

**Paul and the Law**  
**Different Dimensions and Connotations**

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Paul and the Law remains one of the more controversial yet intriguing issues in New Testament scholarship today. Paul utters some very positive as well as some seemingly rather negative statements about the Mosaic Law. Is this just another example of the general incoherence and inconsistency in Pauline thought, as some would maintain? It is our contention that a consideration of the various dimensions of the Law as well as the different contexts in which they occur demonstrates that Paul, although not as clear and unambiguous as some might wish, is nevertheless completely coherent and consistent when it comes to the Law.

To what does Paul refer when he uses the word “Law”? In general, “Law” (nomos) in Paul refers to the Jewish Torah that is often designated as the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The Jewish Torah or “Law” contains the commandments God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. These commandments were considered to be a gracious gift from God which indicated what God expected the people of Israel to do in response to God’s election and salvation of them from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus event. By doing the commandments or “works” of the Mosaic Law, the Israelites would uphold their part of the covenant by which God promised to be the God of the chosen people of Israel.

The Law, however, is not the exclusive possession of the Jews as God’s chosen people. Paul maintains that “whenever Gentiles who do not have the Law by nature do the requirements of the Law, they become a ‘Law’ to themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They show that what the Law requires is written in their hearts...” (Rom 2:14-15). Furthermore, the Jews were to teach the Law to others (Rom 2:17-20). The Mosaic Law thus indicated the way that not only Israel but also the Gentiles could

maintain a right and proper relationship with God and thus be declared as righteous or justified in the sight of God.

But to complicate matters, Paul can use the word “Law” with different connotations, some of which are similar to the way we use the word “law” in English. For example, in his Letter to the Romans Paul argues: “What then becomes of boasting? It is excluded! Through what ‘Law’? (The Law) of works? No, but through the ‘Law’ of faith!” (Rom 3:27). Whereas Paul previously employed the word “Law” to refer to God’s Law or Torah primarily as the instructions, commandments, or “works” for doing the will of God, he now, with a clever play on words, implements the word “Law” in a more general yet perhaps purposely ambivalent sense to signify primarily “principle,” “system,” “rule,” “force,” or “power” (cf. Rom 7:21-23). The radically new “Law” or “principle” of faith has abolished any boasting based upon the righteousness that one might establish for oneself through accomplishing the works of the Mosaic Law.

### **Salvific Dimension of the Law**

Although “Law” in Paul usually refers to the Mosaic Law, that Law has several different dimensions. The first that we need to consider is the salvation-historical or salvific dimension of the Law. Here is where most of Paul’s negative statements about the Law come into play. For Paul the death and resurrection of Christ represents God’s definitive and decisive act of salvation for all people. This has significant ramifications for the salvific dimension of the Law.

God gave the Law the salvific function of pointing out Sin, which for Paul is personified as an apocalyptic power, for what it is: “For before the Law was given Sin was in the world, but Sin is not reckoned when there is no Law” (Rom 5:13). The commandments of the Law were meant to prevent people from sinning. Instead, Sin cleverly and deceptively worked through the commandments to produce the desire to

do precisely what the commandments prohibited--“the very commandment which was meant for life turned out to be death” (Rom 7:10).

The culprit in all of this is the apocalyptic power of Sin. Indeed, the Law “is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12). The real problem is that whereas the Law is spiritual, the power of Sin operates in the realm of our fleshly, bodily existence. The Law simply has no power over Sin in this realm. Paul sums up this dilemma of despair with regard to the Law in terms of an apocalyptic warfare that takes place in the individual: “For I delight in the Law of God with respect to my inner self, but I perceive another ‘Law’ in my members at war with the ‘Law’ of my mind and making me captive to the ‘Law’ of sin which is in my members. What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:22-24).

The doing of the commandments of the Law, then, cannot free one from the power of Sin that ultimately leads to death. But what the Law was incapable of doing because of the power of Sin, God did in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: “For the ‘Law’ of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the ‘Law’ of sin and death! What the Law, weakened because of the flesh, was unable to do, God did-- sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as atonement for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:2-3). For Paul, then, Christ has taken over the Law’s salvation-historical function. Faith in the Christ event now supplants the doing of the commandments of the Law as the way to salvation. Indeed, Christ is the termination of the Law as a way of seeking to attain righteousness before God by doing its works, so that righteousness is now for all who believe in the Christ whom God has raised from the dead and established as Lord (Rom 10:4).

