

Annual Moore College Lectures  
2011

# Paul and the Law

## Keeping the Commandments of God



**Five-Lecture Series**  
Monday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011  
Lecture One



# The Puzzle of Paul and the Law

## *“Circumcision is nothing”*

### I. Make up your mind – Alleged Pauline Inconsistency

The crux of the problem of Paul and the law is the fact that his letters present both negative critique and positive approval of the law. On the one hand, Paul can describe the law as “holy, just and good,” a very positive gift of God, and can quote it for moral exhortation. On the other hand, he speaks of the law as an enslaving power, increasing trespass and used by sin to bring about death.

“the law is holy, just and good,” and  
“Christ is the end of the law”

“we uphold the law,” but  
“you are not under the law”

“does the law not speak entirely for our sake?,” yet  
“the law brings death and works wrath”

Was Paul confused? Did he change his mind? How can Paul believe both these sentiments? Some interpreters take sides with one and ignore the other. Others prematurely seek a compromising harmonization of the two, effectively muting both sets of texts. Treatments of Paul and the law distinguish themselves by how they explain this unmistakable tension in his thought.

“Paul’s view of *Torah* [the law] has led interpreters, concentrating on one aspect to the exclusion of others, to oversimplify his response to it.”  
(W.D. Davies)

### II. Complex – but Unavoidable and Critical

“Paul’s views on the law are *complex*.”  
(BWIII; DAH; DAC; JDGD; HR; NTW; PTOB; etc )

The puzzle of Paul and the law may well be the New Testament studies equivalent of Fermat’s Last Theorem in the discipline of mathematics, finding a solution to which exercised, and frustrated, mathematicians for hundreds of years.

### III. A Way Forward

1. *Look at all the evidence*
2. *Use Biblical Theology*
3. *Treat the law as a unity*

#### IV. Definitions – “Paul” and “the law”

By *Paul*, I mean both the Jew who was seized by Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:12) and became his apostle to the Gentiles and the letters he wrote which are collected in the New Testament. In a theologically conservative college this might seem like a formality. But it needs to be said, and carried through. It's remarkable how most scholars work with a truncated Pauline corpus when looking at Paul and the law. And as we'll see, some texts in the later Paulines shed much light.

With respect to the sense of νόμος in the New Testament, BDAG is typical of most lexica in noting three general meanings of the word in the New Testament: “rule, principle, norm,” “legal system” and “collection of holy writings.” Most treatments of the subject of Paul and the law take “law” in the second sense of “legal system” as their primary, if not exclusive focus.

“The ‘law’ in Paul’s writings frequently refers to the sum of specific divine commandments given to Israel through Moses.” (Stephen Westerholm)

“In the NT ... the term *law* most often refers to what is commanded in the Mosaic law.” (Thomas Schreiner)

But to take “law” to mean *legal material in the Pentateuch* poses problems. Torah or “law” most commonly came to denote not some collection of laws, or even the contents of the Sinai covenant, but rather the first five books of the Bible together. In terms of referent, both Hebrew *torah* and Greek νόμος in Jewish and Christian writings frequently denote the first five books of the sacred scriptures attributed to Moses, often labelled the Pentateuch or Torah. Paul can write of “the law [= the Pentateuch] and the prophets,” as in Romans 3:2. He can also introduce quotations from the Pentateuch as being found in the law, as in 1 Corinthians 9:8-9 where “law” and “Law of Moses” are equivalent: “Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn’t *the Law* say the same thing? For it is written in *the Law of Moses*: [quotation of Deut. 25:4].” For further examples see Matt. 12:5; Luke 2:23; 24:44; John 8:5, 17; Heb. 9:19, where “law” = the Pentateuch.

A test case for the meaning of νόμος for Paul occurs in Galatians, where in a single verse Paul writes of the law in apparently different ways:

“Tell me, you who want to be under the law,  
are you not aware of what the law says?”  
(Gal. 4:21; TNIV).

Two exceptions?

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under *the law*, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Rom 3:19)

“In *the law* it is written,  
‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners  
I will speak to this people; yet even then they will not listen to me,’  
says the Lord.” (1 Cor 14:21)

## V. A Hermeneutical Solution to the Puzzle

Not, *which bits*, but *as what*?

For Paul νόμος “is always the same collection of texts, but the import of those texts shifts dramatically in accordance with the hermeneutical perspective at each stage of the unfolding drama.” (Richard B. Hays)

## VI. An Initial Sounding – 1 Corinthians 7:19

“Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing,  
but *keeping the commandments of God*.”

