etc. And here he gives us an excellent description of the mysterious life of a believer. (1.) *He is crucified, and yet he lives*; the old man is crucified (Rom. 6:6), but the new man is living; he is dead to the world, and dead to the law, and yet alive to God and Christ; sin is mortified, and grace quickened. (2.) *He lives, and yet not he*. This is strange: *I live, and yet not I*; he lives in the exercise of grace; he has the comforts and the triumphs of grace; and yet that grace is not from himself, but from another. Believers see themselves living in a state of dependence. (3.) *He is crucified with Christ*, and yet *Christ lives in him*. This results from his mystical union with Christ. So to die unto sin, and yet be interested in the life of Christ, so as to live unto God. (4.) *He lives in the flesh*, and yet *lives by faith*; to outward appearance he lives as other people do, yet he has a higher and nobler principle that supports and actuates him, that of faith in Christ.

Since the circumcision had become equated with the covenant, the Gospel to the circumcised emphasized that Christ was the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. This would make it possible for Jews to be saved as Jews, that is, while retaining their identity as a covenant people. Christ would be seen as the One who through His blood ratified the covenant by making it operative (Matt 26:28).

Note that Paul does not deny the value of circumcision for the Jews. On the contrary he affirms: “Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.” (Rom 2:25 NRSV). Again in Romans 9 to 11 Paul does not rebuke the Jews for being "Jewish" in their lifestyle (11:1) but rather for failing to understand that the Gentiles in Christ have equal access to the Kingdom as Gentiles.

Romans 11:1: I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself

am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
(NRSV, 1989)

The Law and God's Promises.

**Then where does the law fit into God's promises to Israel and to the Gentiles?
Let's look at Paul's statements in Galatians 3:**

Galatians 3:15-29: Dear brothers and sisters, here's an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or amend an irrevocable agreement, so it is in this case. God gave the promise to Abraham and his child. And notice that it doesn't say the promise was to his children, as if it meant many descendants. But the promise was to his child—and that, of course, means Christ. This is what I am trying to say: The agreement God made with Abraham could not be canceled 430 years later when God gave the law to Moses. God would be breaking his promise. For if the inheritance could be received only by keeping the law, then it would not be the result of accepting God's promise. But God gave it to Abraham as a promise.

Well then, why was the law given? It was given to show people how guilty they are. But this system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made. And there is this further difference. God gave his laws to angels to give to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is needed if two people enter into an agreement, but God acted on his own when he made his promise to Abraham.

Well then, is there a conflict between God's law and God's promises? Absolutely not! If the law could have given us new life, we could have been made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures have declared that we are all prisoners of sin, so the only way to receive God's promise is to believe in Jesus Christ. Until faith in Christ was shown to us as the way of becoming right with God, we were guarded by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until we could put our faith in the coming Savior.

Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Christ came. So now, through faith in Christ, we are made right with God. But now that faith in Christ has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like him. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you. *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996.

Paul is telling his readers that the promise of inheritance given to Abraham preceded the giving of the law (Galatians 3:16,17). The promise came first; the law was added later, Paul's point is that the inheritance is based on the promise, not on a law that came later.

Galations 3:19: Wherefore then *serveth* the law? It was added **because of transgressions, till the seed should come** to whom the promise was made; *and it was* ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. *The King James Version*, 1769.

The phrase "because of transgressions" means simply that the law made transgressions known. It identified sin, and to its disobedient hearers resulted in sin becoming "sinful beyond measure" (Romans 7:13). **As Paul says, "Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (Romans 7:7).**

The phrase "till the seed should come" does not refer to the temporary nature of the ceremonial law; nor does it mean that the law as God's standard of behavior, or code of ethics and morality (i.e., the *educative role*), would be rendered invalid once Christ had come. It simply means that the law's role as a term of the covenant and as an exclusive doctrine of election of Israel had come to an end. When Paul said that the law was added "till the seed should come", he did not mean that the law had no more purpose or function once Christ, the seed, had come. Rather, he meant that the law had accomplished its purpose in making us aware of out transgressions and therefore, our need for a Savior. Christ did not abolish the law, but "nailed to the cross" the record of our transgressions, for those who put their trust in him.

