
The Ethical Reorientation of Paul: From the Law of Moses to the Law of Christ

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The apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians, sums up major events and alliances of his life with the words: “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:4–6). A number of things can be concluded about Paul prior to his call as an apostle. He came from an observant Jewish home (so his circumcision on the eighth day) and had pride in his heritage. Either from early on, influenced by family members or mentors, or later by his own choice, he was a Pharisee, a member of a movement that emphasized strict Torah observance. He could claim that he was “blameless” in his observance of the Torah. That need not mean that he thought of himself as perfect. It could simply mean that, in terms of Torah observance, no one could find fault with him. He was never consciously, outwardly dismissive of any part of the law of Moses. Willing to hazard a comparison between himself and his peers, he could be confident to say elsewhere: “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors” (Gal 1:14).

Paul and the law of Moses

From his Jewish heritage Paul would have understood the law and the “traditions of [his] ancestors” as a comprehensive guide for life. The “law” (νόμος) referred primarily to the law of Moses (Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Tob 7:12–13; 1 Cor 9:9), consisting of a body of commandments, or to the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses (Philo, *On the Virtues* 1:201; 2 Macc 15:9; 4 Macc 18:10; Matt 5:17; Luke 24:44; Rom 3:21; Gal 3:10). The term could also have the more general meaning of instruction or teaching (Deut 4:5–6; Prov 8:32–36; Sir 24:23–27). In any case, the law of Moses, in Paul’s day and subsequently, has always had to do with more than moral codes. It encompasses civic, cultic (ceremonial, ritual), and dietary regulations as well. Although a theoretical distinction can be made between moral, dietary, and ritual commandments, they are to be observed in a comprehensive manner. The person who lives according to the law is obliged to keep all the commandments (Lev 26:14–15; Num 15:40; Deut 8:1–20; 30:8; 2 Chr 33:8). To be sure, it is acknowledged in Jewish tradition that some commandments in the Torah are weightier than others. Laws that

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protect human life, for example, override those that are of a ritual type, as attested in the Mishnah (*Yoma* 8.5–7) and as reflected in the New Testament (Matt 12:7; 23:23; Luke 14:5). In addition to the written laws of the Pentateuch, other regulations and legal interpretations were promulgated and considered binding no less than the written laws, which Josephus, other writers, and Paul himself call the “traditions of the fathers [or ‘ancestors,’ NRSV]” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13:297; 3 Macc 1:3; Matt 15:2–6; Gal 1:14).

Considering the traditional Protestant view that keeping the law of Moses in all of its details must be considered a burden to bear, it is important to point out that in Jewish tradition that has generally not been so. The very first Psalm expresses “delight... in the law of the Lord” (Ps 1:1), and in another it is said that “the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Ps 12:8). That does not mean that criticism of law observance did not occur, for it surely did. But there is an important point to be made here. To this day the view persists in some circles that Paul, worn down by observing the law, considered it too difficult and burdensome to bear. But he found relief and freedom from that burden through conversion to Christ. Such a view, however, runs counter to those statements of Paul himself in which he expresses pride in his heritage. Grounded as he was in his Jewish heritage, Paul could never say that the law of Moses is intrinsically bad or that God had somehow made a mistake in giving it to the people of Israel. On the contrary, he wrote that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12). In Rom 9:1–5, Paul expresses pride in his ethnic and religious heritage, and does so with heartfelt feeling and admiration, for he knew firsthand from that heritage that the people of Israel have been heirs of “the

covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them... comes the Messiah.”

Paul’s negative statements about the law are due to a change in his career path and, above all, to his consideration of the place of the law in the world of Jews and Gentiles. In two of his letters he makes a point that he was called by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15–16; Rom 11:13). From early on, and probably from the very beginning of that role, Paul realized that the law of Moses—with its multitude of commandments, many of which can be considered primarily marks of Jewish identity—could not be imposed upon Gentile converts. God’s action in sending his Son had universal significance; it was the fulfillment of the promises of the prophets that God would send forth the Messiah and, when that happens, the Gentiles would be included in salvation (Isa 2:2–4; 25:6–8; 66:18; Jer 3:17; Mic 4:1–3; Zech 8:20–23). The time of fulfillment had come, and the mission of including the Gentiles into the people of God was under way.