This verse is properly described by E. P. Sanders as one of the most amazing sentences that Paul ever wrote. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more un-Jewish statement than the opening words, *Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing*. Far from an ill-considered slip, Paul says the same thing twice in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15. Paul’s attitude to circumcision was also borne out in practice: in Galatians 5:2 he tells Gentile believers not to be circumcised.

Circumcision was a sign of membership of the covenant community and virtually all Jews considered it a principal command. When Antiochus Epiphanes wanted to eradicate Judaism, one of the things he did was have all those who circumcised their children killed (1 Macc. 1:60-61). Philo firmly criticizes some who argued that the Mosaic laws (including that regarding circumcision) had merely symbolic significance and thus did not need to be literally obeyed (*Migr.* 89-93). Jubilees 15:33-34 warns against “children of Israel ... [who] will not circumcise their children according to the law.” 1 Maccabees 1:15 denounces Jewish men who remove the marks of circumcision. As Räisänen points out, for a Jew to be selective about the law was tantamount to disobeying it. To abandon circumcision was as good as annulling the law. In Acts 21:20-21, Paul telling people not to circumcise their children = turning away from (the Law of) Moses. This is confirmed in Acts 21:27-29, where Paul accused of teaching “against our (Jewish) law.”

However, Paul’s next words come as even more of a surprise and apparently create a confusing paradox: literally, “but (or instead) keeping God’s commands,” an idiom well translated as, *Keeping God’s commands is what counts* (TNIV).

“Paul is expressing a sharp paradox.”  
(N.T. Wright)

Both main terms, “keeping” and “commands,” seem to point to Paul saying that what is paramount is observing the Law of Moses. Apart from here in v. 19, the noun “commandments” or “commandment” (ἐντολή) is used thirteen times in Paul’s letters. In the majority, ten times, it refers unambiguously to the Jewish Law (Rom. 13:9; Eph. 2:15; 6:2; Tit. 1:14; and 6 times in Rom. 7). In the other three occurrences of the word (1 Cor. 14:37; Col. 4:10; 1 Tim. 6:14) it refers to Paul’s own instructions. The verb “to keep” can mean “obey” in the New Testament and is used regularly with reference to keeping the Law of Moses, namely, “God’s commandments” (Rev. 12:17; 14:12), the “commandments” (of Moses; Matt. 19:17), “the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), the Sabbath commandment (John 9:16)

and “the whole [Jewish] law” (Jas. 2:10). In 1 Corinthians 7:19 the related noun is used (τήρησης), which refers to “persisting in obedience” (BDAG). Thielman is right to observe that “keeping the commandments / laws” in Jewish and Christian literature regularly referred to obeying the Mosaic law (Sir. 29:1; 32:23; Wis. 6:18; Matt. 19:17; Josephus, *Ant.* 8:120, 395; 17:159). Since circumcision was an essential part of the law (Gen. 17:10-14; 23-27), what could Paul have possibly meant when he said that *circumcision is nothing* but the important thing was *keeping God’s commands*? How is this paradox to be resolved?

A common way forward is to draw on the venerable distinction between different parts of the law (civil, ceremonial and moral), dating back, in part at least, to the time of Origen. According to Thielman, for example, Paul distinguishes between parts of the law that count and parts that do not count. Circumcision falls squarely into the latter category. But (most of) the rest of the law is still valid as *God’s commands*. However, this approach fails to do justice to the absolute nature of Paul’s negative statements about the law and misses the rhetorical function of the other statements.

Two parallel texts in Galatians undermine further treating 1 Corinthians 7:19 as a paradox expressing both negative and positive assessments of the Law of Moses. In both cases the thing contrasted with the irrelevance of circumcision is not part of the law that remains (*contra* Thielman, et al.) but something that replaces the law entirely:

“In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.  
The only thing that counts is *faith expressing itself through love*” (Gal 5:6)

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything;  
what counts is *a new creation*” (Gal 6:15)

The complement to the repudiation of circumcision in both Galatians 5:6 and 6:15 is a substitute for the law. Since “faith through love” and “a new creation” cannot be understood as the Law of Moses in part or in any sense, it seems only reasonable that neither should *keeping God’s commands* in 1 Corinthians 7:19 be taken that way.

