
**THE LAW OF CHRIST AS
THE FULFILLMENT OF
THE LAW OF MOSES:
A MODIFIED LUTHERAN VIEW**

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Christians disagree about the place of the Mosaic law in the life of the believer because the New Testament itself contains statements that appear to support opposite conclusions. Our Lord's endorsement of the eternal validity of even the "smallest letter" and "least stroke of a pen" in the law is followed by a warning that breaking even "one of the least of these commandments" will mean demotion in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:18-19). Similar apparently unequivocal assertions of the law's continuing validity are found throughout the New Testament: e.g., "we uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31); "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12); "the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25). At the other extreme, however, are apparently equally clear assertions of the law's complete cessation for the believer: "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4a); "you are not under law" (Rom. 6:14; cf. v. 15); "when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (Heb. 7:12).

Such diverse statements about the Mosaic law have both fascinated and frustrated theologians since the inception of the church. And at no time has this been more the case than in the last two decades, which have witnessed a remarkable resurgence of

interest in the theology of the Mosaic law.¹ A deluge of books and articles has examined virtually every bit of evidence and from almost every conceivable perspective. Yet nothing even approaching a consensus has emerged. Several factors account for the radically different conclusions reached by biblical scholars and theologians, the most important of which is the diverse theological and hermeneutical frameworks that are used to order and arrange the various texts. Theological and confessional allegiances—Lutheran, Reformed, dispensational, etc.—thus dictate which texts are given precedence and used to interpret others.

I am not criticizing the use of such general theological frameworks, for responsible biblical theology cannot be carried out without some structure to organize the exegetical evidence. The question becomes, then, which structure most accurately captures the pattern of biblical revelation? Or, to limit the issue to the task at hand: Can we find a framework that is capable of organizing into a coherent picture the various texts about the Mosaic law *without* imposing forced and unnatural meanings on those texts? Each of the contributors to this volume will argue that his approach is best able to accomplish this task of integration. In this essay, I will try to show that the exegetical evidence points to what I am calling a modified form of the traditional Lutheran perspective. Luther himself saw Law and Gospel as discontinuous and

¹Stimulating this resurgence has been the new understanding of Judaism advocated by E. P. Sanders (see especially his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]) and adopted by a large number of scholars. Some of the most significant books are: Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Klaus Berger, *Die Gesetzesauslegung Jesu: Ihr historischer Hintergrund im Judentum und im alten Testament* (Neukirchen/Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1972); Ragnar Bring, *Christus und das Gesetz* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); A. van Dülmen, *Die Theologie des Gesetzes bei Paulus* (Stuttgart: Katholisches, 1968); Daniel Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984); Brice L. Martin, *Christ and the Law in Paul's Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983); E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Frank Thielmann, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); S. Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978); S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a survey of the literature on Paul and the law from 1977–86, see my "Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years," *SJT* 40 (1987), 287–307.

made the distinction between these two basic to his theology. This distinction has continued to be central to Lutheran theology, and I think that it is both biblical and important. But I also think that the traditional approach needs to be modified by greater attention to the salvation-historical perspective of the Scriptures.

Theologians have used the phrase "salvation history" and its equivalent, "redemptive history," to denote a considerable number of concepts.² I am using the phrase in a rather untechnical manner to denote a conceptual framework that is basic to the biblical revelation, a framework with two decisive characteristics. The first characteristic is *historical periodization*. By this I mean that the biblical writers understand salvation as the culmination of a historical process that features several distinct periods of time. At the "center" of history, and forming the decisive turning point, is Christ's death and resurrection. All that came before funnels into this decisive moment, and all that will come after flows from it. Basic, then, to biblical revelation is the contrast between "before" and "after" Christ, a contrast between two "ages" or "eras." Salvation history finds a discontinuity between the time before and the time after Christ at the core of the Scriptures. This is not, of course, to deny the continuity of salvation history—a continuity rooted in one God, carrying out one plan, in one people. But it is to insist that this one continuous and eternal plan unfolds in successive and distinct stages.

I will argue that the New Testament writers view the Mosaic law within this salvation-historical framework and relegate it basically to the period of time before the coming of Christ. And it is necessary to stress at this point that the New Testament teaching about the law is first, and most basically, teaching about the Mosaic law. This is in contrast to the situation in some theological systems—and this is particularly true of Lutheran theology and a point at which it requires modification—where "law" denotes a general theological category, namely, God's word in its commanding aspect.³ In this sense, the Sermon on the

²Works that come closest to my use of the salvation-historical concept are Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), and *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 1982), especially 1:251–81 and 2:37–63; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), especially 44–86.

³Law, says Luther at one point, is "what we are to do and give to God," while Gospel is "what has been given us by God" ("How Christians Should Regard the Law of Moses," *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960], 162).

Mount is "law" just as much as the Ten Commandments. But the New Testament use of the word "law" (*nomos*) is decisively conditioned by the Old Testament background and the Jewish milieu in which it was written. The word therefore almost always denotes not "law" in general, but the Mosaic law, the *Torah* (*tôrâ*).⁴ As a result, the New Testament Law-"Gospel"⁵ tension is not, as in Luther, primarily static and theological, but historical. "Law" (*tôrâ*) came into history at a specific point in time (430 years after the promise, according to Gal. 3:17). In the New Testament, therefore, Law and "Gospel" primarily denote, not two constant aspects of God's word to us, but two successive eras in salvation history.⁶

A second element in the salvation-historical approach is a recognition of the frequent *corporate focus* of the biblical writers. This is a natural corollary of the first characteristic. Since the dividing point in the salvation history conception is the death and resurrection of Christ, the contrast between "before" and "after" has to do not with the experience of the individual but with the experience of the world or of God's people. This is not to deny, of course, that the transition from the "old era" to the new effected by Christ in history has its completion and partial parallel in the life of the believer and that the biblical writers often describe this transition in the life of the individual. But it is to place more importance than many theological and hermeneutical approaches have on the significance and frequency of the corporate perspective.

This perspective, as we will see, is central to some of the key New Testament passages on the Mosaic law. I will seek to show in what follows that the salvation-historical approach is able successfully to explain and integrate the various New Testament data about the Mosaic law and the Christian. Specifically, I will argue that the Mosaic law is *basically* confined to the old era that has

⁴For a survey of the Pauline use of *nomos*, see my "Law," Works of the Law," and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* 43 (1983), 73-100.

⁵Quotation marks must be put around the word "Gospel" because the New Testament never, in fact, directly contrasts the word Law with the word Gospel. But the concept denoted by the word Gospel is certainly contrasted with the Law at many points.

⁶On this point, see Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 1983), especially 2.363-64; Gerhard Ebeling, "On the Doctrine of the *Triplex Usus Legis* in the Theology of the Reformers," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 260-61.

come to its fulfillment in Christ. It is no longer, therefore, *directly* applicable to believers who live in the new era. To establish these points, I will proceed in two stages. First, I will look at the evidence from the Scriptures about the purpose of the law. This step is necessary both to secure a general perspective from which to look more specifically at the question of the applicability of the law to Christians and to see if this evidence implies anything about the law's permanence. Second, I will investigate the teaching about the law in the new age of salvation.

Most of my evidence will come from the teaching of Jesus in Matthew and, especially, from the letters of Paul. We will not ignore other New Testament authors, but they have far less to say on the issues concerning us than do Matthew and Paul. Whatever the exact situation is that Matthew addresses—and Matthean scholars continue to debate the point—it is clear that he is concerned that his Christian audience understand the relationship between the church and Israel and, by extension, between the teaching of Jesus and the Mosaic law. But important as the teaching of Jesus is for the issue of the Christian and the law, it is overshadowed by the evidence from Paul's letters. This is partially because we cannot always be sure whether Jesus was addressing the situation that would prevail after his redemptive acts had opened the new era of salvation or the situation during his earthly ministry when the old covenant was still in effect. Furthermore, Paul's evidence is decisive simply because the issue of the Mosaic law and the Christian was one that Paul had much greater need to address. As the "apostle to the Gentiles," he was used by God to open the doors of the Christian church to Gentiles who had never had any relationship with the Mosaic law. Questions about what relationship, if any, these Gentile converts should have to the Mosaic law were bound to arise. Paul deals with these questions at length in both Galatians and Romans. The former is more polemical in orientation, as Paul must counter a false, "Judaizing," teaching that had quickly arisen in the churches of South Galatia.⁷ Romans, on the other hand, was a treatise-style letter

⁷I think that Galatians was written just before the Apostolic Council (Acts 15) to the churches founded by Paul on the first missionary journey (the "South Galatian" hypothesis). In defense of this supposition, see F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 178–83.

sent to a church that Paul had neither founded nor visited and takes a more evenly balanced approach to the issue of the law.⁵

Regarding the witness of the Old Testament, it is necessary to recognize two things: (1) it has relatively little to say directly about the issues of this article; (2) what it does say must always be interpreted in terms of the New Testament witness before it can be integrated theologically. This is simply to recognize—as all Christians do, to one degree or another—that the Old Testament is not the final word on these matters. I will not ignore what it says or argue that the New Testament contradicts or cancels out what it says. But we must take seriously the fact of salvation history and the progressive nature of God's revelation, in which the New illuminates the Old and has the final word on the ultimate structure and meaning of God's word to us.

THE PURPOSE OF THE MOSAIC LAW

In this section, I want to show first, negatively, that the Mosaic law, while implicitly holding out the promise of salvation to those who would do it, was never intended to be, and could never in fact be, a means of salvation. Second, positively, I will argue that God gave the law (1) to reveal his character to the people of Israel and demand that the people conform to it, (2) to supervise Israel in the time before Christ, and (3) to imprison Israel and, by extension, all people under sin.

The Law Does Not Procure Salvation

The law holds out the promise of salvation, but because of human sinfulness, it cannot confer salvation.

The Law's Promise of Life

Old Testament scholars generally agree that God did not give Israel the law so that the people could attain eternal life by it. He gave it to a people whom he had already made his own by his sovereign and gracious act of calling them out of Egypt. Nevertheless, the New Testament teaches that the law of Moses does hold out an inherent promise of life for those who do it. Jesus responded to the rich young man who asked him how he could

⁵On the differences between Galatians and Romans on the law, see especially John Drane, *Paul: Libertine or Legalistic?* (London: SPCK, 1975); Ulrich Wilckens, "Zur Entwicklung des paulinischen Gesetzesverständnis," *NTS* 28 (1982): 154–90.

get eternal life, "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments" (Matt. 19:17; cf. Mark 10:17-18; Luke 18:18-19). This is, of course, not representative of Jesus' teaching on how one may attain eternal life; in this case Jesus wanted to awaken this rather arrogant young man to his need of what Jesus offered in the gospel. But there is no reason on this account to think that Jesus does not view the promise as at least theoretically valid. Paul likewise claims that "it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Rom. 2:13b) and that the "commandment [representing the Mosaic law] was intended to bring life" (*eis zōēn*; Rom. 7:10).

Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12, often quoted as further witnesses to the salvific promise of the law, are not as clear. Both quote Leviticus 18:5: "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them." This verse may mean no more than that the pious Israelite should "live out life" in the sphere of the law.⁹ But the use of the language of "life" elsewhere in the Pentateuch to denote the reward God gives for obedience to the law (e.g., Deut. 30:15, 19) makes it more likely that "will live" in Lev. 18:5 is a promise of reward for obedience.¹⁰ Later in Leviticus 18, for instance, disobedience of the law is said to bring expulsion from the land for the nation (v. 28) and from the people of God for the individual (v. 29). This "life," as defined elsewhere in the Pentateuch, involves material prosperity, deliverance from enemies, peace in the land that God will give his people, and "long life" (e.g., Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 28:1-14). Since, however, Israel has already, in a sense, entered into the sphere of these blessings by virtue of God's gracious election, the promise of life must be seen as the promise for the continuation of life. Israel's "life" in this sense is dependent on its faithful observance of the law. This is a constant refrain in Deuteronomy (see, e.g., 4:1-2, 40; 5:33; 6:1-3; 7:12-16; 8:1) and is reiterated in the prophets as well (e.g., Ezek. 33:15: "the decrees that give life"). By contrast, failure to reverence God by obeying his commandments will bring destruction and "death" to Israel.

Leviticus 18:5 is not, then, a promise that the doer of the law

⁹See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Leviticus and Paul: 'Do This and You Shall Live' (Eternally?)," *JETS* 14 (1971), 19-28.

¹⁰See, R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 185; Gordon Wenham, *A Commentary on Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 253; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 412.

will attain eternal life. On the other hand, one can make a good case for thinking that Paul, like later Jewish writers (cf. the Onkelos and Pseudo-Jon. Targums) understood Leviticus 18:5 to be promising eternal life for the doer.¹¹ For in both Romans 10 and Galatians 3, Paul sets Leviticus 18:5 in contrast to statements that righteousness and eternal life come only through faith (cf. Gal. 3:11 and Rom. 10:6–8).¹² Paul's point would then be that life comes only through faith and not through doing the law, as Leviticus 18:5 promised. Paul's application of this verse may, however, be more nuanced and more in keeping with the original sense of the verse. The words Paul quotes from Leviticus 18:5 seem to have become almost a "slogan" to express the conditional character of the Mosaic covenant (see, e.g., Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:13, 21; CD 3:14–16; b. Sanh. 59b). Following this tradition, Paul may cite the verse as a succinct summary of the essence of the Mosaic covenant: that blessing is contingent on obedience.¹³ On this

¹¹This is the interpretation that becomes virtually standard in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. On Rom. 10:5, see Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (1540; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1866; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950); Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (1839; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1958). See also Wilckens, "Gesetzesverständnis," 165–72; Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 134–35; Robert H. Gundry, "Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul," *Bib* 66 (1985), 24–25; Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*, 19–20 (on Gal. 3:12); Ridderbos, *Paul*, 134. The "christological" interpretation of Rom. 10:5, which takes "the doer" to be Jesus, is most unlikely (contra Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* [London: Oxford, 1933], 376–77; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979], 2:521–22; Andrew Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World* [Kampen: Kok, 1964], 103–5).

¹²A few scholars have argued that Rom. 10:5 ("the righteousness that is by the law") is in continuity with 10:6–8 ("the righteousness that is by faith"); see Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:521–22; Felix Flückiger, "Christus, des Gesetzes τέλος," *TZ* 11 (1955), 153–57; Fuller, *Gospel & Law*, 66–88; Ragnar Bring, "Das Gesetz und die Gerechtigkeit Gottes: Eine Studie zur Frage nach der Auslegung des Ausdruckes τέλος νόμου in Röm. 10:4," *SJT* 20 (1966), 19–23. But this interpretation fails to take seriously Paul's manifest contrast between these two kinds of righteousness in Phil. 3:6–9 and misunderstands the context. See almost all the commentaries on Romans.