It is in Galatians that Paul is most combative regarding the question of the law and the Gentiles. According to him, the issue concerning Gentile observance of the Mosaic law had been settled earlier in Jerusalem (ca. A.D. 48) prior to his arrival in Galatia.¹ The decision was that Gentile believers need not undergo ritual circumcision (Gal 2:1–10) and its consequences, that is, the observance of the Mosaic law, for “every man who lets himself be circumcised... is obliged to obey the entire law” (Gal 5:3; cf. Rom 2:25). Paul had proclaimed to the Galatians a law-free gospel, but after his departure other preachers arrived on the scene and taught Paul’s converts that they must be circumcised and adopt the law of Moses to complete their identity as believers in Christ and become members of the people of God. According to Paul, these preachers proclaimed a false gospel (1:6, 9); they had bewitched the Galatians (3:1). To Paul’s dismay and anger, the Galatian believers had listened to Paul’s opponents and desired to become subject to the Mosaic law.

Paul’s response to the situation was twofold. He wrote that no one can be justified before God by means of observing the law (2:21; 3:11; 5:4) or performing “works of the law” (2:16; 3:10), for righteousness under the law is impossible to obtain (2:16; 3:21–22; 6:13). Second, Paul wrote about the place of the law in history (3:23–26). The law of Moses, he says, served the people of Israel as the primary means of the revelation of God and God’s will from the time of its delivery at Mount Sinai until the arrival of faith in Christ; that is, until Christ’s death and resurrection, and the consequent rise of faith in him. The law had an important and disciplinary function for the people of Israel (3:24). But that does not mean that God intended it to be in force and observed by Gentiles beyond the coming of the Messiah. All the blessings of God, including righteousness (justification) are received by faith, not by observing the law. Even Abraham, while still a Gentile (cf.

1. For discussion of chronology related to this and other matters, see Walter F. Taylor Jr., *Paul Apostle to the Nations: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 35–40 (plus notes on further scholarship, 327).

The law of Moses, [Paul] says, served the people of Israel as the primary means of the revelation of God and God’s will from the time of its delivery at Mount Sinai until the arrival of faith in Christ; that is, until Christ’s death and resurrection, and the consequent rise of faith in him.

Rom 4:10–11), was justified by believing the promises of God, and to him the promise was given that the Gentiles would be justified by faith (3:6–14). The person who believes in Christ and yet seeks righteousness by observing the law denies, and even nullifies, the benefits of Christ’s death (2:21); it means falling away from grace (5:4).

The question inevitably arises concerning the conduct of the believer. In his letters Paul writes profusely about conduct. Though one is free from the law, that does not mean that one is free from love and care for others. There are many ways that Paul speaks of the believer’s life and how it should be led. His letters contain admonitions and instructions of what it means to be a believer in Christ within communities of faith and in the world.

Paul and ‘the law of Christ’

One of the most puzzling admonitions comes near the end of Galatians. Paul writes: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). This is the only place in Paul’s letters where “the law of Christ” (ὁ νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ) appears, and it has caused much speculation as to its meaning. A similar expression appears in 1 Cor 9:21 where Paul says that he is ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, which is usually translated “under Christ’s law” (NIV, NRSV), but probably more in the sense of being “subject to the jurisdiction of Christ.”² The range of suggested meanings for “the law of Christ” is vast. Some of the major suggestions are that it refers to or denotes (1) the love commandment³; (2) a new Torah,

2. Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 338. Hereafter, BDAG.

