

# A NOTE ON THE MOSAIC LAW

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The relationship between the O.T. law and the gospel of Christ is an extremely complex topic that is very difficult to synthesize and systematize. One scholar has labeled Paul's understanding of the law "the most intricate doctrinal issue in his theology."<sup>1</sup> But it is important to understand something about how these pieces fit together to make sense of significant portions of the N.T.

The term "covenant" carries with it the idea of "pact" or "agreement." When made between unequals in the ancient world, the superior typically promised blessings and protection and the inferior pledged loyalty and submission.

The Abrahamic covenant was the fundamental covenant governing the relationship of God with his people. The blessings promised by God to Abraham and his seed were predicated on their trusting God, on their accepting him for who he is (Gen. 12:1-9, 13:14-17, 15:1-21, 18:17-19, 22:15-18, 24:7; Rom. 4:16-17; Gal. 3:6-9).

The Mosaic covenant was an interim, subsidiary covenant given until God's promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled. It specified the way in which the faith of God's people was to be expressed until Christ came. It was entered into by God and the people of Israel at Sinai (Ex. 20:1 - 24:8). This was after God brought them out of Egypt, hundreds of years after Abraham. Its temporary nature is evident in Gal. 3:15 - 4:7 and 2 Cor. 3:4-18; see also, Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:11-12.

Part of the difficulty in this area stems from the fact the N.T. writers use the term "law" in different ways. "Law" sometimes refers to the entire O.T., sometimes just to the Pentateuch, sometimes to the Mosaic covenant (as represented by the covenant law), and occasionally to a principle or rule. Most often, however, "law" refers to the set or package of commands that were part of the Mosaic covenant.

Spiritual life, salvation, under the Mosaic covenant was by faith not by keeping the commands (the "law"). It was the gracious provision of God bestowed on those of genuine faith, which faith naturally and inevitably expressed itself in obedience, and repentance at failure, including offering of the prescribed sacrifices in conjunction with which forgiveness was provided (e.g., Leviticus 4-6, 17:11, 19:22; Number 15). That is why Paul in Rom. 4:6-8 can cite David, who lived under the law, in support of the idea that justification is by faith. And it is why he (and the writer of Hebrews) can cite Hab. 2:4 in support of the idea that righteousness is by faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The list of O.T. saints in Hebrews 11 confirms the crucial role of faith in pleasing God under the old covenant.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 13.

Of course, the sacrifices prescribed under the old covenant were only a shadow of the true atoning sacrifice on which all divine forgiveness is based (Heb. 10:1-4). God forgave sins under that covenant on credit, so to speak, because Christ, the true efficacious sacrifice to which all the shadows of the old covenant pointed, was coming into the world. And because Christ's sacrifice is the reality rather than a shadow, the forgiveness available under the new covenant surpasses that available under the old in that the blood of Christ *utterly* purifies, purifies even our *consciences* from sin that we might serve God in a greater state of intimacy (Heb. 9:8-14).

The blood of bulls and goats has no atoning efficacy (Heb. 10:4); rather, those sacrifices were the occasion on which forgiveness was granted under the old covenant on the basis of Christ's future sacrifice. The purification that accompanied those sacrifices, however, was at an external level, something that restored a formal degree of fellowship with God but which left a barrier to intimacy in the form of a lingering sense of guilt that was rooted in the intuitive awareness that animal sacrifices were inadequate to atone for sin (Heb. 9:8-14; 10:4). Because animal sacrifices are inadequate to deal finally and fully with one's conscience, their repeated offering served as a reminder of sins rather than as an ultimate cleansing (Heb. 10:3).

The commands of the Mosaic covenant (the "law") provided a *theoretical* way of salvation (Rom. 2:13, 10:5), if they were perfectly obeyed, but because of sin the only way of salvation in practice was by grace through faith. In other words, the commands were never supposed to bring spiritual life because, as Scripture declares, all are under the power of sin and thus are unable to keep the law perfectly as would be necessary for the law to be the basis of one's right standing before God (Rom. 3:9-26, 4:15; Gal. 3:10-14, 3:21-22).

The problem is not with God's law, which Paul in Rom. 7:12, 14 says is spiritual and holy, righteous, and good; rather the problem is with sin (Rom. 7:8, 11-14), this power that dominates unregenerate mankind. (Paul's statement in Phil. 3:6 that according to the righteousness that is by law he was "blameless" does not mean he was sinless but that his obedience to the law was extraordinary compared to his contemporaries.)

Having been given to people who, in general, were not regenerated by the Holy Spirit, the commands of the Mosaic covenant actually stimulated and provoked disobedience, which is why sin so dominates those under the law, under the old covenant (Rom. 5:20, 6:14, 7:5, 8; 1 Cor. 15:56; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 3:19 [possibly], 5:18). But God was able to incorporate even this "work of sin" into his plan. The stimulation of sin magnified the Israelites' failure and thereby reinforced the point that grace was the only path of righteousness. This, along with the messianic prophecies, the purity laws, and the requirement of sacrifices for sin, pointed the way to Jesus Christ, the one in whom the promises given to Abraham are fulfilled (Rom. 3:20, 7:7b, 7:13b; Gal. 3:21-25).