So there is no conflict between God's law and God's promises to Abraham. The law was given to show people how guilty they were before God. The law served as a guardian and teacher to show us what was right and lead us until Christ came. We could not keep the law through our own efforts. The law's purpose was never to save. Rather, the law was a "tutor" (????????Gk.), designed to reveal man's sinfulness and inadequacy, thus sending him to God to find justification by faith. The law effects this purpose by demonstrating in its canons the holy character of God. Additionally, the law provides a perfect standard by which man may measure himself morally and spiritually. Seeing in the law the perfection of God and the imperfection of man, one is instructed to come to Christ in faith. The word ?????????? refers to a slave or guardian into whose charge the children were committed in a given household. Among other responsibilities, the guardian was to see that the child made it to school safely and returned home at the conclusion of the day. In the same way, the law supervised the growth of God's people until the coming of Christ. **The law functions to declare our guilt, drive us to Christ, directs us in a life of obedience, however the law is powerless to save. Through Christ's death and resurrection and faith in him, we are justified to God. Our life is no longer self-effort as law-keeping, but is a life empowered by the indwelling Spirit of Christ.**

Conclusion

The conclusion that emerges from the foregoing discussion is that Paul does not attack the validity and value of the law as a moral guide to Christian conduct. On the contrary, he emphatically affirms that Christ specifically came "in order that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom 8:4). What Paul criticizes is not

the moral but the saving functions of the law, that is, the law viewed as a document of election that includes the Jews and excludes the Gentiles.

The mounting pressure of Judaizers who were urging circumcision upon the Gentiles, made it necessary for Paul to attack the exclusive covenant concept of the law. But under other circumstances Paul might have insisted on the importance of Israel's retention of her distinctiveness.

The failure to distinguish in Paul's writing between his moral and saving functions of the law, and the failure to recognize that his criticism of the law is directed not toward Jewish-Christians but toward Gentile Judaizers, has led many to falsely conclude that Paul is a disciple who rejected the value and validity of the law as a whole. Such a view is totally unwarranted because, as we have shown, Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a moral standard of Christian conduct.

In summary then, the fundamental problem is this: people read only those statements of Paul which negate the value of the law as the basis of salvation, such as Romans 3:28, that we are saved by grace through faith without the works of the law. However, what many forget is that while on one hand Paul will affirm that we are not saved by the law, that we are saved by faith through grace without the works of the law, on the other hand, this same Paul says that the law is holy; the law is just; the law is pure (Rom. 7:12). God sent His Son in the flesh so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled. So the question is this: How can Paul negate the law on one hand and affirm it on the other hand? It seems contradictory. How can you say it's *abolished* and it's *established*? We have shown you that the key to resolve this apparent contradiction is in the context of any particular text. When Paul speaks of the law as the basis of salvation, he says that the law cannot save us. Because we are not saved through rules and regulations. Salvation is a divine gift. It's not a human achievement. So, when Paul speaks of the law as the basis of salvation he clearly says, the law is of no avail. But, when Paul speaks of the law as the *standard of salvation*-the standard to which we are saved, he says that we are not saved to remain in sin. But, we are saved to reflect the righteousness of God in our own life. And when Paul speaks of the law in terms of the standard of salvation, then he affirms it. Why? Because the function of the law is to help us understand the will of God so that we can develop the character after His likeness.

What Was Nailed to the Cross?

Many people today think it doesn't matter what days they keep to worship God. Most people who think of themselves as Christians also assume that the Apostle Paul passed on a "theological divorce" between Old Testament and New Testament practices involving the keeping of the law, the weekly Sabbath and the annual Holy Days. What is the truth and what was the law nailed to the cross at Christ's crucifixion?

Many people maintain that the Apostle Paul, despite some limited acceptance of

the law's general utility, was very specific "anti-Holy Day." To back up this position they cite Colossians 2:14-17:

¹⁴Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; ¹⁵And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. ¹⁶Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: ¹⁷Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ. (KJV)

Does Paul condemn the observance of the weekly Sabbath and the Holy Days in this scripture? To give an exhaustive answer would take us some time. So we are going to mention a few basic points.

First, we need to define what was nailed on the cross. The prevailing perception among many Christians, including commentaries, is that when Christ was nailed on the cross, they say it was the law that was symbolically nailed on the cross, whether it is moral or ceremonial. Different translations translate what was nailed to the cross slightly different:

handwriting of ordinances	<i>King James Version</i>
handwriting of requirements	<i>New King James Version</i>
charges proved against you	<i>Living Bible</i>
the bond against us	<i>New American Bible</i>
canceled the debt	<i>New Century Version</i>
canceled the record that contained the charges against us	<i>New Living Translation</i>

As you can see these last four translations all convey the idea that what was canceled was a record of charges against us, the bond or debt we owed for our sins. **It is as if we were a prisoner locked up in jail, and we have these charges against us for disobeying the law. When Christ died for us he paid the penalty for our sins and canceled the charges against us. This did not abolish the law itself that we had broken, but wiped out the charges against us and the record of our guilt.**

The Greek term used to describe what was nailed to the cross is *cheirographon*. It means "something that is handwritten"; a handwritten document that was nailed on the cross. That term occurs only once in the New Testament and only in Colossians 2:14. When you only have one usage of a word you cannot make a comparative analysis of the meaning of it. But fortunately, recent research has examined the usage of that Greek word in the extra-biblical literature of the same time period.