¹³On the conditional character of the Mosaic covenant, see R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A New Approach* (Atlanta: Knox, 1978), 101–3; 116–19; David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," *Int* 18 (1964), 419–31. Many think that a greater emphasis on the conditionality of the covenant, with a consequent absolutizing of the law, took place in the later stages of the Old Testament and in early Judaism (see Ernst Würthwein, "Der Sinn des Gesetzes im Alten Testament," *ZTK* 55 [1958], 255–70).

reading, Paul is warning Jews and Judaizing Christians who are insisting on adherence to the law as essential to justification that they must live with the consequences and find their relationship with God through that means that the law itself recognizes: doing the commandments.¹⁴ Paul may not be claiming, then, that Leviticus 18:5 promises eternal life to the doer. But he is insisting that whatever "life" one tries to find through the law can be found only by doing—a doing that, because of human sin, can never achieve that goal of life.

The reader may think that I have just affirmed contradictory points: that God did not give the law to save his people, and that the law promises salvation if it is kept. But these two statements are not incompatible. By the latter, I mean simply that the law, in stating God's demand of his people Israel, promises them also that successfully meeting that demand would bring them salvation. But this is not to say that the law could ever in fact be obeyed so fully by sinful human beings that it *would* save anyone; and God, knowing this, never intended the law to save anyone. It would be as if I were to give a basketball to my son for the first time in his life and tell him: "Here: if you make 100 free throws in a row, you will not have to practice and train to become a basketball player." So God, in the law he gave to Israel, implied that perfect obedience would bring eternal blessing and salvation; but he never gave the law with that purpose, knowing the impossibility of fulfilling it. To use the terminology of covenant theology, the law expresses a "hypothetical covenant of works."¹⁵ In the law God says in effect: "Here is who I am, and here is what you must be if you want to stand before me." In seeing the impossibility of ever achieving by works the holiness that God demands, the pious Israelite would, as God intended, flee in faith to the mercy of God, wherein can be found the only means of righteousness actually available to sinful humanity.

But there is no good reason to think that the basic conception of the covenant changes within the Old Testament.

¹⁴For this general approach, see Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 121–27; Andreas Lindemann, "Die Gerechtigkeit aus dem Gesetz. Erwägungen zur Auslegung und zur Testgeschichte von Römer 10.5," *ZNW* 73 (1982), 244–46; Hans-Joachim Eckstein, "'Nahe ist dir das Wort.' Exegetische Erwägungen zu Röm 10.8," *ZNW* 79 (1988), 204–6.

¹⁵On this point and in agreement with our conclusions, see Roger T. Beckwith, "The Unity and Diversity of God's Covenants," *TynBul* 38 (1987), 112–13; cf. also Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 144–50.

The Law Cannot Confer Salvation

The implicit promise of the law to save those who obey it can never be fulfilled. While by no means an innovation, this principle was a staple of Reformation teaching and has been a consistent characteristic of orthodox Protestant theology. Among the Reformers it was Luther who pursued this principle most vigorously, elevating into a hermeneutical principle the opposition of Law and Gospel. He insisted that the Law, whether Mosaic or otherwise, can only tell us what God expects of us and, because of our inability to do what he demands, drive us sinners to despair and to the sweet relief of the Gospel.¹⁶ The Law, because its nature is to demand works, can never be the agent of liberation in any way. This strict contrast between Law and Gospel, with its corollary opposition of works and faith, was not maintained by all the Reformers (Zwingli, for instance, softened the opposition considerably¹⁷) and has been challenged in a variety of ways by contemporary scholars. Nevertheless, Luther on this point was right: the Mosaic law can never become an agent of liberation from sin, for its nature is to demand works that can never be done sufficiently by sinful humans so as to gain approval before God.

The inability of the law to save is plainly taught in the New Testament. Luke records Paul telling the synagogue audience in Pisidian Antioch that through Christ, "everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). The author to the Hebrews shows that the law, only a "shadow of the good things that are coming," could never secure ultimate forgiveness or holiness (Heb. 10:1-14). Paul claims in Galatians that "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Gal. 2:21b), and that "if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (3:21b). Further substantiation of this inability of the law to save comes in Paul's assertion that "works of the law" (*ta erga tou nomou*) cannot justify, confer the Spirit, or work miracles (2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; cf. Rom. 3:20, 28).

To be sure, opposition to this interpretation came already in the early church, with Origen and others suggesting that "works

¹⁶"The Law shows up sin and makes man guilty and sick; indeed proves him worthy of being damned. . . . The Gospel offers grace and remits sin and cures the sickness unto salvation" ("Scholium" on Rom. 10:15, in *Lectures on Romans, Luther's Works*, vol. 25 [Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972]).

¹⁷See W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1986), 164-69.

of the law" denoted only ceremonial observances.¹⁸ Recent interpreters suggest that the phrase may indicate works done in a legalistic spirit¹⁹ or "Jewish identity markers," namely, Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws.²⁰ The acceptance of such restrictive meanings to the phrase would mean that the texts just mentioned would not be denying that justification comes through works done in obedience to the law, but only through certain kinds of works or through works done in the wrong spirit. While most of those advocating this interpretation would not go so far, it does open the door to making the law, if done in the right way or in the right spirit, a means of salvation.

However, this revisionist interpretation of "works of the law" is not acceptable. The equivalent Hebrew phrase is rare but refers generally to *anything* done in obedience to the law.²¹ Because of the Jewish milieu in which Paul was writing, "works of the law" is his way of referring to those things done by human beings in obedience to the law of Moses. These particular works represent what we might call "good works" generally; see, in this regard, the obvious connections between "the works of the law" in Romans 3:20, 28 and Abraham's "works" in 4:2–5, as well as the "works" of Jacob and Esau in 9:11–12. "Works of the law," then, is a subset of the more general category "works." The Reformers and their heirs were quite right to use these verses to deny that human beings could be justified before God by anything that they might do.²²

As we noted above, Luther's insistence on a rigid distinction between the Law and the Gospel was rooted in a fixed association

¹⁸See Maurice Wiles, *The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 67–69; Karl Hermann Schelkle, *Paulus, Lehrer der Väter. Die altkirchliche Auslegung von Römer 1–11* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1966), on Rom. 3:20.

¹⁹Fuller, *Gospel & Law*, 90–98.

²⁰See especially James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 65 (1983), 107–11; "Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3:10–14)," *NTS* 31 (1985), 528–29; *Romans 1–8*, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1989), 158–60.

²¹See 4QFlor 1:7; 1QS 5:21, 6:18. The phrase also apparently occurs in a letter found at Qumran (according to Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law*, 66). See also the phrase "works of the commandments" (*2 Baruch* 57:2) and the rabbinic use of the words "works" (*ma'asim*) and "commandments" (*mitzvot*).

²²For further substantiation of this interpretation of the evidence, see Moo, "Law, 'Works of the Law' and Legalism in Paul," 73–100; Moo, *Romans 1–8*, WEC (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 208–211, 212–18; Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 116–21.

of the Law with doing and the Gospel with believing. The logic could be stated in this way:

1. Salvation comes only by believing.
2. The law is associated with doing and not with believing.
3. Therefore, the law cannot bring salvation.

Some contemporary scholars, however, would deny this conclusion—not because they want to argue that salvation can come by works (i.e., denying point 1), but because they think that the law can be associated with believing (i.e., denying point 2). There is no doubt that the word *nomos* can mean something other than the Mosaic law. It sometimes has a “canonical” sense, that which is central in the Jewish estimation of Scripture, standing for the Pentateuch (1 Cor. 9:8, 9; 14:21, 34; Gal. 4:21b) or for the whole Old Testament (John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; Rom. 3:19a); note, also, the combinations “Law and Prophets” (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; Rom. 3:21b) and “Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). It would indeed be appropriate to speak of believing the “law” whenever the word has this sense (although, in fact, this connection is never made in the Scriptures). Calvin, in this regard, argues that the law can have both a narrow sense—the commands in and of themselves—and a broader sense—the commands as part of the encompassing framework of the covenant of grace (*Inst.* 2.7.2). But what we have here are two different meanings of the word “law”; it reflects no softening of the crucial distinction between faith and works or between Law (in the sense of “the commandments”) and the Gospel.

When the New Testament uses *nomos* to depict the body of commandments given to Israel through Moses, the word is never connected with faith or said to have salvific power. Those who dispute this assertion point especially to three expressions in Paul: “law . . . of faith” (Rom. 3:27), “law of the Spirit” (8:2), and “law of righteousness” (9:31).²³ In the first two instances, however, it is unlikely that Paul is referring to the Mosaic law at all, for both contexts feature a contrast between two “laws.” In 3:27, Paul

²³See especially Klyne Snodgrass, “Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law,” *JNT* 32 (1988), 93–113; Eduard Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1991), 157–65; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.219–20; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 185–87, 416–17; and *Romans 9–16*, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988), 581–83; Gerhard Friedrich, “Das Gesetz des Glaubens. Römer 3,27,” in *Auf das Wort kommt es an. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. J. H. Friedrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 107–22.

argues that it is the law of faith, not the law of works, that excludes all boasting before God. That the law of works is the Mosaic law is clear from the context (see "observing the law" in 3:28; lit. "works of the law"). It is then argued that the law "of faith" is also the Mosaic law, viewed not from the standpoint of the works it demands, but from the standpoint of the faith that it also demands or bears witness to. But the emphasis on faith *apart from the law* in both 3:21–22 and 3:28 makes this interpretation unlikely. Rather, Paul is utilizing a more general meaning of the word *nomos* ("principle"; cf. *NTV*) to create a rhetorical contrast between the law of Moses that demands works and the "law" (or principle) of the new covenant (inherent already, of course, in the old; cf. Rom. 4). This "law" Paul identifies in 3:28: "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."²⁴

A similar more general use of *nomos* is almost surely to be found in Romans 8:2; it would render Paul's argument almost senseless were he affirming the ability of the law of Moses to deliver from the power of sin (v. 2), for he goes on immediately (v. 3) to deny to the law precisely this power. Probably neither occurrence of *nomos* in Rom. 8:2 refers to the Mosaic law but to two opposing "principles" or "powers," as if Paul were saying: "the power of the life-giving Spirit in Christ Jesus has set you free from the power of sin and death" (cf. "law of sin" in 7:23).²⁵

In Romans 9:31, on the other hand, "law of righteousness" almost certainly refers to the Mosaic law, the genitive *dikaïosynēs* indicating the object of the law: "the law that demands righteousness."²⁶ Yet Paul faults the Jews for pursuing this law through works (*hōs ex ergōn*) rather than through faith (v. 32a). Some argue

²⁴For this interpretation of 3:27, see especially Heikki Räisänen, "Das 'Gesetz des Glaubens' (Röm. 3,27) und das 'Gesetz des Geistes' (Röm. 8,2)," *NTS* 26 (1979–80), 101–17. See also Moo, *Romans 1–8*, 251–53. For substantiation of this meaning of *nomos*, see Räisänen, "Sprachliches zum Spiel des Paulus mit NOMOS," in *The Torah and Christ* (Helsinki: Kirjapaino Raamattutalu, 1986), 119–47.

²⁵See, again, Räisänen, "Das 'Gesetz des Glaubens'"; and Moo, *Romans 1–8*, 504–8; see also Leander E. Keck, "The Law and 'The Law of Sin and Death' (Rom. 8:1–4). Reflections on The Spirit and Ethics in Paul," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lev. H. Silberman*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980), 41–57.

²⁶Against this interpretation see Calvin, who views the phrase as a *hypallage* and translates it "righteousness of the law" (*Romans*, 378), and William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, who think that *nomos* here means "rule" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], 279).

that here Paul saw the law broadly as something to be believed and not just done.²⁷ Again, however, the context makes this interpretation unlikely. Paul's careful contrast between Gentiles and Jews in vv. 30–31 makes it necessary to attribute to both the same goal of pursuit: righteousness. Moreover, v. 31 finds clear parallels in 10:3, 5, where the issue again is righteousness. We must, then, place the emphasis in 9:31 on righteousness: it was "the law in terms of its demand for righteousness" that Israel pursued and never attained (v. 31), for righteousness is based on faith and not on works (v. 32a).²⁸

These texts raise a broader issue in Paul's use of *nomos* that we might consider here. Many who think that "law of faith" and "law of the Spirit" refer to the Mosaic law viewed improperly think also that the contrasting phrases, "law of works" and "law of sin," refer to the Mosaic law as misunderstood or misused by human beings. In fact, scholars since the beginning of the church have pursued this line of interpretation, to the point that many of Paul's negative statements about the law are interpreted as directed not toward the law as God gave it, but only to the law as people have perverted it.²⁹ The word *nomos* in these texts, they argue, means "legalism," or it refers to the ceremonial law only or to the law falsely used as a national charter of exclusivism for Israel. By such an interpretation, these scholars are able, they claim, to resolve the tension between Paul's negative and positive statements about the law.³⁰

But this whole approach to Paul's teaching on the law must be rejected. First, there is no good evidence that Paul ever uses the word *nomos* to refer to "legalism" or to a misunderstood law. When he wants to denote a legalistic conception, he uses phrases such as "seeking to be justified by the law, or by works of the law." Second, most of the negative statements Paul makes about the law come in contexts in which he has unambiguously

²⁷See Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 66–88; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2.509.

²⁸See John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989), 253–54; Tom Schreiner, "Israel's Failure to Attain Righteousness in Romans 9:30–10:3," *TJ* 12 (1991), 211–20; Martin, *Christ and the Law*, 136–38; Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 42; Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 126–30.

²⁹This development in the early church was stimulated by the problem of answering Marcion. See Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 50–52.

³⁰Important examples of such an approach are: C. E. B. Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," *SJT* 17 (1964), 43–68 (see a revised form of this material in his *Romans*, 2.845–62); Fuller, *Gospel & Law*, 66–105.

identified the law as the law given by God (see Rom. 3:19–20; the passive verb in 5:20; 7:7; Gal. 3:15–18). Third, Paul views God's work of redemption in Christ as the answer to the problem posed by the negative effects of the law (Rom. 3:21–26; 7:4–6; 8:2–4; Gal. 3:13–14; 4:7). Sending Christ to die on the cross implies that the situation from which we had to be rescued was not the subjective one of misunderstanding or misusing the law, but the objective one of being imprisoned under its sin-revealing and sin-provoking powers. Solving the apparent tension between Paul's positive and negative statements about the law by attributing a different meaning to the word in each set of statements must, therefore, be rejected as an overly simplistic alternative.³¹

I return now to the main point: Paul, by definition, understands the Mosaic law to call for works and not for faith. Indeed, he clearly affirms just this in Gal. 3:12a: "The law is not based on faith"; i.e., "the law is not a matter of believing" (*ek pisteōs*). A similar definition is assumed by Eph. 2:15: "the law with its commandments and regulations." This perspective is maintained throughout the New Testament. The Mosaic law, by its nature, demands works. But since salvation can be achieved only by faith, the Mosaic law can have nothing to do with securing salvation.