John 1:17 (For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ) does not mean that the Mosaic covenant had no grace any more than it means it had no truth. Grace clearly was extended under the Mosaic covenant in that God graciously forgave sins under that covenant. The point is that the grace and truth that came

with Christ *replaced* the earlier, less complete display of grace and truth in the Mosaic law, which law anticipated and pointed toward his coming.

You can see this more clearly when the preposition *anti* in Jn. 1:16 is given its normal meaning "instead of" or "in place of" rather than "upon," which it never means. John 1:16 does not mean that from Christ's fullness we have all received abundant, piled up grace ("grace *upon* grace"); it means that from his fullness we have all received "grace in place of grace already given," as it is translated in the TNIV. Verse 17 then explains that statement (note "For" at the beginning of v. 17). The grace and truth that came through the incarnation replaced (and surpassed) that which previously was given through the law.

Though the Mosaic covenant was an interim, subsidiary covenant which was given until God's earlier promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled in Christ, some Jews gave it priority over the Abrahamic covenant and exalted it to the point that the works of the law, the commands that were part of that covenant, became the basis of one's relationship with God and thus the basis of one's inheritance (Lk. 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27 - 4:8, 9:30 - 10:8; Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Phil. 3:2-11). In other words, some turned the law into a legalistic path of salvation. Making salvation something gained by works impermissibly changed the prior Abrahamic covenant by canceling out its promissory character (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-18).

The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin when God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements *from creation*, a fact to which Noah's flood bears solemn witness. Those moral requirements had not been given as "law," had not been laid down as specific, express commandments, but they were known intuitively or innately as part of the law written by God on the human heart (see Rom. 2:15), and violating them was sin. In other words, the existence of "law," specific edicts to be obeyed, is not necessary for sin to occur. That is why Paul can say in Rom. 2:12, "For as many as *sinned without the law* will also perish without the law" and say in Rom. 5:13a that sin was in the world *before (until) the law was given*.

"Transgression," however, is a different story. To *transgress* is to violate the will of God *as revealed in an express commandment*. As Douglas Moo puts it, "'Transgression' denotes a specific kind of sin, the 'passing beyond' the limits set by a definite, positive law or command. While every 'transgression' is also a 'sin,' not every 'sin' is a 'transgression.'"<sup>2</sup> So the existence of "law," in the sense of express commands, is a precondition to transgression. That's what Paul means when he says in Rom. 4:15b, "And where there is not law, neither is there transgression." As Moo notes, Paul in Rom. 4:15 "is not claiming that there is no 'sin' where there is no law, but, in almost a 'truism,' that there is no deliberate disobedience of positive commands where there is no positive command to disobey."

You can see this concept in the parent-child relationship. It is the difference between "you knew better than to . . ." and "I specifically told you not to . . ." Both are

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 277.

wrong and subject to punishment, but the latter is a more flagrant act of insubordination. The statement in Rom. 5:13b that sin is not "charged" when there is no law means it is not judged according to the greater responsibility of specific revelation.

Some of the commands in the Mosaic covenant were peculiarly covenantal, meaning they were not universal moral desires of God. They erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably (at least in part) to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God. A distinction between the commandments of the law is evident in 1 Cor. 7:19 (TNIV): Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.

A new covenant was instituted between God and mankind through the sacrifice of Christ, the effect of which was to render the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). And with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the *set of commands* that were part of that covenant, the Mosaic law, ceased to be binding.

That the Mosaic law ceased to be binding is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14 but also from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law — such as Sabbath regulations (Col. 2:16-17; Rom. 14:5-6), food laws (Rom. 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23 – 11:1), and circumcision (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2) — are said to be no longer binding. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

Though the set of commands that constitute the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the individual commands included in that law have an ongoing or renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant. For example, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in N.T. commands and prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting. Indeed, there are literally hundreds of commands in the N.T. – dos and don'ts – issued by Spirit-inspired writers.

The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). This ongoing moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

As regenerate, Spirit-filled people, Christians are empowered to obey these ethical norms in a new way (though "not yet" perfectly). We fulfill the law by living out its true purpose (Mat. 5:17-20). These works do not save us, but they are an inevitable accompaniment of our salvation as Spirit-empowered expressions of our faith in God (Jas. 2:14-26).

Because the commands of the Mosaic law relating to circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days, ritual purity laws, and food laws are not part of the law of Christ (see Mat. 15:16-20; Mk. 7:18-19, indicating that the rules of ritual contamination are removed), not something Christians are required to obey (other than as an accommodation), Christ's ending of the Mosaic law ended the requirements that created the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In this way, he created one new man out of the two, which is Paul's point in Eph. 2:14-18.