

Annual Moore College Lectures  
2011

# Paul and the Law

## Keeping the Commandments of God



**Five-Lecture Series**  
Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2011  
Lecture Two



# Paul's Repudiation of the Law

## *"Not under the law"*

### I. The Nature and Extent of Paul's Opposition to the Law

"The Law of the Decalogue has no right to accuse and terrify the conscience in which Christ reigns through grace, for Christ has made this right obsolete."  
(Martin Luther)

"The law, *as* law, is meant to be observed: only so can the life and blessings that it promises be enjoyed." (Stephen Westerholm)

"The Law originally had the primary function of *defining the identity of God's elect people*, the Jews. Within that hermeneutical perspective, the Law was understood primarily as *commandment*." (Richard B. Hays)

Is Paul guilty of the charge of apostasy? When Paul arrived at Jerusalem after his second missionary journey in Acts 21, he was accused by zealous Jews of teaching "all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to commit apostasy (ἀποστασία) with respect to the teaching of Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children, or live according to our customs." Eusebius in the fourth century reports that the Ebionites regarded Paul to be an apostate from Judaism.

Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether Paul the Jew is guilty of the charge of apostasy. On one side of the debate, Segal argues in his book, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, that Paul would have been judged to be a renegade by Jews and Jewish Christians. Gaston and Barclay agree. Wilson points out that Paul himself apparently abandoned some Jewish practices when he lived among Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:22; Gal. 1:13-14).

Dunn, on the other hand, contends that: "Paul could never have accepted that his apostleship to the Gentiles constituted apostasy from Israel. Quite the contrary, he was apostle to the Gentiles precisely as apostle *for* Israel, apostle *of* Israel."

The question comes down to the interpretation of Paul's own claims over against the reactions he provoked. Either way, the issue places Paul's relationship to the Law of Moses in a sharply polemical setting.

If Paul's clearest explanation for his opposition to the law emerges from his use of Leviticus 18:5 (recall last Tuesday night), "not under the law" is Paul's most compact and comprehensive rejection of the law.

"He bestowed knowledge upon them,  
and allotted to them *the law of life*"  
(Sirach 17:11)

## II. Paul's Insistence that Believers are "not under the law"

Paul uses the phrase "under the law," ὑπὸ νόμου, eleven times (in eight verses) in Galatians, Romans and 1 Corinthians. A common mistake in determining what it means is to assume a technical sense across the board, committing the fallacy of 'totality transfer,' where the various meanings are gathered from diverse contexts and read into every occurrence. Although the meaning of "under the law" is disputed, context, usage and syntax make clear what Paul meant each time it is used.

First, Jews are those who are "under the law," meaning that they are "bound by the demands of the Mosaic law code and subject to its sanctions" (Westerholm).

Secondly, Gentiles are not and were never "under the law." Even though the second point follows logically from the first (if Jews are those who are "under the law," then Gentiles are not), certain texts are widely seen as contradicting it. In my view, Paul's consistency of usage with respect to the phrase can be defended.

Thirdly, if for Paul being "under the law" can have a neutral sense, simply referring to Jewish identity (as in point one above), it can also carry more ominous and negative connotations: "under the law" can be equivalent to being "under (the penalty and power of) sin," and is thus something from which Jews need to be released and something to which being under grace can be favourably contrasted.

Outside of the "under the law" references, Paul uses ὑπὸ with the accusative seven times in Galatians and Romans in ways that move the reader to take "under the law" quite negatively. As well as being "under the law" people are "under the control of" or "under obligation to" a number of things to their distinct disadvantage:

- "all who rely on the works of the law are *under a curse*" (Gal. 3:10)
- "the scripture has imprisoned all things *under sin*" (Gal. 3:22).
- "now that faith has come, we are no longer *under a disciplinarian*" (Gal. 3:25).
- "but they remain *under guardians and trustees* until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were *under the elemental spirits of the world*" (Gal. 4:2-3).
- "we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are *under sin*" (Rom. 3:9).
- "we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery *under sin*" (Rom. 7:14).

The only time Paul uses ὑπὸ with the accusative in Galatians and Romans not in reference to what humans are subject to is in Romans 16:20, where the connotation is still that of an oppressive (if more advantageous) control: "The God of peace will shortly crush Satan *under your feet*."

*What is the origin of Paul's opposition to being under the law?*

1. Paul's calling and conversion.

“For Paul, the encounter with the Resurrected One near Damascus set before him the question of the *law or Christ* in the form of a *soteriological* alternative. For Judaism of that time the *Torah* was in manifold expression the essence of salvation, and could be identified with the fundamental religious metaphor, ‘life.’” (Martin Hengel)

2. Jeremiah 31:31-33, Ezekiel 36:22-32 and Daniel 9:9-16a, 18b lament that the Mosaic covenant and law have failed due to human sinfulness and declare that the time has come, or will come, when people must look to God's mercy and grace alone apart from the law. For Paul these prophetic hopes come to fruition in Christ, in the New Covenant and in giving of the Spirit

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors. (Jer. 31:31-33)

Ezekiel makes it clear that not keeping the Law of Moses is the problem and the Spirit of God's enablement will be part of the solution: “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:27).

In Daniel's prayer in ch 9 the nation's transgression of the law and disobedience has occasioned a disaster on the nation, that was itself foretold in the law (“just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us”) – the only hope is that God might turn in mercy: Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. ... We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. (Dan. 9:9-16a,18b)

### **III. Confirmation and Clarification**

## IV. In Paul's Own Words

In Romans 2:29 Paul sets up a contrast between “letter” and “Spirit”: “circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom 2:29). The same contrast also appears in two other Pauline texts:

“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the letter” (Rom. 7:6).