The Law Cannot Save Because of Sin

The Mosaic law holds out the promise of life for those who do it. But no one can ever achieve life through the law, because it is impossible to do it. This principle is made evident in several New Testament texts. Peter speaks of the law as "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10; see the reference to salvation in v. 11). But it is again in Paul that the most important and most debated texts are found. In Galatians 3:10–12, Paul argues that justification can come only by faith and not by the works of the law because a curse rests on "all who rely on observing the law . . . for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law' [Deut. 27:26]" (Gal. 3:10). While it has been contested in recent years,³² the point that Paul is making here is that a curse, rather than salvation, comes by reliance on the law because no one can

³¹For detailed argument, see my "Law, 'Works of the Law' and Legalism," 73–100. Cf. also Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 130–36.

³²See especially Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 20–22.

"continue to do everything" that it demands.³³ The same logic is even more evident in Romans. The explanation for why the promise that doers of the law will be justified (Rom. 2:13) can never come to fruition (3:20) is given in 3:9b: "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." Human inability to fulfill the law is why it can never be the means of salvation.

Paul makes this same point later, in Romans 7:7–8:4. The "later" (post-Pelagian) Augustine, most of the Reformers, and a large number of expositors to this day argue that Paul in the latter part of Romans 7 is describing his own experience as a Christian.³⁴ But this is unlikely. The person depicted in these verses is "sold as a slave to sin" (7:14) and "a prisoner of the law of sin" (7:23). Both descriptions conflict squarely with what Paul affirms to be the experience of all Christians in Romans 6 (no longer "slaves of sin" [see vv. 6, 16–17, 18, 20, 22]) and Romans 8 (set free from "the law of sin and death" [see v. 2]). Romans 7 is Paul's description of his own life, and that of other Jews, under the law of Moses.³⁵ The giving of the law to Israel, Paul affirms, has meant not life (as some Jews believed) but death (vv. 7–12); for the law is given to human beings who are already "under sin" (3:9) and who cannot therefore obey the good and holy law that God gives them (vv. 14–25). Thus, as Paul summarizes in 8:3, the law cannot rescue from the power of sin because the law is "weakened by the flesh [*sarx*; NIV 'sinful nature']." Here again, then, Paul describes human sinfulness as the reason why the law cannot bring salvation.

I have devoted most of my attention in this section to the New Testament, simply because the most decisive and clear biblical statements on these issues are found there. Nevertheless, I should note that, although not a great deal is said about these matters in the Old Testament, there are indications that it teaches the same

³³See Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*, 18–19; and especially Thomas Schreiner, "Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Possible? A Re-examination of Galatians 3:10," *JETS* 27 (1984), 151–60; and "Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E. P. Sanders," *WJ* 47 (1985), 245–78.

³⁴Recent important defenses of this view are: Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1949), 284–97; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.344–47; Durin, *Romans 1–8*, 387–89; 403–12; J. I. Packer, "The 'Wretched Man' in Romans 7," *SE* 2, 621–27.

³⁵See my *Romans 1–8*, 469–96, for a detailed defense of this view. In agreement, see also most of the church fathers and W. G. Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1929); Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 199–212; Brice L. Martin, "Some Reflections on the Identity of ego in Rom. 7:14–25," *SJT* 34 (1979), 39–47.

truths. As we have seen, the Old Testament holds out the promise of "life"—in the sense we have defined it—for those who do the law. But the Pentateuch itself, when seen as a whole, takes a decidedly pessimistic viewpoint on the ability of Israel to fulfill its covenant obligations.³⁶ In his concluding words to Moses, God predicts that the people of Israel "will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant" (Deut. 31:20). It is this rebellion that the prophets observe, both predicting and reflecting on the exile as God's judgment on his unfaithful people and at the same time announcing the good news that God will yet remain faithful to his promise to Abraham and provide a "new covenant," to be established on the grounds of God's transforming work in the hearts of his people (see Jer. 31:31–34). The law's failure to deliver because of human sin is one of the clearest and most persistent themes of the Old Testament. Faith in the God of the promises, not obedience to the law, is seen to be the way to ultimate blessing.

The Law Reveals the Character of God

As we noted above, God did not give the law of Moses to Israel to save the people. Rather, it was God's gracious revelation of his character, and it demanded that those who were now his people become like him in character. "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:45) is a repeated refrain that states a central purpose of the law. God's character is the implied basis for the entire law; in different ways, its various commandments and prohibitions spell out implications of his character for his people Israel. This purpose of the law is so plain that we need say little about it. But we should note two aspects particularly relevant to our purposes. First, the Mosaic law is not *simply* revelation of God's character; it is a demand for conformity to that character and contains threats of punishment for disobedience. What we are insisting on here is that the Mosaic law is, indeed, *law*.³⁷ The

³⁶In agreement with this conclusion, although argued on different premises, see John Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *WTJ* 53:2 (Fall 1991), 241–61.

³⁷As Walther Zimmerli has correctly argued, the Mosaic law included the threat of judgment for failure to comply with it from the beginning (*The Law and the Prophets: A Study of the Meaning of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1965], 51–65). He is arguing against, *inter alia*, Martin Noth ("The Laws in the Pentateuch: Their Assumptions and Meaning" in *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Essays*

Septuagint translators were, therefore, correct to translate *tôrâ* by *nomos*.³⁸ Second, the law points to the character of God in different ways. Some laws rather directly relate human behavior to the character of God: for example, we are not to murder because God reverences and sanctifies human life. Others do so in an indirect way: the Israelites are not to eat certain kinds of food because God is holy and the people must be taught that there are "unholy" things from which they must separate themselves. The sacrificial laws teach still another truth about God, that he cannot tolerate sin without some kind of shedding of blood to compensate for that sin.³⁹

Hallowed theological tradition suggests at this point that we distinguish among the various laws by allocating them to one of three categories: moral, ceremonial, and civil.⁴⁰ The "moral" commandments, it is assumed, are eternally binding in the form in which they were originally given, while the ceremonial and the civil ones, finding their fulfillment in Christ, cease to act as immediate guides to Christian behavior. In fact, this distinction is vital to many approaches to the law in the New Testament; statements about the law's continuity are regarded as statements about the moral law, while assertions of the law's cessation are applied only to the civil and ceremonial law. But this distinction does not hold up under close scrutiny. The structure of the Mosaic law certainly suggests that the Decalogue holds pride of place;⁴¹

[Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966], 95–102) and Gerhard von Rad (*Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. [New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965], 1:194–202). I will not deal in this essay with the higher-critical hypotheses of the origin of the law and its relationship to the prophets. I will assume that the chronological order now found in the Old Testament is the order in which the relevant events actually occurred.

³⁸The validity of this translation has been doubted by some, who think that the Greek *nomos* introduces a harder, more "legal," element than is present in the Hebrew *tôrâ* (see C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954], 25–41). But what I have said above, along with other reasons, shows that the lexical overlap in the two words is large (see Stephen Westerholm, "Torah, Nomos, and Law: A Question of Meaning," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 15 [1986], 327–36).

³⁹On the various ways in which the law teaches eternal principles, see especially Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991).

⁴⁰The distinction is still widely used; see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 114–16.

⁴¹See Gordon Wenham, "Law and the Legal System in the Old Testament," in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, ed. Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 28.

but it is not easy even within the Ten Commandments to distinguish clearly between what is "moral"—and therefore, it is assumed, eternal—and what is not. For instance, the promise attached to the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and your mother") is "so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). Significantly, when Paul "reapplies" this commandment to his Christian readers (Eph. 6:2–3), he "universalizes" the promise: "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." An even thornier problem for those who would elevate the Decalogue to the status of eternal moral law is presented by the Sabbath commandment. Thus, in general, it is notoriously difficult to know from the Old Testament itself which commandments should be placed in the category of "moral" and therefore eternally binding *in the form in which they were first given*.

Jews in Jesus' and Paul's day certainly did not divide up the law into categories; on the contrary, there was a strong insistence that the law was a unity and could not be obeyed in parts.⁴² This being the case, we would require strong evidence from within the New Testament to think that the word "law" in certain texts can apply only to one part of the law. Jesus recognized that some requirements within the law were more important than others (Matt. 23:23); but he also insists in this very context that all the requirements must be obeyed. Likewise, Paul reminds the Galatians that they cannot pick and choose which commandments of the law they are going to obey: "I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). And James asserts that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). These points suffice to show that the continuity of the law in the new covenant cannot be founded on such a distinction among the different "kinds" of laws.⁴³

The Law Supervised the People of Israel

Old Testament scholars have long noted how many of the laws given to the people of Israel served to preserve and give

⁴²While there was some debate among Jews about how much of the law was required to be obeyed by a proselyte, the view that the law was fundamentally a unity was basic. See *m. 'Abot* 4.2; *b. Shabb.* 31a, and the discussion in E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, Magnes, 1979), 1:360–65.

⁴³See also Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 119; Bruce, *Paul*, 192–93; van Dülmen, *Theologie des Gesetzes*, 132–33.

cohesion to the nation. By forcing distinctiveness on the people in terms of diet and other areas of lifestyle, they would be kept intact as a nation and “set apart” for God’s special purposes in and through them. The New Testament recognizes something like this purpose of the law, teaching that the law was given by God to supervise and safeguard the people of Israel until Christ should come.

The key text is Galatians 3:24: “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ” (*ho nomos paidagōgos hēmōn gegonen eis Christon*). The NIV (quoted here) suggests that the text is teaching what is known as the second, or “theological,” use of the law: that the law was given to show people their need of God and so lead them to Christ. But this application of the text is certainly wrong, and for two reasons. First, a salvation-historical perspective dominates Galatians 3–4, and especially 3:15–4:7. Paul is not speaking of the experience of individuals with the law, but of the purpose of the law in the history of the people of Israel. Consequently, the first person plural (“us”) probably refers to Paul and his fellow Jews, not Paul and his fellow Christians.⁴⁴ Second, the telic interpretation of the NIV, “to lead us to Christ,” is not justified. Temporal statements surround v. 24: “before faith came” (v. 23); “now that faith has come” (v. 25). These make it likely that *eis* in v. 24 also has a temporal meaning: “the law was our custodian *until* Christ came” (RSV; italics mine).⁴⁵ In a similar vein, the key word *paidagōgos* does not suggest the notion of instruction that leads to Christ (cf. KJV “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ”). The word denoted a person, usually a servant, who had charge over young children. The ancient “pedagogue” was not a teacher but a babysitter.⁴⁶ Galatians 3:24, then, is asserting that the Mosaic law functioned among the people of Israel to direct their behavior until the time of their maturity, when the promised Messiah would be revealed (cf. Gal. 4:1–7).

⁴⁴See Bandstra, *Law and Elements of the World*, 59–60; Brendan Byrne, “Sons of God”—“Seed of Abraham.” *A Study of the Idea of Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul Against the Jewish Background* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979), 178–82; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 145, 164.

⁴⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 183; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 148–49; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 178.

⁴⁶See especially the excellent survey of the evidence by Richard Longenecker, “The Pedagogical Nature of the Law in Galatians 3:19–4:7,” *JETS* 25 (1982), 53–61.

The Law Imprisoned Israel (and All People) Under Sin

We have seen that both Old and New Testaments teach that the law could not free people from the power of sin. But the Scriptures go further: the law has actually had the effect of revealing and stimulating sin and of locking up the people of Israel—and, by extrapolation, all people—under the condemning power of sin.

The Law Reveals Sin

In revealing to Israel the character of God, the law at the same time makes clear that any deviation from conformity to that character is sin. Therefore, as Paul puts it, the law brings “knowledge” of sin (Rom. 3:19–20; 7:7–12). By this Paul means not simply that the law has “defined” sin, in the way that the “laws” of golf define throwing a golf ball as illegal. As so often in Scripture, “knowing” in these contexts means to enter into intimate relationship.⁴⁷ Israel came to “know” sin through the law by personal and factual experience of their inability to do what the law demanded of them. Using “I,” perhaps to represent himself in solidarity with the people of Israel,⁴⁸ Paul can say that “I would not have known sin except through the law” (Rom. 7:7b; my own translation), i.e., I would not have known sin to have the power that it really has (see v. 13). Here again, Paul’s perspective is salvation-historical, for he describes the negative effect of the giving of the law on Israel. The author to the Hebrews makes a similar point with reference to the Mosaic laws of sacrifice: they acted as a “reminder of sins” (10:3).

The salvation-historical context of these statements makes it unlikely that we can apply them to the function of the Mosaic law for people generally. Indeed, the popular notion that the Mosaic law should be preached as a preparation for the gospel, revealing sin and one’s need of salvation, has slim biblical support.⁴⁹ None of the examples of evangelistic preaching in the New Testament uses the law in this way. The closest is Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man, cited earlier (Matt. 19:16–22 and par.). Here

⁴⁷See, for instance, Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:198–99; Ulrich Luz, *Das Geschichtsverständnis des Paulus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1968), 187.

⁴⁸See my “Israel and Paul in Romans 7.7–12,” *NTS* 32 (1986), 122–35.

⁴⁹Luther insisted on the continuing use of the law as a means to prod repentance among both unbelievers and Christians. He was opposed, however, by Agricola. See the discussion in Steffen Kjeldgaard-Pedersen, *Gesetz, Evangelium und Busse* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

Jesus' citations of the commandments may have the purpose of revealing to this man his need of the gospel. However, it was not the commandments of the Mosaic law, but Jesus' "gospel" demand to follow him that drove the young man to despair. Moreover, Jesus cited the Mosaic law because he could assume the applicability of that law to this Jewish man. We must reiterate at this point the importance of keeping the New Testament salvation-historical perspective in view and of exercising caution in elevating what was true for Jews under old covenant with its Mosaic law to the status of a general theological principle.