The *Apocalypse of Isaiah* and a number of other works contain the word. It is interesting to note that the term is used in extra-biblical literature to refer to the "record book of sin." This meaning fits beautifully with the context. If you read, beginning from verse 11, Colossians 2 speaks about putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, being buried with Him in baptism and being raised in Him through faith in the working of God.

Then verse 13 shows you were "dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, and he has made you alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

¹¹In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

¹²Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. ¹³And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; (KJV).

So, you notice Paul refers to circumcision and to baptism in showing how this represents the cleansing and the forgiveness of our sin. **And then having discussed this forgiveness, in verse 14, he goes a step further, showing the completeness of God's forgiveness by nailing to the cross, erasing and canceling even the record of our sin.** In other words, this image of the *cheirographon*, the hand-written document, has to be seen in this context. And the context is a whole theological discussion of Paul when he tries to help the Colossians that were misled by heretical Gnosticism.

Gnosticism has two basic tenets: (1) salvation is by mystic, exclusive knowledge, and (2) matter is evil. Some of its specific principles were: (1) the observance of certain religious rites of a Jewish character (2:16); (2) the rigorous practice of specific dietary prescriptions (2:16, 21); (3) a tendency toward asceticism (2:20) calling for self-abasement and severity to the body; (4) a reliance upon and promotion of human philosophies and special knowledge (2:8, 12, 13); (5) the veneration of angels (2:18); (6) attacks upon the centrality of Jesus Christ (1:15–19; 2:9, 10); (7) and exclusivism (3:11).

The phrase "basic principles of the world" of verse 2:8 refers to the unseen host of evil angelic beings who were thought to be in control of the universe in pagan belief (cf. v. 20). These spirits were believed by some to be associated with wind, cold, heat, and all natural phenomena. The phrase "Colossian heresy" describes a movement of false teachings within the church at Colossae, which threatened the faith of the new covenant. Paul composes the Colossian letter in an effort to correct certain errors in their teachings. In attacking the heresy in 2:4–23, Paul identifies several of its features. It is described as being very persuasive, alluring men to heretical opinions (v. 4). It is based upon human tradition rather than divine revelation (v. 8). It is legalistic, defining religion in terms of laws governing food and drink. It involves the worship of angels (v. 18). It is mystic, claiming visions and revelations and leading to the formation of a spiritual aristocracy (v. 18). It is ascetic, calling for self-abasement and severity to the body (v. 23).

In its mature form, Gnosticism attempts to combine Oriental theosophy (belief about God) and Greek philosophy with Christian doctrines. The essential errors of Gnosticism are found in its teachings relative to matter and the origin of the world. It holds that spirit is good and matter in itself is evil; therefore, God could not have created the world. In its effort to reconcile the holiness of God with the creation of evil matter, it imposes a series of emanations or lesser spirits called aeons, spirits, and angels between God and matter. These emanations place matter in a position so remote from God that God cannot be contaminated by creations of evil matter; yet He is close enough to have

the power to create matter. The aeon closest to God possesses a measure of the holiness and power of God, but each descending aeon contains less and less until, finally, there is one, the *Proteus*, Gk., that possesses just enough of God to create, but too little of God to remain uncontaminated by evil.

When Gnosticism confronts Christianity, it faces the problem of fitting Christ into its elaborate system. It identifies Him as an emanation somewhere between God and the evil universe. As a result, He is not regarded as God, but as a demigod. This leads to a grave error concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. The error takes two forms. The first denies the humanity of Jesus. In this case, Christ is regarded as having only a phantom body and as being wholly aeon or angel. He took upon Himself an apparent human form, but His body was only an illusion. The other form denies the identity of Jesus as the Christ. This speculation holds that Jesus had a natural human life, and the aeon (spirit) came upon Him at His baptism and left Him on the cross. The Gnostic philosophy gives rise to extremes of both asceticism and license. In the one view, evil is to be avoided altogether and the body abused as being evil in itself. In the other view, evil is everywhere and cannot be avoided; so there is no need to struggle with it. This results in the wildest license. Both of these concepts regarding evil run counter to the true teachings regarding God's dealings with evil.

When Paul learns from Epaphras of this threat to the Colossian church, he wastes no time in denouncing the false teachers and exposing the false doctrine. From Paul's perspective, the chief fault of this false doctrine lies in its failure to do justice to the divine Person and the atoning work of Christ. Paul answers the Gnostics with a true interpretation of the Person of Christ. He finds in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form (v. 9). This verse is an affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. He possesses all the unbounded powers and attributes of God. This strongly counters the Gnostic view that Jesus did not have an actual body but only a phantom body, or that the aeon Christ came on the human Jesus at His baptism and left Him on the cross.