“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Romans 2, 7 and 2 Corinthians 3 are the only three places in Paul's letters that he refers to the law as “letter”. While “letter” is not the standard Jewish epithet for the law, Jews did refer to the law as “letters” in the plural, as in the phrase, “the holy writings”, or more literally, “the holy letters”, τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα. Schrenk reports that the phrase was common in Jewish texts, and 2 Timothy 3:15 uses it to refer to the “holy Scriptures” (TNIV) or “sacred writings” (NRSV).

Most commentators agree that Paul uses “letter”, γράμμα, to refer to the Law of Moses as a written document. Fitzmyer, for example, takes “letter” here to refer to the old “dispensation”, which was “governed by a written code, an extrinsic norm to be observed and esteemed”. Although in English the most common meaning of “letter” is “a unit of an alphabet” (cf. Gal. 6:11), in Greek it can mean “a set of written characters forming a document or piece of writing” (BDAG, 2). Given this basic sense, can we specify more accurately what law as “letter” denotes for Paul? A clue to its meaning is found in 2 Corinthians 3:7-8, where “letters” refer to the Decalogue written on tablets of stone:

“Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?”

Another pointer is the fact that “letter” is contrasted with “Spirit” in all three chapters and in Romans 2:27 it is linked with circumcision. This has led many to suggest that “letter” refers to “the externality of the law” (Schreiner). When Paul writes negatively about circumcision, he frequently conceives of it as an external action. And the “letter / Spirit” contrast is often taken to point to a distinction between an external versus a condition of the heart.

Taking matters a step further, several English versions translate “letter” in Romans 2 and 7 as “written code” (e.g., NIV, TNIV, NRSV, ESV; cf. HCSB: “letter of the law”). The context of Romans 7 supports this decision. In Romans 7:7-12, following 7:6, the last word of which is “letter,” Paul refers interchangeably to the law as νόμος (six times) and as ἐντολή (“commandment”, five times). He directly associates the two as virtual synonyms in v. 12: “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy”.

Paul uses “letter” as a way of referring to the law as a set of commandments to be obeyed, as a written “legal code”. As such, it is significant that he confines his references to the law as “letter” and “commandment” to contexts in which he is discussing Jewish adherence (or more accurately, non-adherence) to the law. When writing of the law positively in

connection with Christians, Paul's letters refer to it as γράμματα ("letters" – 2 Tim 3:15), νόμος ("law" – e.g., 1 Cor. 9:8-9), γραφή ("Scripture" – e.g., Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:8; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:16), and γραφαί ("Scriptures" – e.g., Rom. 15:4); but Paul never refers to the law as γράμμα, "letter", as "legal code", with Christians in mind. Pauline usage justifies seeing a distinction between the plural "letters" and the singular "letter". Whereas the former refers to all of the Jewish Scriptures, the latter is a pejorative term for the Law of Moses.

Paul, it seems, uses γράμμα as a technical term for the law as an obsolete Jewish legal code, from which Christians are exempt. The three texts in question (Rom. 2 and 7, and 2 Cor. 3) all contain a contrast in terms of salvation history. As Moo contends, "'letter' describes the past era in which God's law through Moses played a central role and 'Spirit' summing up the new era in which God's Spirit is poured out in eschatological fullness and power". The Holy Spirit as the gift characterizing the new age is prophesied in texts such as Joel 2:28-29, Isa. 44:3 and Ezek. 11:19, 36:26-27.

According to Paul, if Jews have the law as "letter," as legal code and written collection of commandments, Christians do not.

Along with "letter," there are four other terms in Paul's letters that describe the law as a possession of the Jews, but not of Christians:

### 1. *Commandments*

Gk. ἐντολή. In Rom. 7:7-12, in a context of the law leading to death rather than life, as noted above, Paul uses "commandment" as a synonym for "law."

### 2. *Book*

Gk. βιβλίον. In Paul's quotation of Deut. 27:26 in Gal. 3:10 he changes "the words of this law" in the citation of Deut. to "the *book* of the law":

"Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all the things  
written in the book of the law so as to do them."

In referring to the curse of the law Paul shifts from the law as oral proclamation to the law as written document, in a manner reminiscent of his use of "letter" as a reference to the law as an external and objective code. Tellingly, as Watson points out, in other texts in Deuteronomy, "the book of the law" is associated with the curse of the law. Cf. Deut. 28:61; 29:19-20,26; 30:10 (also Josh. 23:6).

### 3. *Decrees*

Gk. δόγμα. In Eph. 2:15 and Col. 2:14 Paul writes of Christians as being freed from the law as "decrees", that is, "rules or regulations to be observed" (BDAG 1a).

### 4. *Covenant*

Gk. διαθήκη. "But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds" (2 Cor 3:13-14). Note: "whenever the old covenant is read" = "whenever [the books of] Moses is read."

Christians are not under the law *as letter, commandments, book, decrees or covenant*. To recall our discussion of 1 Timothy 1:8-10, the law (νόμος) used lawfully (νομίμως), or as some commentators put, "as law," is not for the righteous (believers), but to condemn the lawless (ἄνομος).

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Moore College  
1 King Street Newtown NSW 2042  
Phone: (02) 9577 9999 Fax: (02) 9577 9988  
[registrar@moore.edu.au](mailto:registrar@moore.edu.au)  
[www.moore.edu.au](http://www.moore.edu.au)