The Law "Increases" Sin

Paul goes further: He argues that the law has had the effect of multiplying sins: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase" (Rom. 5:20). This increase probably has both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. Quantitatively, the law has increased the number of sins, both by defining a greater number of things that displease God and by stimulating rebellion against God by its very prohibitions (the principle of "forbidden fruits" being the sweetest). But Paul's emphasis is on the qualitative increase in sin that the law has brought. As he makes clear elsewhere (Rom. 4:15; 5:13–14), the law makes sin a more serious matter by spelling out in detail the will of God. Before the law was given, sin certainly existed, for people knew from nature and conscience (see Rom. 1:19–22, 32; 2:14–15) what God was like and some of what he wanted from his creatures. But the Mosaic law specified in detail God's will for his people Israel, thereby increasing their responsibility and the seriousness of the matter when they failed to meet that responsibility. Jesus indicated the same principle of greater responsibility because of greater knowledge when he warned that it would go easier in the Day of Judgment for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those people in Galilee who had heard but rejected Jesus (Matt. 10:15). Moreover, since the passive verb in Romans 5:20 must have God as its agent—"the law was added [by God]"—it is clear that God intended this effect of the law when he gave it.²⁰

Paul is probably making a similar point in Gal. 3:19 with the phrase *tōn parabaseōn charin*. This may mean that the law was

²⁰On Rom. 5:20, see my *Romans 1–8*, 360–62; and J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 243–45; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 202–3; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1,292–93.

added "because it was necessary to curb transgressions" or "in order to reveal transgressions," but the use of the word *parabasis*, which Paul always views as the *result* of the giving of the law (Rom. 2:23; 4:15; 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14), suggests rather the translation "in order to produce transgressions," i.e., to transform sin into transgression.⁵¹

The Law Imprisons Under Sin

Because the law reveals and increases sin, it has had, in itself, the negative effect of imprisoning Israel under sin's power and thereby bringing condemnation. The Mosaic law, Paul claims, has brought wrath, for it has revealed sin to be transgression against God's good and holy law. It has thus increased Israel's responsibility (Rom. 4:15). Life under the law has led to enslavement to the "the law [or power] or sin" (Rom. 7:23), a slavery from which only Christ and his Spirit can set us free (8:2-3). "The curse of the law" stands over all who are outside of faith in Christ, for the only means of attaining righteousness apart from Christ is through perfect obedience to God's law, a feat impossible for sinful humans to accomplish (cf. Gal. 3:10, 13). Therefore, the law is like an unfulfilled and unfulfillable "IOU" standing against sinful human beings (Col. 2:14). Paul summarizes all this in Galatians 3:22: "The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin" (cf. also Rom. 3:19-20). The law's manifest inability to rescue God's people Israel from sin's power shows, *ipso facto*, that all people are in a similar situation. As Paul often does, he here argues from the situation of Israel to the situation of all people, viewing Israel's experience with the law as paradigmatic of the experience of all people with God's "law" in its various forms.⁵²

In arguing this point, we must again keep in mind that Paul is referring to the effect of the Mosaic law *in itself* on the people of Israel. He is not claiming that every Israelite was finally condemned under sin, but that every Israelite, in terms of the Mosaic covenant in and of itself, was so condemned. For throughout the Mosaic dispensation, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:6-9, 15-18, the prior Abrahamic promise arrangement, by which God

⁵¹Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*, 26; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 150; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 186-87.

⁵²See Gerhard Ebeling, "Reflections on the Doctrine of the Law," in *Word and Faith*, 275-80; T. L. Donaldson, "The 'Curse of the Law' and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3:13-14," *NTS* 32 (1986), 104-6; Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 192-95.

justified sinners through their faith, continued in effect. The promise and the law, Paul suggests, operate on different levels. The Mosaic law was given to supervise Israel as a people and to reveal their sinfulness, and those who sought their "life" in its terms were doomed to condemnation and death (3:10, 12–13). The promissory arrangement with Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, on the other hand, functions to save people from the imprisonment under sin produced by the Mosaic law.

At this point the salvation-historical conception that so dominates Paul's discussion of the law must be carefully nuanced. His strict demarcation of two "eras" can lead to the conclusion that all who lived before Christ were necessarily doomed, while all those who live after Christ are, by definition, saved. But this is not, of course, what Paul intends to say. His application of the salvation-historical contrast of "before" and "after" operates on two levels: the level of world history and the level of individual history.³³ In Galatians 3–4, a passage central to our purposes, the former is clearly dominant, as Paul divides history into three stages: before the law (when the promise was given to Abraham), under the law, and after the law (when the promise to Abraham was fulfilled). Until that promise was fulfilled and "faith in Christ" came, the curse reigned. But in so conceptualizing the situation, Paul does not intend to deny the presence of people before Christ who were genuinely saved from the curse (see 3:6–9). These individuals, by God's grace and in anticipation of the perfect sacrifice of Christ (cf. Rom. 3:25–26), could be delivered from the condemnatory aspects of their life under the law of Moses.

Conclusion

Our survey of the purposes of the Mosaic law has produced a rather negative picture. To some extent this is due to the fact that so much of our evidence comes from Paul, who was dealing with those who were placing too much weight on the law. But while this factor may affect the number of references, it does not materially affect the overall perspective. For while Galatians is certainly polemically oriented, Romans is not; and we have just as strong a negative evaluation of the purpose and effects of the law in Romans as we do in Galatians. Furthermore, the picture found

³³On this, see especially Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 135–81; Kurt Stalder, *Das Werk des Geistes in der Heiligung bei Paulus* (Zurich: EVZ, 1962), 240–48; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 193.

in Paul is not materially different than that found in other New Testament books (e.g., Hebrews) or in the Old Testament itself. Throughout the Scriptures, while the essential goodness of the law is tenaciously guarded, its failure to rescue humans from the predicament of sin is made clear. The fault is not God's, nor is the law that he gave to blame; it is our fault, who are so under sin's power that we are not only unable to fulfill his good law, but are stimulated by it to rebel even further against our rightful Lord and so make our condition even worse than before. Typical to the salvation-historical conception, these points are made with respect to the experience of the people of Israel with the Mosaic law, but it is clear that what applies to Israel under its law applies at the same time to all people, confronted with God's law in its various forms (see, e.g., Rom. 2:14–15).

THE MOSAIC LAW IN THE NEW COVENANT

Those purposes of the law that are given most attention in the New Testament—guardianship of Israel; revelation of sin—are limited to the time before the coming of Christ. But we must now look more closely at the law as a revelation of God's character and will for his people. In what sense, if any, does the law continue to exercise this function in the new covenant period? Simple, neat answers to this question—e.g., the law has no role anymore; the whole law, or at least the "moral" law continues in force—are easy to give. But I am convinced that they are too neat and miss some of the nuances found within the New Testament. At the risk of committing the same mistake, I will state at this point the position for which I will argue: The entire Mosaic law comes to fulfillment in Christ, and this fulfillment means that this law is no longer a *direct and immediate* source of, or judge of, the conduct of God's people. Christian behavior, rather, is now guided directly by "the law of Christ." This "law" does not consist of legal prescriptions and ordinances, but of the teaching and example of Jesus and the apostles, the central demand of love, and the guiding influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

I will try to substantiate this basic thesis by showing that it is compatible with Old Testament teaching, is taught in key New Testament texts (particularly in Matthew and Paul), and is nowhere contradicted within the New Testament. The nature of the material to be surveyed warrants our abandoning the topical outline of the first section in favor of a canonical outline.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament claims the commandments given to Moses are eternally valid (e.g., Lev. 16:24; 24:8). But these texts cannot be used to demonstrate the eternal applicability of the Mosaic commandments in their original form to the people of God. For one thing, the English words "eternal" and "everlasting" translate Hebrew words that mean "lasting for an age" ('ôlām). Thus, for example, the Levitical priesthood is said to be "eternal" (Ex. 40:15), but Hebrews claims explicitly that it has been done away with under the new covenant. For another, the strict application of this logic would mean that every detail of the Mosaic legislation would remain authoritative in the new covenant era, including the sacrificial law. Again, since Hebrews and other New Testament books demonstrate clearly that at least these laws are no longer to be carried out by new covenant Christians, it is clear that we cannot press these Old Testament texts to prove the eternal applicability of the Mosaic commandments. In fact, two other points within the Old Testament itself suggest that the Mosaic law, considered as an integrated regime, was to have only temporary reign.

The first factor is the very nature of the Mosaic law as *covenant* law. The form of the Sinaitic covenant closely resembles second millennium b.c. Hittite "suzerainty" treaties, through which a king entered into a solemn agreement to provide certain benefits for his vassals, contingent on their abiding by the covenant stipulations (see particularly Ex. 19–24 and the Book of Deuteronomy).⁵⁴ The point here is simply that the Mosaic law fits squarely into the framework of this kind of covenant "document," and that we should therefore expect the duration of that law to be bound up with the duration of the covenant of which it is a part. "The law is a temporary framework that prescribed the terms of obedience for the people of God in the Mosaic era."⁵⁵ Yet the later Old Testament books make clear that the continuation of the Sinaitic covenant is in jeopardy because of Israel's repeated disobedience of the covenant stipulations (e.g., Dan. 9:7–14; Hos. 6:7; 8:1). God does not, therefore, abandon his people; on the

⁵⁴See Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), especially 27–44; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963); George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

⁵⁵McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 73.

contrary, in an act of sheer grace, he promises to “recreate” a people for himself through a new covenant.

Secondly, this promised eschatological act is based not on the Mosaic covenant, but on God’s inviolable promises to the patriarchs. This pattern is replicated in the New Testament, where Paul bases the future salvation of Israel not on God’s continuing maintenance of, or restoration of, the Sinaitic covenant, but on the faithfulness of God to his calling of the people Israel and his promises to the patriarchs (see Rom. 11:16, 28–29). Hope for a new covenant that would arise out of the ashes of the old surfaces repeatedly in the prophets (Isa. 24:5; 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:37–41; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60–63; 34:25; 37:15–28 [26]; Hos. 2:18). This covenant is no simple renewal of the Mosaic covenant, but a *new* arrangement, “not . . . like the covenant I made with their forefathers” (Jer. 31:32); in it God, by his Spirit (Ezek. 36:24–28), insures that his law is obeyed (Jer. 31:33–34 [the word *tōrā* is used]; Ezek. 37:24; cf. also 11:20; 36:27 [the words *huqqōt*, “statutes,” and *mispōt*, “judgments,” are used]).⁸⁶ It is precisely this reference to the law of God that draws our attention to the question of the place of the Mosaic law in this new covenant. Since, especially in Ezekiel, the promised new covenant is connected with a return to the land, we might think that the focus is on the return from exile in the sixth century B.C. But, while perhaps including this return, the prophecies clearly go beyond that period of time. Traditional dispensationalism has confined the true fulfillment of these prophecies to the people of Israel in the millennial era, arguing for a renewal of the Mosaic law in all its details at that time. But the New Testament demonstrates that these new covenant prophecies have been fulfilled through Christ and in the Spirit-endowed church (e.g., Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:7–13).⁸⁷ Is the Mosaic law, then, to be a constitutive part of the new covenant also?

⁸⁶It is true, in a sense, that “Jeremiah found no fault with the Sinaitic covenant,” for its failure was due neither to God nor to the covenant arrangement as such (cf. Kaiser, *Old Testament Theology*, 232). Yet fail it did, as Jeremiah and the other prophets make clear, requiring a new and different arrangement. Kaiser himself notes the discontinuity between the Sinaitic and new covenants, affirming that the new covenant is in direct line with the promises to Abraham and David (see pp. 232–34). This continuity with the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants does not, however, justify speaking of this covenant as a “renewed” covenant (contra Kaiser, p. 234; correctly, McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 163–68), for it brings to fulfillment what was only promised in those earlier covenants.

⁸⁷On this, see McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 155–61.

Many argue that this is what the texts we have mentioned require: The new covenant promises the internalization of the same law given by God at Sinai.³⁸ But there is reason for caution. First, if Jeremiah and Ezekiel are thinking of the Mosaic law, there is no basis to confine the reference to only part of the law (e.g., the so-called moral law). Yet it is evident that the totality of the Mosaic law has *not* been reinstated as an authoritative source of life in the new covenant—its laws pertaining to food, sacrifices, festivals, and civic matters are not binding on Christians (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:9–16; Hebrews, *passim*). Those who argue, then, that the Mosaic law continues intact in the new covenant must recognize that it does not continue without variation and modification. The writing of the law on the heart (Jer. 31:33) may indeed involve transformation of the actual content of the Mosaic law. Second, there are references in the prophets to a *tôrâ* that will be established in the last days and that probably does not refer to the Mosaic law as such (Isa. 2:3; 42:4; 51:4, 7; Mic. 4:2). This “Zion torah,” perhaps to be understood as a fresh publication of God’s will for his people, in continuity with but not identical to the “Sinai torah,” may be what is envisaged in Jeremiah 31:33–34 and the Ezekiel texts.³⁹ Another possibility is that the concept of “law” has here come to have almost a “formal” sense, denoting generally God’s will for his people.⁴⁰ The point of Jeremiah, then, is that God would ensure that his will—not the Mosaic law as such, in its totality—would be carried out in the new covenant. In any case, there are solid grounds for thinking that Jeremiah’s “law written on the heart” is not simply a reissue of the Mosaic law.

Within the manifest continuity of God’s plan for his people, then, there are also in the Old Testament clear indications of the discontinuity between the Sinaitic covenant and the way in which God’s promises are finally to be fulfilled in the “last days.” All Christian interpreters agree that this discontinuity embraces the Mosaic law in some sense. The question then becomes: How much is continued and how do we know what is continued and what is

³⁸Kaiser, *Old Testament Theology*, 233.

³⁹The distinction between the “Sinai torah” and the “Zion torah” has been promulgated particularly by Hartmut Gese (see “The Law,” in *Essays on Biblical Theology* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981] 60–92). See also, on Isaiah, R. Ridderbos, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 54.

⁴⁰O. Palmer Robertson argues that Jeremiah uses *tôrâ* broadly, to mean the “whole of the Lord’s teaching” (*The Christ of the Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 262, n. 13).

not? The prophetic focus on a new covenant suggests that in the revelation of that new covenant arrangement we will learn just what it means to have God's law "written on the heart." I turn now, then, to the New Testament to find answers to these questions.

Jesus

Much of our evidence in this section will come from Matthew, for he is the evangelist who passes on to us most of Jesus' explicit teaching about the law.

Fulfillment

Particularly significant is Matthew 5:17-48. This passage has two parts. In vv. 17-19, Jesus defends himself against the charge that he is urging the abrogation of the law. Quite the contrary, Jesus claims in what is a justly famous theological summary, "I have come . . . to fulfill [the Law and the Prophets]." He then builds on this claim to continuity with the Old Testament by solemnly asserting the enduring validity of the law (v. 18) and by urging the teaching of its commandments (v. 19). The second part of this passage (vv. 21-48) examines six facets of the superior, "kingdom" righteousness that Jesus requires of his followers (cf. v. 20, a transitional statement). He enunciates these components of kingdom righteousness by comparing his demand with the commandments of the Mosaic law. Since it will be easier to understand the "theory" of Jesus' relationship to the law expressed in vv. 17-19 after looking at the practical examples in vv. 21-48, I will begin with this latter text.⁶¹

The six comparisons between traditional teaching and Jesus' teaching found here are usually called the "antitheses," because of the formula used to introduce them: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago . . . but I tell you" (vv. 21-22, 33-34; vv. 27-28, vv. 31-32, vv. 38-39, and vv. 43-44 abbreviate the same formula). This formula suggests that Jesus is comparing his teaching with the teaching that his Jewish listeners have heard in the synagogue. Whether this teaching represents fairly the teaching of the Old Testament itself is not clear; for Jewish

⁶¹For a more detailed study of Matt. 5:17-48, with more argument and citation of views and sources, see my "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 20 (1984), 17-28. (The article has been reprinted, with minor revisions, in *The Best in Theology*, ed. J. I. Packer [Carol Stream, Ill.: Christianity Today Institute, 1987].)

synagogue audiences would often hear the Old Testament read in “targumized” or paraphrased form, and these paraphrases often shifted the meaning of the original.⁶² This issue is important in assessing the stance of Jesus vis-à-vis the Old Testament commands in this passage. One influential interpretation, for instance, holds that Jesus is simply reasserting the meaning of the original Old Testament commandment over against Jewish misinterpretations of his day.⁶³ A second popular viewpoint, however, holds that Jesus generally quotes the Old Testament in its original meaning, but in his own teaching he goes beyond that original meaning, promulgating a “deeper” or “more radical” form of the law for the new kingdom age.⁶⁴ A quick study of each of the antitheses will reveal, however, that neither of these options is adequate as an overall summary of Jesus’ stance on the law in this passage.