These false teachers taught them that they had to call for the help of principalities, of powers, of the angels, translated: "the rudiments of the world"(KJV) or "elemental spirits of the universe" (RSV) (v. 20). And Paul in effect says, "Why do you feel so insecure? Why are you trying to seek salvation by submitting yourself to all of these rules and regulations? Don't you realize that God and Christ have forgiven you (v. 13), and yes, more than that, **He has even canceled, erased, nailed to the cross the record of your sin**, so you don't have anything to worry about."

Having developed this theological argument, from verses 12-15 Paul proceeds to discuss the implication: "Therefore, since you are completely forgiven, since you are completely at peace with Jesus Christ, 'let no one judge you.'" Careful now! This is the text that has been used historically as the death nail of the Sabbath and the Holy Days through Christian history.

So, who's doing the judging? Now we're coming to the real question. The mistaken, prevailing, historical misunderstanding of this text is that Paul is doing the

judging, in the sense that he's telling the Colossians: "Don't worry anymore about observing the annual, monthly or weekly Holy Days." However, a recent doctoral dissertation research has been completed by seven scholars who worked together in England at Cambridge University dealing with this Sabbath/Sunday question [Donald A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day, A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, Zondervan, 1982].

There's a whole chapter dealing with Paul, the Sabbath and the law and a whole section on Paul's preaching in Colossians 2:14-16. **These scholars say that the "anyone" doing the judging is not Paul, but the false teachers! Colossian heretics or Gnostics were doing the judging.** They were telling the Colossian believers how to eat, how to drink, and how to observe the annual, monthly and weekly days. They were telling the believers that if you really want to be saved, if you want to reach perfection, you have to eat in a certain way, drink in a certain way and observe the annual, monthly and weekly days in a certain way. They were laying down the rules and regulations or ordinances.

Paul says, let not anyone judge you, that is, dictate to you how to eat, how to drink, and how to observe the annual, monthly and weekly days. But, Paul is not doing the judging. The ones who are doing the judging are these false teachers. **And Paul tells these false teachers to mind their own business. Let them not trouble you, because apparently what the Colossian Christians were doing was correct.** When you condemn a perversion, that doesn't mean that you are condemning the principle. Professor Lincoln, in the dissertation just mentioned, comes out with a statement that **in this passage, Paul speaks approvingly of the five major practices: eating, drinking, observing festivals, new moons and Sabbaths.**

That is a complete turnaround! In the past, the passage has always been understood as Paul condemning those five practices. Today, scholars come out saying, "It's *not* a condemnation by Paul but an approval!" Just the opposite of what was formerly taught.

Which merely goes to show how sometimes even sincere people, even sincere scholars, have been misled and jumped to conclusions that were totally unwarranted. Today, there is a whole new realization that Paul was far more supportive of the observance of the biblical Sabbath and Holy Days of the Jewish calendar than we have ever imagined. What Paul is condemning is mainly the perversion of the Colossians, Galatians, and Romans, who were attracted by these Greek philosophical practices: gnosticism and asceticism.

Some of these heretical movements believed that in order to please God they had to submit themselves to regulations, by not touching, by fasting, by abstaining from certain foods, like in Romans 14 where Paul speaks about being a strict vegetarian. So the idea was that these practices would predispose you better to divine revelation and would enable you to please the "elements of the world," these old mediators. The idea was that there was a mediator between you and God. You could not reach God directly.

You had to go through these "elemental spirits of the universe." There are a lot of key words used by Paul that are reflective of this Gnostic, heretical system.

Paul says, "Listen, that doesn't make sense. Christ is the Head. We can have direct access to Jesus Christ. We do not need to call for help from anybody by submitting ourselves to all of this regulation." So, basically, we need to understand the context. **Many times, people will take a Bible text, "something nailed to the cross," and jump to the conclusion that it is the law. Paul did not even use the word "law." The Greek word "law" (*nomos*) doesn't occur a single time, not a single time in the whole epistle to the Colossians!**

Usually law and grace are the pivot of Paul's theology, but they are never discussed in the whole epistle. Paul is not talking about the law. Paul is talking about forgiveness. **God has completely forgiven us by nailing to the cross the record of our sin [*cheirophon*].** Because we are fully accepted in Jesus Christ, we do not need to follow heretics who say, "You're not accepted; you have to call for help from some elemental spirit by eating, drinking and observing days in a certain way." What Paul is condemning is the perversion, not the principle of the Scriptures.