In his Letter to the Galatians Paul implements the image of the paidagogos to characterize the salvation-historical role of the Law. The Greek word paidagogos referred to a slave who accompanied a child to school but did not teach or tutor. He was thus merely a guardian or monitor or disciplinarian. Similarly, the Law merely

accompanied us as a guardian or disciplinarian until we were justified by faith in Christ. But now that we have been justified by faith, the Law's role as our guardian or disciplinarian has been terminated by Christ (Gal 3:23-25).

That Christ is the termination of the Law sounds rather negative, but it is a limited and ultimately positive statement with regard to the Law. It means that God has brought an end to the futile attempt to attain righteousness with God by doing the works of the Law (cf. Rom 2:13; 3:19-20; 7:7-12). It does not mean that the Law has been abrogated or rendered totally useless. Indeed, as Paul insists, we do not nullify the Law through faith, "on the contrary, we uphold the Law" (Rom 3:31).

### **Prophetic Dimension of the Law**

One of the ways Paul upholds the positive dimension of the Law is by indicating its prophetic dimension. As part of the Jewish scriptures, the "Law" as well as the "Prophets" have the prophetic function of prefiguring God's salvation in the Christ event. Although the righteousness of God has now been manifested in Christ "apart from the Law" that could not free us from the power of Sin, nevertheless it has been "attested by the Law and the Prophets" (Rom 3:21). Paul illustrates one of the ways the Law attests to or bears witness to the righteousness of God by citing from that part of scripture known as "the Law" the example of Abraham, who was made righteous not by doing the works of the Law but by faith: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6 in Rom 4:3).

Similarly, in his Letter to the Galatians Paul points to the positive, prophetic role of the Law as scripture: "Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the gospel to Abraham, saying, 'In you all the Gentiles will be blessed'" (Gal 3:8). The citation is from Gen 12:3, that part of scripture known as the Law.

### **Moral Dimension of the Law**

Although the Law has lost its salvific role as a way of attaining righteousness with God, it has retained its positive role as a code of moral and ethical behavior. The Mosaic Law is still valid and valuable as a way for Christians to live an upright and moral life in accord with God's Spirit. Now that God has sent his own Son to condemn sin in the flesh, we Christians can fulfill the requirements of the Law as those who behave not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom 8:3-4).

In that part of his Letter to the Romans where he applies the gospel to the everyday life of the Christian community Paul urges: "Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves the other has fulfilled the Law. For, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet' (Exod 20:13-15; Deut 5:17-19, 21), and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:18). Love does no harm to a neighbor; love then is the fulfillment of the Law" (Rom 13:8-10). Christian love, the active care and concern for the other in response to God's gracious love for us in the Christ event that supplants and surpasses the salvific dimension of the Law, achieves all that God's Law has ever commanded as a moral code of behavior.

Equipped with God's Spirit through baptism we Christians can now fulfill the moral and ethical requirements of the Law and thus experience freedom from the power of sinfulness in our lives. Even for those justified by faith in the Christ event, the Law remains the ethical and moral criterion for God's final judgment: "For it is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous before God, but it is the doers of the Law who will be pronounced righteous" (Rom 2:13).

### **Law for Christians Today**

In summary, the "Law" in Paul has several connotations and different dimensions. But they all fit together consistently and coherently in the mind of Paul. That the Law has lost its salvific function as a way to righteousness with God helps us Christians appreciate the grace of God that comes to us in the death and resurrection

of Jesus Christ. We cannot free ourselves from the devastating power of sin that ultimately leads to death and thus achieve salvation by doing the commandments or works of the Mosaic Law. Christ did for us what our doing of the Law could not. But now that we have been justified before God through our faith in the Christ event, we have received the Spirit by which we can fulfill the ethical and moral requirements of the Law and thus live in freedom from the power of sin and death and in hope of final salvation.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

Westerholm, S. Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

Dunn, J. D. G. (ed.) Paul and the Mosaic Law. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

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