The first two antitheses are similar: Jesus quotes a prohibition from the Decalogue and then adds a condemnation of the heart attitude to which the action prohibited in the commandment can be traced. Despite the popularity of the viewpoint, fostered by its prominence in Reformation catechisms, it is unlikely that Jesus is asserting the “true” meaning of the original prohibitions. Nothing in the Old Testament suggests that anger and lust were included in the prohibitions of, respectively, murder and adultery. A good

⁶²Since most Jews believed that these additions, part of the oral law, or “the traditions of the elders,” were handed down at Sinai (cf. *m. ’Abot* 1:1–2), Jesus could well be including them in what was given “to the people long ago” (taking the dative *lois archaïos* as a “pure dative”).

⁶³This view was held by most of the Reformers (cf. Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* [London: Epworth, 1960], 36) and probably by a majority of contemporary evangelical scholars. See Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 300–307; John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 158; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1977), 90; Hermann Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 299; Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 197–211.

⁶⁴A form of this view was the most popular among the fathers of the church (see McArthur, *Sermon on the Mount*, 26–32), and it is the view most widely supported in modern scholarship. See Martin Dibelius, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Scribner’s, 1940), 69–71; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 101–2; Jacques Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, vol. 1: *Le problème littéraire—Les deux versions du Sermon sur la Montagne et des Béatitudes*, 3d ed. (Bruges: Abbaye de Saint-André, 1958), 146–58; Wolfgang Schrage, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 63–69.

case can be therefore made here for the second viewpoint: Jesus is "deepening" the law by extending its prohibitions from the sphere of action to that of the thought life. Yet not even this is clear, for Jesus demonstrates no intention, here or in any of the antitheses, of "doing" something to the law, whether it be expounding it or radicalizing it. What the antithetical formula suggests, rather, is that Jesus is placing his own authoritative demand alongside that of the law. It is the "I say to you" of the Messiah and Son of God, not the Mosaic law in any sense, that is the basis of the new kingdom demand.

The relationship between the Mosaic law and Jesus' teaching in the third antithesis is even more indirect than in the first two. In quoting Deuteronomy 24:1, Jesus is probably alluding to the broad grounds for the attaining of a bill of divorce that were available to Jewish men who followed, as most of them naturally would, the liberal teaching of Hillel. Jesus' prohibition of divorce and remarriage on any grounds except that of unchastity counters this liberal tendency, agrees generally with that of Shammai, another prominent rabbi of the day, and is generally in accord with what the Old Testament text itself implies.⁶⁵ One could, of course, argue that Jesus is simply reasserting the original meaning of the Mosaic law on this point. Nevertheless, Jesus is much more forthright than is the law at any point in branding second marriages after improper divorces adulterous, and his teaching can hardly be said to grow directly out of the Old Testament.

The fourth "thesis" (v. 33) cited by Jesus accurately summarizes several Old Testament texts that demand the faithful performance of vows (e.g., Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:3; Deut. 23:21). Since the Old Testament never commands that a vow be taken, Jesus' prohibition of vows is no abrogation of the law. On the other hand, Jesus does deny, or perhaps restricts, the acceptance of vows implicit in the Old Testament teaching. Once more, we see how inadequate is the notion that Jesus is simply expounding the Mosaic law, for he simply sweeps away the whole system of vows and oaths that was described and regulated in the Old Testament. On the other hand, it is not clear what Old Testament commandment Jesus might be "deepening," unless we apply the idea to the law in general.

In the fifth antithesis (vv. 38-42), Jesus juxtaposes the Old

⁶⁵I am here assuming the authenticity of the "exception" clause and that it states a real exception to the condemnation of a second marriage.

Testament law of “equivalent compensation” (see Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) with his own demand, “Do not resist an evil person.” Complicating the situation here is the difficulty in deciding exactly what Jesus intends by this prohibition. If he is in fact forbidding the practice of using this law as a rationale for private retaliation, then Jesus is once again neither abrogating nor expounding the law. The law quoted demands that Israel’s judges render decisions fairly and make the punishment fit the crime. By prohibiting the application of the commandment in this way, Jesus does not match nor interpret any particular commandment of the law.

The mixture of Old Testament law and popular interpretation is most evident in the final antithesis (vv. 43–47). Nowhere does the Old Testament command that a person hate his or her enemy, nor is this a fair extrapolation from Old Testament teaching generally.⁶⁶ Again, however, Jesus’ demand that his disciples love their enemies goes beyond anything required in the Old Testament.⁶⁷

When the antitheses as a group are considered, it becomes clear that no single interpretive method explains all of them. In some it could be argued that Jesus is expounding the law (the third), and in others that he is “deepening” the law (the first and second). But a larger category is needed to explain the overall relationship between the Mosaic commandments cited and Jesus’ own teaching. What does consistently emerge from the antitheses is Jesus’ radical insistence on what *he* says as binding on his followers. He taught “as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt. 7:29). This independence from both Jewish tradition and from the Mosaic law itself gives us an important indicator for our interpretation of vv. 17–19.

Jesus’ insistence that he had come not to “abolish” (*kataluō*) but to “fulfill” (*plēroō*) the law and the prophets (v. 17) deserves to be ranked among the most important New Testament pronouncements on the significance of the Law of Moses for the new Christian era. Matthean usage shows that the phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the commanding aspect of the Old

⁶⁶Jesus’ quotation may reflect the attitude inculcated among the sectaries at Qumran, who were encouraged to hate “the sons of darkness” (see IQS 1:3, 9–10; 2:4–9; and Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972], 42–47).

⁶⁷Lev. 19:18 commands the Israelites to love the “fellow Israelite” (*’*).

Testament (cf. 7:12; 22:40) rather than to the Old Testament generally.⁶⁸ That this is the focus in v. 17 is confirmed by the shift to "Law" in v. 18 and "commandment" in v. 19. Some interpreters think that Jesus' fulfillment of the law involves his personal observance of the demands of the law,⁶⁹ but the focus throughout this passage on Jesus' teaching rather than on his actions renders this view unlikely. Arguing that "fulfill" must be an exact antonym of "abolish," others think that Jesus is here expressing his intention fully to establish the law by restoring its true meaning.⁷⁰ But there is no reason to think that "fulfill" must express the exact opposite of "abolish."

More seriously, such an interpretation overlooks the manifestly eschatological and salvation-historical dimensions of the term "fulfill" (*plēroō*) in Matthew. Matthew uses it fifteen times (compared with two in Mark and nine in Luke), ten of these occurring in the introductions to Matthew's distinctive "formula quotations" (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). In these quotations Matthew shows how Jesus has "filled up" the entire Old Testament, not only by accomplishing what it predicted but also by reenacting climactically Old Testament historical events (e.g., 2:15). Particularly suggestive of Matthew's viewpoint is 11:13, in which Jesus declares that "all the Prophets *and the Law* prophesied until John" (*italics mine*). Integral to Matthew's gospel, then, is a scheme of salvation history that pictures the entire Old Testament as anticipating and pointing forward to Jesus.⁷¹

This background, coupled with the way in which Jesus goes beyond the law in his teaching in vv. 21–47, makes it unlikely that he is affirming in v. 17 his intention simply to establish the Mosaic law as it already exists. Other interpreters, then, view v. 17 as Jesus' claim to be "filling out" the law by extending or radicalizing its demands.⁷² But we have already seen that this perspective is

⁶⁸See Wolfgang Trilling, *Das wahre Israel: Studien zur Theologie des Matthäusevangeliums* (Munich: Kosel, 1964), 173–74.

⁶⁹T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (London: SCM, 1960), 53–54; Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Deichert, 1922), 212–13; Henrik Ljungman, *Das Gesetz erfüllen: Matth. 5,17ff. und 3,15 untersucht* (Lund: Gleerup, 1954), 58–61.

⁷⁰See especially Bahnsen, *Theonomy*, 64–69.

⁷¹On the fulfillment theme in Matthew, see especially R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 106–205.

⁷²See Dupont, *Béatitudes*, 138–44; W. D. Davies, "Matthew 5.17, 18," in *Christian Origins and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 33–45; Trilling, *Das wahre Israel*, 174–79.

unable to account for all the ways in which Jesus compares his teaching with that of the law in the antitheses that follow. The best interpretation, then, is to give to *plēroō* in v. 17 essentially the same meaning that it has in Matthew's fulfillment formulas: accomplishing that to which the Old Testament looked forward. In Matthew's bold perspective, *all* parts of the Old Testament "prophesy" about Jesus and the age of salvation. Thus, as Jesus "fulfills" Old Testament prophecies by doing what they predicted and "fulfills" Old Testament history by reenacting its events, so he "fulfills" the Old Testament law by making demands to which the law pointed forward. Jesus rejects any notion that his claim to dictate God's will to his followers involves a radical departure from the law or from its intentions. Rather, he is claiming that his teaching brings the eschatological fullness of God's will to which the Mosaic law looked forward. Jesus "fulfills" the law not by explaining it or by extending it, but by proclaiming the standards of kingdom righteousness that were anticipated in the law.⁷³

But can this interpretation be squared with what Jesus says about the law in vv. 18–19? These verses appear to give a ringing endorsement to the law's eternal validity (v. 18) and applicability (v. 19). However, few Christians would want to take the verses in just this way,⁷⁴ for they would then demand that Christians practice *every* commandment in the law, including commandments relating to the cult that the author to the Hebrews explicitly says are invalidated for Christians. Some have sought to evade this implication by arguing or assuming that Jesus is referring here only to the "moral" law. But we have seen above that these distinctions cannot be read into the New Testament, and particularly not in a text that focuses on the details of every part of the

⁷³For this general approach, see especially Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 207–10; J. P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 75–85; Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 143–53; Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 137–38, 163; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 142–45; France, *Matthew*, 194–95; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 485–87; Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 263–67.

⁷⁴The strength of these endorsements has given rise to various theories about Matthew's sources for vv. 18 (with its parallel in Luke 16:17) and 19. For discussion of various theories, see R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, "Attitudes to the Law in Matthew's Gospel," *BR* 17 (1972), 19–32.

law and in a Jewish context. Jesus' teaching about the law in vv. 18–19 must apply to the whole law.

How, then, can Jesus' teaching in these verses be integrated with the New Testament perspective generally? Some think that one, or both, of the "until" clauses in v. 18 sets up a temporal limitation on the validity of the law. The disappearance of heaven and earth and the accomplishment of all things will take place when Jesus completes the work of redemption on the cross and in his resurrection (see Matt. 24:34–35).⁷⁵ But there is insufficient evidence to support this limitation. Others argue that v. 19 refers to the commandments that Jesus is teaching (vv. 21ff.) rather than to the commandments of the law (v. 18).⁷⁶ But this is not the most obvious interpretation. Probably, then, we should understand v. 18 to be an endorsement of the continuing "usefulness" or authority of the law. Jesus is no Marcionite; and even if his followers are no longer bound by the commandments of the law, they are still to read and profit from it. In v. 19, then, the continuing practice of the commandments of the law must be viewed in light of their fulfillment by Jesus. It is the law *as fulfilled by Jesus* that must be done, not the law in its original form.⁷⁷

Love and the Law

Jesus' insistence that love be the touchstone of all that his disciples do is well known. What relationship does his focus on love bear to the continuing applicability of the Mosaic commandments? Three interpretations are popular: (1) love replaces the law (love in place of the law); (2) love is the criterion by which the meaning and application of the Mosaic commandments are to be evaluated (love over the law); or (3) love is the central demand of the law, without which the fulfillment of the rest of the law is meaningless (love as central to the law). I will argue that elements of both the second and third perspectives are found in Jesus' teaching.⁷⁸

The most direct evidence comes from Jesus' singling out love

⁷⁵See Davies, "Matthew 5.17, 18," 44–63; Meier, *Law and History*, 62–64; Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 145–48.

⁷⁶Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 221–23.

⁷⁷See especially France, *Matthew*, 195–96.

⁷⁸On these points, again see my article "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," 6–11; and also the slight revision of the position I take there in "Law," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. I. H. Marshall, S. McKnight, and J. Green (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

for God (Deut. 6:5) and love for one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18) as constituting, together, the greatest commandment in the law (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; cf. Luke 10:25–28). On these two commandments, Jesus claims, "all the Law and the Prophets hang [*krematai*]." As we have seen, "the Law and the Prophets" is an expression Matthew uses to denote the commanding aspect of the Old Testament. Jesus' language here suggests that the two great commandments are to the rest of the commandments as hinges are to a door; without them, the other commandments fall to the ground.⁷⁹ Obeying all the commandments in the law without manifesting love for God and love for one's neighbor is useless and unprofitable. Jesus, therefore, does not suggest that love is to replace the law, but that love is central and vital to the law. Similar is Jesus' rebuke of the Jews for paying scrupulous attention to the minutiae of the tithing laws, while neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23, probably alluding to Mic. 6:8). Again, his point is not that the Jews should replace the laws of tithing with these demands, but that they should have focused on the greater demands "without neglecting the former."

Nevertheless, Jesus makes love so central to his understanding and interpretation of the law that it becomes the power of interpreting and applying God's will as revealed in the law.⁸⁰ On at least three occasions, Jesus pronounced love for others, or "mercy," to be more important than sacrifices (Matt. 9:13; 12:7 [both quoting Hos. 6:6]; Mark 12:32–34). In keeping with the prophetic tradition, Jesus may simply be insisting on the priority of love within the commandments. But the application of the principle to the Sabbath law (Matt. 12:7) suggests that Jesus goes further. On at least six different occasions (Matt. 12:1–8 = Mark 2:23–28 = Luke 6:1–5; Matt. 2:9–14 = Mark 3:1–6 = Luke 6:6–11; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–15; 9:1–12), Jesus or his disciples violate the accepted Jewish teaching about appropriate behavior on the Sabbath. While none of these actions clearly infringes the written law, the non-emergency healings of Jesus certainly "stretch" it. More important, however, are Jesus' responses to Jewish criticism of his and his disciples' action. It is as

⁷⁹Ceslaus Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*, vol. 1: *Agape in the Synoptic Gospels* (St. Louis/London: Herder, 1963), 30.