In this light 1 Corinthians 7:19 thus turns out to be not a paradox, but polemic. Instead of obeying the law, Paul says the important thing is to obey *God’s commands*, which, I believe, the Corinthians would have understood as Paul’s own instructions in the letter. The only other place where “commands” appears in 1 Corinthians is in 14:37: “what I am writing to you is the Lord’s *command*.” In Col. 4:10 and 1 Tim. 6:14 “command” likewise refers to apostolic instruction. Furthermore, if “God’s commands” in 1 Corinthians 7:19 refer to the Law of Moses, in whole or in part, this would be the only place in his letters where Christians are instructed to “keep them.” Paul’s words in 7:19 are formulated in a deliberately polemical fashion.

In my view Paul does three things with the law and each one must be fully heard without prejudicing the others: (1) polemical repudiation; (2) radical replacement; and (3) whole-hearted re-appropriation. These correspond to treating the law as *legal code*, *theological motif* and *source for expounding the gospel and for doing ethics* respectively. When describing Paul’s view of the law too often scholars notice one or two or two of these impulses and minimize, ignore or deny the other(s). All three moves occupy a vital place in what Paul says about and does with the law.

The next four lectures:

“Not under the law”  
Paul’s Repudiation of the Law as Legal Code  
(Tuesday)

“Under the law of Christ”  
Paul’s Replacement of the Law  
(Wednesday)

“Witness to the gospel”  
Paul’s Re-appropriation of the Law as Prophecy  
(Thursday)

“Written for our instruction”  
Paul’s Re-appropriation of the Law as Wisdom  
(Friday)

### ***Paul and the Law in 1 Corinthians***

<i>Text</i>	<i>Repudiation</i>	<i>Replacement</i>	<i>Re-appropriation as Prophecy</i>	<i>Re-appropriation as Wisdom</i>
7:19	“circumcision is nothing”	“Keeping God’s commands is what counts”		
9:20-21	“I am not under the law”	“I am under the law of Christ”		
8:5-6			Allusion to Deut. 6:4 – Christ the Lord	
15:45			Use of Gen. 2:7 to underscore the universal significance of Christ	
5:13b				Words from Deut. quoted to climax the expulsion of the incestuous man
9:9				Deut. 25:4 quoted, “do not muzzle the ox ...” to argue for financial support of ministers
10:11				the exodus and wilderness wanderings “were written down as [moral] warnings for us”

## VII. The Pillars of Judaism – Sectarian Strategies

“One of the most difficult areas in the study of Paul lies in trying to understand the ways in which, and the extent to which, Paul’s perspectives on his ancestral faith were reconfigured in the light of his vision of Christ.”  
(David Horrell)

“Paul’s controversial view of the Law was inextricably bound up with the significance which he ascribed to Jesus as Messiah and with the challenge this issued to all the fundamental symbols of Jewish life.”  
(W.D. Davies)

“Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against *our people, our law, and this place*” (Acts 21:28a)

## VIII. Implicit Evidence – What Paul doesn’t say

“The Jew is obliged to *do* the Torah (cf. [Gal] 3:10, 12; 5:3; also 6:13), while the Christian *fulfills* the Torah. ... [Paul] carefully distinguishes between the ‘doing’ and the ‘fulfilling’ of the Torah – the ‘doing’ of the Jewish Torah is not required of Christians, but the ‘fulfilling’ is.” (Hans Dieter Betz; 1979)

A Jew like Paul could be expected to relate to the law in a number of ways. According to his own testimony in Romans 2:17-29, Jews ‘rely on’ the law, ‘boast’ in the law, know God’s will through the law, are educated in the law, have light, knowledge and truth because of the law, are to ‘do’, ‘observe’ and ‘keep’ the law, on occasions ‘transgress’ the law, and possess the law as a ‘written code’. Much of this is confirmed by the Jewish Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish texts. Significantly, Paul never says that Christians relate to the law in any of these ways.

Jews also ‘learn’ the law, ‘walk according to the law’, and expect good fruit and good works to flow from their obedience to the law. Paul says none of these in relation to Christians.

Paul not only omits to say such things, but he usually puts something in their place and sometimes even reverses what Jews customarily said. To feel the full force of the implicit evidence we need to notice omission, substitution and reversal.

See JSNT article for the details:

[http://jnt.sagepub.com/content/32/4/405.full.pdf+html?ijkey=bLJ25jooxqvl&keytype=ref&siteid=spjnt&utm\\_source=eNewsletter&](http://jnt.sagepub.com/content/32/4/405.full.pdf+html?ijkey=bLJ25jooxqvl&keytype=ref&siteid=spjnt&utm_source=eNewsletter&)

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*Annual Moore College Lectures, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2011 – Brian S. Rosner*