⁸⁰Jesus differed fundamentally with the Jewish teachers of his day at this point; see especially Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority*.

this point that Jesus' citation of Hosea 6:6 (Matt. 12:7) becomes important, for in the Markan parallel, Jesus claims that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).⁸¹ He thereby suggests that concern for the welfare of one's fellow human beings plays a role in interpreting the intention and regulating the observance of the Sabbath command.⁸²

But Jesus' main justification for his and his disciples' Sabbath activities is Christological. This is clear from the great discourse in John 5 as well as from several details in the synoptic accounts. Jesus justifies his disciples' plucking of grain on the Sabbath by citing the parallel of David, who illegally ate the Bread of the Presence when he and his followers were in need (Matt. 12:3-4 = Mark 2:25-26 = Luke 6:3-4; cf. 1 Sam. 21:1-6). He may thereby be suggesting the principle that human need takes precedence over obedience to details of the law. But the main point runs in a different direction. As Matthew's example of the temple and the priests immediately following (12:5-6) suggests, the main point is a Christological one: As priests who serve the temple are innocent of breaking the law by working on the Sabbath, as David's followers are innocent when they eat consecrated bread, so also the disciples are innocent of Sabbath-breaking, for they are serving and following one who is greater than the temple and greater than David.⁸³

This Christological focus is strongly reasserted in the climax of this incident in all three Gospels: "The Son of Man is Lord [even] of the Sabbath." As we have noted, this saying further confirms what we have discovered above: that Jesus was not so much concerned with adjudicating the exact meaning and application of the Mosaic law as he was in asserting *his* claim to bring that which

⁸¹Scholars persist in suggesting that the text be emended to "The Sabbath was made for the Son of Man" (cf. v. 28); a mistranslation of the Aramaic is usually suggested: see F. W. Beare, "The Sabbath was made for Man," *JBL* 79 (1960), 134. But the emendation is not to be accepted (cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966], 117-18).

⁸²The formal similarity between Jesus' statement and the rabbinic claim that "The Sabbath is delivered over for your sake, but you are not delivered over to the Sabbath" (*Mek. Exod.* 31:13) should not blind us to the fact that they are making different kinds of claims. The Rabbi (Simeon b. Menasya) is arguing only that human life can be preserved on the Sabbath; Jesus, however, is justifying a wide variety of non-life-threatening activities (see Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 2 vols. [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978, 1979], 1.123).

⁸³R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 46-47; Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 1.181-82.

was both greater than, and the fulfillment of, that law. While he does not clearly teach the abrogation of the Sabbath command, he redirects attention from the law to himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, and thereby sets in place the principle on which the later church would justify its departure from Sabbath observance.

Jesus, then, both makes love the center of the law and moves slightly in the direction of using love as a criterion to interpret and explain the law. Never, however, does he clearly take the step of using love as the basis for the abrogation of a commandment in the law.

The Mosaic law and the Commandments of Jesus

Our cursory survey of Matthew 5:17–47 shows that Jesus made his own teaching the norm for life in the kingdom. This teaching is neither a repetition nor an expansion of the law, nor is it based on the law. Nevertheless, it stands in salvation-historical continuity with that law. This perspective is reflected throughout the Gospels. True, Jesus does sometimes base his teaching on the Mosaic law and applies that law to his followers and to fellow Jews. But at this point, we must remind ourselves of the importance of recognizing the salvation-historical context in which Jesus is teaching. He himself apparently scrupulously observed all the details of the Mosaic law, and generally addressed both his disciples and his opponents within the context of the Mosaic covenant that was still then in force. His personal obedience of the law and his teaching of such obedience to others cannot, then, be automatically viewed as expressing his belief about what should be the case after his death and resurrection had brought the new era of salvation into existence.

Indeed, we find numerous more or less clear indications that Jesus did not expect the Mosaic law to continue in unabated force. He suggests that the Mosaic law, in allowing for human sinfulness, does not always express God's "perfect will" (Matt. 19:3–12 and par.). Clearest is his teaching that nothing going into a person from outside can make that person "unclean" (Matt. 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23). Mark, in a parenthetical remark to his readers, brings out the revolutionary implications of such teaching: "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'" (Mark 7:19b). Here Jesus announces the abrogation of a significant part of the Mosaic law, acting on the far-ranging implications of his claim to be "Lord of the Sabbath." Significantly, after his death and resurrection, Jesus urges his disciples to teach "all that I have commanded you"

(Matt. 28:19–20, italics mine). What emerges from Jesus' teaching is a shift of focus from the law to Jesus himself as the criterion for what it means to be obedient to God.

Conclusion

The picture we gain of Jesus' teaching about the law, while not crystal clear in all its details, suggests a strong element of discontinuity within the overall continuity of God's plan and purposes. Jesus tells his disciples to look to himself as the fulfiller of the law for guidance in the way they are to live. The Mosaic law, it is suggested, no longer functions as the ultimate and immediate standard of conduct for God's people. It must always be viewed through the lens of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Paul

I will now try to show that Paul shares this same perspective on the Mosaic law and the Christian. Specifically, I will argue that Paul teaches that Christians should not look directly to the Mosaic law as their authoritative code of conduct but to "the law of Christ." This "law" is not a set of rules but a set of principles drawn from the life and teaching of Jesus, with love for others as its heart and the indwelling Spirit as its directive force. I will follow the same outline that we used to survey the teaching of Jesus, treating in order Paul's teaching about the fulfillment of the law, love and the law, and the locus of authority for believers.

Fulfillment

Paul uses the word *plēroō* with reference to the law of Moses four times (Rom. 8:4; 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14), but these all refer to concepts that are better discussed under other headings below. Here we want to look at another verse which, although not using the word *plēroō*, expresses a concept similar to that found in Matthew 5:17; this verse is Romans 10:4: "Christ is the end of the law [*telos nomou*], so that [*eis*] there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

Paul's statement here has almost become a slogan to summarize his attitude toward the Mosaic law. Unfortunately, the exact meaning of the pronouncement is not clear, with the debate centering on the meaning of the three Greek words indicated above. The word *nomos*, as we noted above, is sometimes taken to denote legalism, and this meaning has been applied by some to

the word in this verse.⁸⁴ As I argued, however, this meaning is unattested in Paul; normally he uses *nomos* to refer to the Mosaic law as such. A second issue is whether the phrase that *eis* introduces depends on *nomos* alone—i.e., “the law which is for righteousness [or] which would confer righteousness”—or on the entire first phrase, as the NIV translation suggests. A comparison of similar constructions in Paul points to the second alternative.⁸⁵

The third and most debated point is the meaning to be given to *telos*. The word has several meanings, the most likely in this verse being “end” (in the sense of “termination”) and “goal.” If we accept the first meaning, Paul would be asserting a strong discontinuity between the law and Christ, implying perhaps that the law has no more function for those who have come to know Christ and to experience his righteousness.⁸⁶ The second meaning, on the other hand, suggests a much more continuous sense, according to which the law may well be understood to remain in full force for believers.⁸⁷ However, we do not need to choose between these two options in their extreme forms. Paul’s use of *telos* points to a meaning that is perhaps best translated in English as “culmination,” combining the ideas of both goal and end.⁸⁸ In

⁸⁴C. F. D. Moule, “Obligation in the Ethic of Paul,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 402.

⁸⁵See Mark A. Seifrid, “Paul’s Approach to the Old Testament in Rom. 10:6–8,” *TJ* 6 (1985), 8–9.

⁸⁶See van Dülmen, *Theologie*, 126; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 139–57.

⁸⁷See Bring, “Gesetz,” 1–36; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:516–19; Fuller, *Gospel & Law*, 82–85.

⁸⁸The word probably means “end” in 2 Cor. 3:13 and 1 Thess. 2:16 and combines the ideas of “end” and “goal” in the sense of destiny, outcome, or culmination in Rom. 6:21, 22; 1 Cor. 1:8; 10:11; 15:24; 2 Cor. 1:13; 11:15; Phil. 3:19; 1 Tim. 1:5. The technical meaning “tax” or “customs payment” is found in its two occurrences in Rom. 13:7. Among others who combine the ideas of “end” and “goal” in their interpretation of the word are Bandstra, *Law and Elements of the World*, 105–6; F. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 376; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 589–91; Campbell, “Christ the End of the Law,” 73–77; Seifrid, “Paul’s Approach,” 6–10; Drane, *Paul*, 133. Markus N. A. Bockmuehl suggests the meaning “prophetic fulfillment” or “consummation,” based on several extra-biblical texts (*Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1990], 150–53). The objection of Robert Badenas (who has made the strongest case for taking *telos* to mean “goal”) that such a double meaning should not, except as a last resort, be adopted (*Christ the End of the Law: Romans 10:4 in Pauline Perspective*, *JNTSup* 10 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1985], 147) is not to the point. I am not arguing that the word has a double

other words, Paul is saying that Christ is the one to whom the law has all along been pointing—its goal. But now that goal has been reached, the regime of the law is ended, just as a race is ended once the finish line, its goal, has been attained. This does not mean, of course, that the law ceases to exist or even that it has no more relevance to believers. What is suggested, rather, is that the law has ceased to have a central and determinative role in God's plan and among his people. Interpreted in this sense, Romans 10:4 makes a claim that is similar to Matthew 5:17: the Mosaic law points to Christ and is dethroned from its position of significance in mediating God's will to his people with the coming of Christ.

Love and the Law

Two key texts in which Paul applies the language of fulfillment to the Mosaic law are Galatians 5:14 and Romans 13:8–10, in both of which love for one's fellow human being is presented as the "fulfillment" of the law. What implications does this fulfillment have for the application of the law to believers? Many answer that it means only that Paul considers love to be so central to the law that one is not really obeying the law if love is not present. Paul highlights love not to displace the law in any sense, but to point to its true meaning and essence.⁸⁹

But the texts suggest that Paul does, indeed, see love as in some sense displacing the commandments of the Mosaic law. Paul's claim that the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" sums up (*anakephalaioō*) all the other commandments (Rom. 13:9) surely points in this direction. If love for others "sums up" the commandments, the implication is that the one who truly loves will have no need of these commandments.⁹⁰ Paul's use of fulfillment language in these contexts suggests a similar conclusion. Vital to understanding Paul's perspective on the law is to recognize a principal distinction in his writings between "doing" and "fulfilling" the law. Nowhere does Paul say that Christians are to "do" the law, and nowhere does he suggest that any but Christians can "fulfill" the law. "Doing" the law refers to that daily obedience to all the commandments that was required of the

meaning, but that we require two words in English to get at the single meaning for the Greek word used here.

⁸⁹See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 282.

⁹⁰See C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 251; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 778–81; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 241–44; Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 204–5.

Israelite. "Fulfilling" the law, on the other hand, denotes that complete satisfaction of the law's demands that comes only through Christians' identification with Christ (Rom. 8:4; see below) and their submission to that commandment that Christ put at the heart of his new covenant teaching: love (Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8, 10). It is the love of others, first made possible by Christ (hence the "new" commandment [John 13:34]), that completely satisfies the demand of the law.⁹¹

Two possible objections to this interpretation may be raised. First, is not that demand that Paul claims to fulfill the law part of the law itself (see Lev. 19:18)? Certainly the words are derived ultimately from Leviticus 19:18. But Paul's citation of the verse is due to the fact that Jesus had already singled it out as central to his demand. Paul cites the text, then, not as an Old Testament commandment, but as an Old Testament commandment already transformed into the demand of Christ. A second objection is that loving one's neighbor hardly seems able to encompass within it all that the law prescribes of people, particularly those duties owed to God rather than to other people. But Paul's focus in both texts is obviously restricted to what we might call the "horizontal" relationship (note the commandments cited in Rom. 13:9). He is not necessarily claiming that consistent love for one's neighbor exhausts all that the Christian must do, but that love for the neighbor includes within it all that the law demands of Christians in their relationship with other people.

Finally, the question must be asked: What is the status of the law for those—including all Christians more or less often—who do not consistently and perfectly love their neighbors? Does the law become, as Luther suggested, a means to reveal our failure and judge us for it? To answer this question, we must look more broadly at the place Paul gives to the law of Moses within the new covenant and at the locus of authority he establishes for Christians.

The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ

I will move in this section from the negative to the positive, arguing first that Christians are not, according to Paul, bound to the law of Moses but, secondly, are bound to those principles

⁹¹See especially Westerholm, *Israel's Law*, 201–5; A. Feuillet, "Loi de Dieu, Loi du Christ et Loi de l'esprit d'après les épîtres pauliniennes," *NœT* 22 (1980), 53–54.

established by Christ in his life and teaching—principles mediated and motivated by the Spirit and focused on love; this constitutes “the law of Christ.”

No longer “under the law.” Paul uses the phrase “under [the] law” (*hypo nomon*) eleven times (Rom. 6:14, 15; 1 Cor. 9:20 [four occurrences]; Gal. 3:23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18). The omission of the article in each instance does not indicate that Paul is thinking of divine “law” in general or of law as a principle (as some older commentators thought); the “law” in question is so well known that there is no need to make the word *nomos* definite. As the context in each case makes clear, the law to which Paul refers is the Mosaic law, the *tôrâ*. To understand what Paul means by the phrase and thereby to evaluate accurately the significance of Paul’s claim that believers are *not* “under the law” (Gal. 5:18; Rom. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 9:20), we will examine each occurrence in its chronological sequence. We do not presume that “under the law” must connote the same idea in each of its occurrences, although the stereotypical flavor of the phrase may point in this direction. Three general meanings of the phrase are popular: (1) under the condemnation pronounced by the law; (2) under a legalistic perversion of the law; and (3) under the law as a regime or power, in a general sense. I will argue that it is only the third interpretation that can do justice to the evidence, that the second meaning is not present at all, and that the first may be included, along with the third, in some places.

The first three occurrences in Galatians come within Paul’s rehearsal of the role of the law in salvation history (Gal. 3:15–4:7). Paul is trying to convince the Gentile Christians in Galatia of the foolishness of adopting Jewish practices by showing that the time when those practices were necessary has now passed. To accomplish this aim, Paul pictures the law as something of a parenthesis within salvation history; it was “added” well after the promise to Abraham (3:17, 19) and was in effect “until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (3:19). It was, then, “before this faith [probably ‘faith in Jesus Christ’; cf. v. 22] came” that “we were confined under the law” (v. 23; my own translation; NIV paraphrases). While we cannot be certain, it is likely that the “we” refers to Paul and other Jews. “Under the law,” in fact, is only one of several phrases that Paul uses to depict the situation of the Jews in the old covenant in this context; others are “under a *paidagōgos*” (3:25; cf. v. 24), children under “guardians and trustees” (4:1–2), “under the basic principles of the world” (4:3), and “under sin” (3:22; NIV again paraphrases).

If “under the law” is exactly parallel to “under sin,” then to be “under the law” could denote being subject to the curse of the law. An additional reason for this interpretation comes in 4:5, where those whom Jesus needs to redeem are those “under law.”⁹² But other evidence points in a different direction. First, the assertion of v. 22 about being under sin is something of an anomaly in the flow of this context, speaking of “Scripture” (rather than “the law”) and of “the whole world” (rather than just the Jews). The identification of the law with the *paidagōgos* in v. 24, however, shows that it is the reference to being “under the *paidagōgos*” that is parallel to being “under the law.” And this phrase, as we have seen, denotes not the cursing effect of the law but its custodianship of the people of Israel during the time of their “minority.”

A second reason for preferring this broader interpretation of the phrase is Paul’s assertion in 4:4 that Jesus was himself “born under [the] law.” Since Jesus was not *born* subject to the curse (although he later voluntarily and vicariously took it upon himself; cf. 3:13), the phrase here cannot mean “under the curse of the law.” Jesus, Paul is stressing, was a Jew and lived as one who was subject to the requirements of the Mosaic law that had been given to oversee the Jewish people. Like most of the other phrases about bondage in the context, then, “under the law” refers to a status of close supervision and custodial care, a situation that eventually gives way to a time of maturity and freedom.⁹³

As we noted above, Paul’s salvation-historical conception can allow him to associate this pre-Christian, objective situation of guardianship and immaturity with subjection to the curse and wrath of God. Hence the phrase can occasionally include within it (as in 4:5) nuances of condemnation. But this is a nuance and not the basic meaning of the phrase. And while not stated, Paul’s logic implies that the coming of Christ removes the situation during which Israel must be held “under the law.” In summary, the context of Galatians 3:15–4:7 shows that “under the law” depicts the situation of Jews before the coming of Christ, when they were subject to the authority and supervision of the Mosaic law.

By submitting to circumcision (cf. 5:2) and to the observance

⁹²See Thielmann, *From Plight to Solution*, 77–78.

⁹³See especially Linda Belleville, “‘Under Law.’ Structural Analysis and the Pauline Concept of Law in Galatians 3:21–4:11,” *JSNT* 26 (1986), 53–78; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 145–49, 171.

of Jewish festivals (cf. 4:10), the Gentile Christians in Galatia would, in effect, be putting themselves in this same situation. Their acceptance of such old covenant practices, Paul says, shows that they "want to be under the law" (Gal. 4:21), for one cannot pick and choose which commandments of the law to observe (5:3). Paul's Judaizing opponents in Galatia were apparently teaching that Christians needed to observe some of the commandments of the law without taking on themselves the burden of the whole. Paul makes clear in this verse that this is impossible: God's law is a unity, and one cannot pick and choose which commandments to place oneself under (the same point is made in Jas. 2:11–13). This makes it clear that, for Paul, subjection to the law of Moses was an all-or-nothing proposition: Either one was under that law and bound to obey all its commandments, or one was free from that law and free from all its commandments. Thus, acknowledging that a commandment such as circumcision is necessary if one is to belong to the people of God in the new era of salvation entails acknowledging the authority of that entire Mosaic law of which the commandment is a part. This is why Paul is so upset with the Galatians: for them to submit to circumcision is to recognize the continuing supervisory role of the Mosaic law and thereby tacitly to deny that the promised seed, who ends the rule of the law, had come (see 3:19). Paul can therefore warn them that "you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4).

This verse, along with many others in Galatians, makes clear that the issue concerned justification rather than sanctification. It could be argued, then, that Paul is denying any role for the law in making people Christians but is not contesting the authority of the law in guiding people who already are Christians. But this interpretation falters on two counts. First, as we have seen, being "under the law," the condition to which the Galatians would in effect go back to if they accepted the Judaizers' program (4:21), does not involve the use of the law for salvation. It denotes the supervisory role of the law. Paul argues, in effect, that accepting the law as a means of justification involves accepting its general supervisory authority (being "under the law"), a role that is now clearly ended with the coming of the promised one.

A second reason for rejecting the view that Paul is limiting his critique of the law to the issue of justification only is Paul's assertion in Galatians 5:18 that "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under [the] law." This verse comes in the section of the letter (5:13–6:10) in which Paul stresses that Christians, though

“free” in Christ (5:1, 13), are nevertheless bound by certain moral imperatives: specifically, to love one another (5:13–15) and to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–26). By following these, they will fulfill “the law of Christ” (6:2). Now, in 5:18, Paul may mean that it is only those Christians who are fully submitting to the guidance of the Spirit who are in no need of the directives of the law; but those Christians who are not so led are still “under the law.” But this interpretation would require that the phrase “under the law” means something different here from what it did earlier, where it denoted the situation that the Galatian Christians would be under if they submitted to circumcision and other Old Testament requirements (cf. 4:21). Therefore, it is more likely that “being led by the Spirit” is a way of designating all Christians, who have come under the dominating influence of the Spirit (cf. also Rom. 8:14, where “being led by the Spirit” confers divine sonship, a status enjoyed by all believers).⁹⁴ “Being led by the Spirit,” then, parallels “living by the Spirit” (v. 25). Not being “under the law” applies to all Christians and refers not to entrance into the Christian life, but to the living out of Christian existence.

The phrase “under the law” occurs again four times in 1 Corinthians 9:20. In this chapter, Paul cites his own willingness to forego apostolic “rights” for the sake of others. As an example of this attitude, he mentions his flexibility with respect to his manner of life:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law [*ἐπινομὸς Χριστοῦ*]), so as to win those not having the law. (9:20–21)

In this passage, it is clear that “under the law” cannot denote being subject to the curse of the law or to a legalistic perversion of the law. Being “under the law” is not contrasted to the situation of Christians, in which case the phrase might mean “under the curse,” but to the situation of the Gentiles, those “not having the law.” It must refer, then, to that which is peculiar to the Jewish people—and that can only be their subjection to the rule and authority of the Mosaic law. Paul’s point, then, is that he as a Christian is not subject to the authority of the Mosaic law, but he

⁹⁴See Betz, *Galatians*, 281.

willingly gives up that freedom and conforms to that law when evangelizing Jews.⁹⁵

Finally, in Romans 6:14–15, Paul contrasts being “under [the] law” with being “under grace.” These assertions are closely related in Paul’s train of thought to Romans 7:4, in which he claims that Christians have “died to the law.” Traditional Reformed (and especially Puritan) exegesis has emphasized that the contrast here is between justification and condemnation. Christians are free from the law’s condemnation, for their status “under grace” has delivered them from the law as a “covenant of works,” in which every infraction had to receive its penalty. But, these exegetes insist, Paul is not asserting that Christians are free from the law “as a rule of life.”⁹⁶ Other scholars add to this condemnatory sense a nuance of legalism, suggesting that Christians’ freedom from *nomos* here involves also freedom from the perverted misuse of the law as a means of salvation.⁹⁷

The idea that Paul is claiming here that Christians are delivered from legalism is particularly unlikely. As we have argued before, Paul does not use the word *nomos* to denote this idea; and here again, release from the bondage of the law takes place through the redeeming work of Christ (“through the body of Christ,” 7:4). As Heikki Räisänen says, “It is hard to understand why a method as drastic as the *death* both of Christ and of the Christians would have been necessary to get rid of a mere misunderstanding about the law. A new revelation about its true meaning would have sufficed.”⁹⁸ That freedom from the law’s condemnation is included is probable. But it is questionable whether this is all that Paul means. The issue in Romans 6 is not freedom from the *penalty* of sin, but from the *power* of sin. If sin is not to rule over believers (6:14a), more than forgiveness (i.e., freedom from the law’s curse) is necessary. After all, justification in itself could be understood simply as freeing the believer to sin with impunity—which is precisely the objection in 6:1 (cf. v. 15a). In the context, then, “not being under the law” must involve more than freedom from the law’s condemnation.

⁹⁵For this general interpretation, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 429–30.

⁹⁶See Calvin, *Romans*, 233–34; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.319–20; Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 429–30; Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 187–88.

⁹⁷Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.319; Moule, “Obligation,” 394–95.

⁹⁸Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 46.

Two other contextual factors support a broader interpretation. The last reference to the law before 6:14 comes in 5:20a, where Paul describes the law as an instigator of sin: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase." We would expect Paul's assertion in 6:14 to be the answer to this problem and include, therefore, freedom from the law's sin-inducing function. A second contextual factor is the nature of the argument in 6:15ff. Significantly, Paul's response to the question "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" does not include a reminder that Christians are still under the law's regulative power. While this is an argument from silence, it has real weight. For if not being under the law was confined only to freedom from its condemnation, we would have expected Paul to have made clear this restriction when this question came up.

I think, then, that not being under the law means not living under the regime or power of the law.³⁹ Such a concept fits naturally into Romans 5–8, where Paul employs the metaphors of slavery, freedom, and transfer from one regime or power to another to denote the new status of the believer. Christians die to sin and are joined to Christ (6:1–11); are set free from sin and enslaved to God and righteousness (6:15–23); die to the law (7:4), being set free from it (7:6), so as to be joined to Christ (7:4); are released from the sphere of the flesh (7:5; 8:9) and placed within the sphere of the Spirit (7:6; 8:9). That Paul would designate another such transfer from one regime to another by speaking of Christians as no longer under law but grace makes good sense. His point, then, is that the Christian lives in a new regime, no longer dominated by the law with its sin-producing and condemning power, but by Christ and the Spirit. We conclude that as in Galatians 3–4 and 1 Corinthians 9, "under the law" in Romans 6 refers broadly to being under the dominating influence or binding authority of the Mosaic law. The condemnation incurred by failing to obey that law may be included, but it is not the only or even the basic idea. Christians, Paul is asserting and implying in these texts, are no longer subject to the Mosaic law in the most general possible sense.

Several other Pauline texts confirm this exegesis. "The law is

³⁹See my *Romans 1–8*, 405–8. For similar emphases, see Ridderbos, *Paul*, 148; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 132–35; Stephen Westerholm, "Letter and Spirit: The Foundation of Pauline Ethics," *NTS* 30 (1984), 242–43.

not laid on [*keitai*] the righteous person [*dikaiō*]" (1 Tim. 1:9; my own translation) probably means that the law is not binding on Christians, on those who have been made righteous by Christ.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Paul can claim in Ephesians 2:15 that Christ has abolished "in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations [*dogmasin*]." Many take this to mean that only the ceremonial provisions of the law—those ordinances that separated Jews and Gentiles (cf. vv. 14, 15b-18)—have been abolished.¹⁰¹ But a wider reference to the law in general is certainly possible, and perhaps probable, since Paul may well be alluding here to Jewish teaching about the *tôrâ* as a whole.¹⁰² "Abolish" (*katargeō*) could then not mean that the law ceases to exist or has no more relevance at all to the Christian, but that it has been "rendered powerless," that is, ceases to stand as an immediate authority for God's people. Somewhat parallel is Colossians 2:14, where Paul speaks of Christ "having canceled the written code [*cheirographon*], with its regulations [*dogmasin*], that was against us and that stood opposed to us." The reference is probably to the Mosaic law,¹⁰³ and although Paul's primary concern here is clearly the believer's release from condemnation, allusion to the power of the law generally over believers might be included.

Bound to "the law of Christ." Many label the approach that I have outlined in the last section "antinomian." In a sense, of course, this is fair, for I have argued that Paul is "against the law" as a continuing binding authority for Christians. But, as I have repeatedly emphasized, the law from which Paul claims Christians are set free is the Mosaic law, the *tôrâ*. Nothing that I have said justifies the conclusion that Paul, or any other New Testament writer, denied the applicability of *all* "law" to the Christian. In fact, one of the texts examined earlier makes clear that Christians are still obliged to "God's law." Paul's claim not to be "under the

¹⁰⁰See particularly Stephen Westerholm, "The Law and the 'Just Man' (1 Tim 1,3-11)," *ST* 36 (1982), 79-95.

¹⁰¹See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 311-12; Knox Chamblin, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 361.

¹⁰²See *Epistle of Aristas*, 139: "Our lawgiver . . . fenced us about with impenetrable palisades and with walls of iron to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations. . . ." On this verse generally, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 141-43.

¹⁰³See Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 124-26.

[Mosaic] law" in 1 Corinthians 9:21 is followed immediately by his reminder that he is not, therefore, "free from God's law" but is, in fact, "under Christ's law" (*en nomos Christou*; lit. "in-lawed to Christ").

This is perhaps the clearest Pauline statement of the situation of the Christian with respect to God's law. As we have emphasized, the Scriptures present the law of Moses as a specific codification of God's will for a specific situation: Israel under the Sinaitic covenant. Paul asserts that from this law Christians, who live under the new covenant inaugurated by Christ, have been set free. But Christians are now subject to God's law in another of its manifestations: the law of Christ.¹⁰⁴ I will argue that this "law of Christ," the new covenant form of God's law, is not a code or series of commandments and prohibitions, but is composed of the teachings of Christ and the apostles and the directing influence of the Holy Spirit. Love is central to this law, and there is strong continuity with the law of Moses, for many specifically Mosaic commandments are taken up and included within this "law of Christ."

Justification for understanding of the law of Christ in this manner comes particularly from the context of the only biblical occurrence of this phrase: Galatians 6:2. In light of Paul's insistence that believers are not "under the [Mosaic] law" (see the discussion above), it is impossible to maintain that he means by this phrase the Mosaic law in a "Christianized" form.¹⁰⁵ Rather, as a safeguard against some who might think that Christians, being no longer bound to the law of Moses, have no authority at all to direct their conduct (see 5:13), Paul insists that Christians are still obligated to a "law."

In what does this "law" consist? Since Paul has only a few verses earlier (5:14) highlighted love as the fulfillment of the law, we must certainly include the demand for love as a central component of this "law of Christ." But it is unlikely that Paul confines the law to this demand alone,¹⁰⁶ for also prominent in the

¹⁰⁴On the relationship of God's law to the Mosaic law and "the law of Christ," see especially Feuillet, "Loi de Dieu," 29–65.

¹⁰⁵Contra, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches in Galatia*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 213; Wilckens, "Gesetzesverständnis," 175.

¹⁰⁶As many expositors do. See, for example, Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 329; Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 60–64.

context (5:16–26) is the fruit-producing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Coupled with the centrality of the Spirit in Paul's teaching about what it means to live as a Christian, this strongly suggests that the directing influence of the Spirit is an important part of this law of Christ. And this, indeed, is foreshadowed in the Old Testament itself, where there is a close thematic relationship between Jeremiah's prophecy about the law written on the heart in the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) and Ezekiel's prophecy about the work of the Spirit in transforming the human heart, rendering it able to obey God's will (Ezek. 36:26–27).

It is more difficult to determine whether the law of Christ includes specific teachings and principles. Many deny that this is the case, but their reasons for doing so often betray a bias against finding any specific demands as binding on Christians. The work of Schrage and others has shown that Paul and the other apostles were quite willing to impose specific commandments on their charges;¹⁰⁷ and these commandments were, in fact, often drawn from, or reflective of, Jesus' own teachings. For these reasons, I think it highly probable that Paul thought of the law of Christ as including within it the teachings of Jesus and the apostolic witness, based on his life and teaching, about what it means to reverence God in daily life. This is not, however, to deny the importance of love or the direction of the Spirit. The "law of Christ," Paul's shorthand expression for that form of God's law applicable to new covenant believers,¹⁰⁸ includes all these. Longenecker's succinct summary says it well: The law of Christ "stands in Paul's thought for those 'prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel (usually embodied in the example and teachings of Jesus), which are meant to be applied to specific situations by the direction and enablement of the Holy Spirit, being always motivated and conditioned by love.'"¹⁰⁹

This teaching and witness, as we have noted, is built on and

¹⁰⁷Wolfgang Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese* (Gütersloh: Mohr, 1961); T. J. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981), see his summary on 208–10.

¹⁰⁸See Friedrich Lang, "Gesetz und Bund bei Paulus," *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Johannes Friedrich, Wolfgang Pöhlmann, and Peter Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976), 318.

¹⁰⁹Longenecker, *Galatians*, 275–76 (he is quoting from a previous book of his). See also Longenecker, *Paul*, 184–90; for this general approach, see W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 111–46; Bruce, *Galatians*, 261; Deidun, *New Covenant Morality*, 210.

incorporates within it many provisions of the Mosaic law. Indeed, we can confidently expect that everything within the Mosaic law that reflected God's "eternal moral will" for his people is caught up into and repeated in the "law of Christ." Having recognized the place within "the law of Christ" of specific commandments, however, I want to insist that they must not be given too much prominence. The basic directive power of "new covenant law" lies in the renewed heart of the Christian (Rom. 12:1-2), a heart in the process of being transformed by God's Spirit into a perfect refractor and performer of God's will. Commandments, even with the work of the Spirit, are still necessary, for our hearts are not yet, and in this life will never be, in perfect conformity with God's will. But Paul would protest against their being given a position of supremacy within new covenant ethics.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

Before leaving Paul, I want to look briefly at four texts that could be cited as evidence against the position I am advocating. In Ephesians 6:2-3, Paul cites the fifth commandment of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:12) as evidence for what is "right" for Christians to do. This is one example, I would argue, of the way in which the "law of Christ" incorporates within it teachings from the Mosaic law.¹¹¹ It should also be noted (as mentioned above) that Paul significantly changes the promise attached to this commandment, reflecting the transformation the commandment undergoes in being taken up within the law of Christ.

Secondly, Paul's insistence in 1 Corinthians 7:19 that "keeping God's commandments is what counts" has been cited as evidence that he teaches the reapplication of the Mosaic law to Christians. But, particularly in a context where an argument against the necessity of circumcision is featured (vv. 18-19a), it is unlikely that the commandments to which Paul refers are Mosaic commandments.¹¹² Paul is claiming nothing more than that those commandments that are applicable to Christians should be carefully observed.

¹¹⁰See Drane, *Paul*, 55-58.

¹¹¹Douglas de Lacey argues that Paul does not give to the Mosaic commandment authority in its own right ("The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 178).

¹¹²De Lacey, "Sabbath/Sunday Question," 176-77; contra, see Wilckens, "Gesetzesverständnis," 159.

The last two texts, Romans 3:31 and 8:4, can be considered together, because they interpret each other. Paul's claim to "uphold the law" (3:31) has been taken to mean that he upholds the law as a continuing source of authority for Christian conduct.¹¹³ But those who support such a view would have to qualify the verse to mean "uphold part of the law," or "uphold the moral law," for nowhere does Paul maintain that the law as a whole has a continuing direct authority for Christians. As we have seen, however, there is no reason to limit *nomos* in Paul to part of the law. Others think that Paul is claiming in Romans 3:31 to be upholding the law's function in condemning sinners (cf. 3:19–20),¹¹⁴ or in witnessing to the righteousness by faith that he is teaching (cf. v. 21 and chap. 4).¹¹⁵ But since Paul has been thinking of the Mosaic law in its commanding role in the immediate context (cf. vv. 27–28), it is more likely that he is claiming to uphold the law's demands. But in what does Paul's doctrine of justification by faith uphold them?

Romans 8:4 suggests the answer. Here again, many expositors think that Paul is asserting that the Spirit-led walk enables believers to obey the Mosaic provisions, implying the continuing authority of the Mosaic law over believers.¹¹⁶ But it is significant that the apostle Paul speaks of the demand of the law in the singular: "righteous requirement" (*dikaiōma*; NIV unaccountably translates this word with the plural, "requirements"). This requirement, in light of 13:8–10, might be the love of the neighbor.¹¹⁷ But the passive form of the verb *plēroō* ("might be fulfilled") points away from any activity on the part of human beings. What Paul must mean in the context, where he is showing how God in Christ has provided for that which sinful humans could not accomplish (v. 3), is that believers who are "in Christ"

¹¹³John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 1.124–26.

¹¹⁴Bandstra, *Law and Elements of the World*, 99–100; W. Grundmann, "σπρηκω," TDNT, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 7.649.

¹¹⁵This view is especially popular. See the thorough defense by Thomas C. Rhyne, *Faith Establishes the Law* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1981).

¹¹⁶See Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.383–85; Murray, *Romans*, 1.283–84; Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Abolition and the Fulfillment of the Law in Paul," *JNT* 35 (1989), 60–61.

¹¹⁷S. Lyonnet, "Le Nouveau Testament à lumière de l'Ancien. À propos de Rom 8,2–4," *Nouvelle Revue de Théologie* 87 (1965), 582–84; R. W. Thompson, "How Is the Law Fulfilled in Us? An Interpretation of Rom. 8:4," *Louisian Studies* 11 (1986), 32–33.

and led by the Spirit fully meet the demand of God's law by having it met for them in Christ. As Calvin recognized, only such a vicarious fulfilling of the law on our behalf by Christ meets God's demand that the law be fully and completely obeyed.¹¹⁸ I would suggest, therefore, that in this sense Paul's teaching of justification by faith "upholds the law" (3:31). Justification takes full account of the law, providing for its complete satisfaction in believers through their incorporation into Christ.¹¹⁹ Neither text in Romans suggests the continuing direct application of the Mosaic law to believers.

Other New Testament Writers

I have been referring in this essay to Jesus' teaching and especially to Paul's letters. As I explained above, this is simply because these are the two main sources for the New Testament teaching about the Mosaic law (143 of the 194 New Testament occurrences of *nomos* are on Jesus' lips and in Paul's letters). Nevertheless, several other authors also contribute to our subject, and I want now to look briefly at this evidence.

John

John is responsible for one of the most famous New Testament statements about the law: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). This statement follows and explains ("for") John's assertion that "we have received grace in place of [anti] grace" (my translation of v. 16). If we give the preposition *anti* its normal "substitutionary" sense, this statement will mean that the grace by which the law was given has been displaced and superseded by the fuller measure of grace that has now come in Christ.¹²⁰ John is not, therefore, denying the presence of grace in and with the old covenant. But he is implying a strong disjunction between the era

¹¹⁸Calvin, *Romans*, 383; see also Nygren, *Romans*, 316–20; Byrne, *Sons of God*, 93–94; Deidun, *New Covenant Morality*, 72–75; Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 105–7.

¹¹⁹Augustine comments on 3:31: "But how ought the Law be affirmed, if not by righteousness? a righteousness, moreover, that exists through faith, for those things which could not be fulfilled through the Law were fulfilled through faith." ("Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans," 13.1–2). See also Luther, "Preface to Romans"; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 171–72; W. Gutbrod, "*νομος*," *TDNT* (1967), 4.1076–77.

¹²⁰See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 131–33.

of Moses and the era of Christ; the grace by which believers now live comes in Christ "in place of" that grace that accompanied the Mosaic law. The same note of discontinuity is sounded repeatedly throughout John's gospel in his "replacement theme": the presentation of Christ and his work as that which takes the place of and "fulfills" old covenant institutions (e.g., the Feast of Tabernacles [cf. chaps. 7–8]; the Passover [1:29; 19:36]; the manna in the wilderness [chap. 6]; even Israel itself [chap. 15]). While John says nothing explicitly in this respect about the law, his appropriation of imagery usually associated with the law (e.g., "light," "bread of life," "living water") may suggest that he includes the law in this replacement scheme.¹²¹

Luke (-Acts)

Scholars have recently shown considerable interest in the teaching of Luke-Acts on the law, and they have come to remarkably different conclusions. Some think that Luke is a strong defender of the law, teaching that Jewish Christians should be obedient to all its precepts and Gentile Christians to those that particularly relate to Gentiles.¹²² But those who see a more "discontinuous" view of the law in Luke-Acts are surely correct.¹²³ Salvation-history is strong in Luke's writings, and he clearly presents the transition from the "torah piety" observed by Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Mary (Luke 1:6; 2:22–24, 27, 39), and by Paul in his youth (Acts 22:3, 12; 23:3) to the situation within the early church, in which the apostolic council declines to force Gentile Christians to observe the law (Acts 15). Nor is it at all clear that the requirements imposed by the council on Gentile Christians are based on the law or were anything more than a temporary accommodation measure. What stands out above all in Luke is his stress on the law as a witness to the events that have taken place in Christ and in the early church (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23).

¹²¹See S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

¹²²See particularly Jacob Jervell, "The Law in Luke-Acts," in *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 133–51.

¹²³Wilson, *Luke and the Law*; Craig L. Blomberg, "The Law in Luke-Acts," *JNST* 22 (1984), 53–80; M. A. Seifrid, "Jesus and the Law in Acts," *JNST* 30 (1987), 39–57.

Hebrews

That the author to the Hebrews views "the law" as outmoded and inapplicable to Christians is obvious; it was "only a shadow of the good things that are coming" (10:1) and can never bring people to that perfection that God demands of his people (7:19; 10:2). Christians who put themselves under the law therefore put in danger their relationship with God. However, the "law" that Hebrews addresses is almost always the sacrificial and priestly law, and it is questionable whether the author would want to extend his critique of these laws to the Mosaic law generally. Evidence that he might want to do so comes from two texts. Heb. 7:11 is a puzzling text, claiming that the law was given to the people of Israel "on the basis of" (*epe*) the Levitical priesthood. This text may suggest that in the mind of the author the law as a whole is bound up with the priesthood. If this is so, he may then be thinking of the Mosaic law generally when he claims in v. 12 that "when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law."¹²⁴ A second passage that may point in the same direction is the citation of the new covenant prophecy in 8:7–13. The author argues that the prophecy itself implies the need for "another" covenant (v. 7) to take the place of the Mosaic covenant. Now, in Christ, the old covenant has been rendered "obsolete" (v. 13). But the new covenant (see Jer. 31:31–34, the passage quoted here) carries with it the promise of the law written on the hearts. It is probable that the author sees in this law written on the heart more than the ceremonial parts of the law and that he implies, therefore, a significant transformation in its nature.

James

James's letter to Jewish Christians contains perhaps the strongest evidence against the case that I have been arguing. In keeping with his reputation—greatly exaggerated, it is important to note—as a strict Jewish-Christian conservative, James appears to impose the Mosaic law on his readers.¹²⁵ He demands that Christians continue to do "the perfect law that gives freedom" (1:25), reminds us that breaking one part of that law means to break it all (2:10), and warns that we will be judged by the "law

¹²⁴See James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 95–96; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 145–46.

¹²⁵See O. J. F. Seitz, "James and the Law," *SE* 2 (1964), 472–86.

that gives freedom" (2:12). Certainly, given James's background and readership, the law of which he speaks must have some reference to the Law of Moses. But there are good reasons for thinking that he is not speaking of the law of Moses simply and directly. James's qualifications of this law as "perfect" and "giving freedom" could, in light of Jewish parallels, refer simply to the Mosaic law, but his description of it in 2:8 as "the royal law" goes further. In a context that refers to the "kingdom" (v. 5) and to the commandment that Jesus singled out as central to his own demand (Lev. 19:18; cf. v. 8b), the "royal law" is almost certainly that law or body of commands that Christ made applicable to the kingdom.

That this interpretation is on the right track is suggested also by the flow of thought in 1:18–25. The "perfect law that gives freedom" is clearly the same as that "word" that Christians are to do and not merely listen to (v. 22). But this "word," in turn, must include the message of the gospel, for it is the instrument of new spiritual birth (v. 18). Here also, then, James suggests that the law he has in mind is more than the Mosaic law; it is that body of teaching generally to which Christians are obliged.¹²⁸ James's strong dependence on the words of Jesus throughout his letter suggests that Jesus' own teaching is a prominent part of this "law." This is not to say, however, that Mosaic commandments are excluded from James's purview. But it is to say that James is not simply applying the Mosaic law, in totality or without interpretation, to his readers. The allusions to Jesus' teaching and its connection with the gospel message suggest that for James as well, the Mosaic law is applicable to Christians only as part of the larger phenomenon of "the law of Christ," "the royal law."

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that a salvation-historical approach in which the Mosaic law is tied firmly to the Sinaitic covenant, now abrogated in Christ, is best able to explain the varied data of Scripture. Under such an approach, the Mosaic law is not a *direct* and *immediate* source of guidance to the new covenant believer. How, then, should the Christian read the law of Moses? In what

¹²⁸For more detailed argument, see my *The Epistle of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 48–50, 83–84, 93–94; cf. also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 349–53; Ralph Martin, *James*, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988), 51, 67–68.

way is it “profitable” to us (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16)? In at least three ways, I would suggest.

First, as I have stressed, to say that the Mosaic law in itself is no longer binding on the Christian is not to say that individual commandments within that law may not be. In fact, as we have seen, New Testament authors explicitly “reapply” several Mosaic commandments to the Christian (cf. Gal. 5:14; Eph. 6:2; Jas. 2:8–12). The content of all but one of the Ten Commandments is taken up into “the law of Christ,” for which we are responsible. (The exception is the Sabbath commandment, one that Heb. 3–4 suggests is fulfilled in the new age as a whole.¹²⁷) I am not, then, suggesting that the essential “moral” content of the Mosaic law is not applicable to believers. On the “bottom line” question of what Christians are actually to *do*, I could well find myself in complete agreement with, say, a colleague who takes a traditional Reformed approach to the Mosaic law. The difference would lie not in what Christians are to do but in how it is to be discovered. While my Reformed colleague might argue that we are bound to whatever in the Mosaic law has not been clearly overturned by New Testament teaching,¹²⁸ I argue that we are bound only to that which is clearly repeated within New Testament teaching.

A second continuing function of the Mosaic law is its “filling out” and explaining certain basic concepts within both old and new covenant law. For instance, a Christian reading the laws about personal injury in Exodus 21 might well conclude—rightly, I think—that the killing of an unborn baby falls into the category of those takings of human life that are prohibited by both the Decalogue and by the New Testament. The detailed stipulations of the Mosaic law often reveal principles that are part of God’s word to his people in both covenants,¹²⁹ and believers continue to profit from what the law teaches in this respect.

Finally, as many New Testament authors emphasize, the Christian should read the law as a witness to the fulfillment of God’s plan in Christ. Its authority therefore continues—I am no Marcionite. But its authority is not, in the era of the new covenant, the authority of “law” but the authority of a prophetic witness.

¹²⁷See D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*.

¹²⁸Although not in the traditional Reformed camp, Kaiser takes essentially this view; see *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 310–14.

¹²⁹See particularly the fine, detailed application of such laws by Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*.