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535* in *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955–1976), 27:113; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951, 1955), 1:344; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 298–301; E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 98; Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (2d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 59–65 (especially 64).

based on the words of Jesus⁴; (3) “the [Mosaic] law as redefined and fulfilled by Christ in love”⁵; (4) the pattern of Christ’s self-sacrifice on behalf of others⁶; (5) “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”⁷; (6) behavior in keeping with Christ’s example⁸; (7) living by the Spirit⁹; and (8) “the Law that Christ has brought to completion for the life of the church, the new creation (5:14), thus making the Law his own Law.”¹⁰

The expression is peculiar, in particular, in light of Paul’s references to νόμος elsewhere in the letter. The word is used thirty-two times in Galatians. With the exception of 6:2 (“the law of Christ”), the remaining thirty-one uses of the word νόμος refer to the law of Moses.¹¹ Apart from a few exceptions, the Mosaic law is regularly spoken of in a negative way. Those who live under the law are imprisoned by it (3:23); no one can be justified by doing works of the law (2:16); no one actually obeys the law in its entirety (6:13); and all such people are under a curse, for “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law” (3:10, a conflation of Deut 27:26 and 28:58). The few exceptions where the law of Moses is not referred to in a negative way are at 3:17 (the law does not annul the covenant of Abraham); 3:24 (“the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came”); 4:4 (Christ was “born under the law”); 5:14 (“the whole law is summed up” in the love commandment); and 5:23 (there is “no law against” the fruit of the Spirit).

The phrase “the law of Christ” thus comes as a surprise from the apostle. The words “law” and “Christ” are regularly set against one another or, more accurately, the works of the law and

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faith in Christ are two distinct pathways for justification. Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13). In Romans, written later than Galatians, Paul goes on to say that “Christ is the end of the law” as a means of justification (10:4). Bearing that in mind, there are a few points to be made along the way to interpreting the phrase.

(1) It is not likely that “the law of Christ” could be conceived of by Paul or his readers as a code of law with its precepts that replaces—or is patterned after—the law of Moses.

(2) Before he uses the phrase in 6:2, Paul has said that “the whole law [of Moses] is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). The verb translated here as “summed up” is πεπλήρωται (perfect passive of πληρώω). “Summed up” is the translation found in some recent versions of the English Bible (NIV, NRSV, and NET), whereas others (RSV, NAB) have “fulfilled.” The fact that the verb is a passive perfect can mean that “the whole law has found its full expression” in the love commandment.¹² Or, similarly, the law of Moses has been brought to perfect completion in the love commandment.¹³ The one who loves the neighbor has caught the essence of what the law has intended from the beginning. This verse, so close at hand, must be considered in interpreting what is said in 6:2. That does not mean, however, that “the law of Christ” in 6:2 must refer back solely to that verse, or that the law of Christ is the love commandment.

(3) In the present context, Paul writes: “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus (καὶ οὕτως) you will fulfill (future plural, ἀναπληρώσετε) the law of Christ” (6:2). The sentence structure is simple. It is a compound sentence in which the first part consists of an imperative, and the second part spells out its consequences. The words are translated here as “and thus” but could be rendered as “and so” (RSV, ESV) or “and in this way” (NIV, NRSV, NET). The second part is not a purpose clause (“bear one another’s burdens in order to fulfill the law of Christ”) as though there is a law—

4. C. H. Dodd, “Ἐννομος Χριστοῦ,” *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 134–148; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (4th ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 144.

5. John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 134; similarly, Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (Sacra Pagina 9; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 221.

6. Richard B. Hays, “Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 275 (“a formulation...to refer to [the] paradigmatic self-giving of Jesus Christ”), 289 (a life that “recapitulates Jesus Christ’s self-giving”).

7. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary 41; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 275–276.

8. Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 117.

9. Michal Winger, “The Law of Christ,” *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 537–546 (especially 538).

10. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, (Anchor Bible 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 558.

11. It is possible that νόμος in 5:23 (“There is no law against such things”) is an exception, too. R. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 264, considers the saying to be a common ethical maxim. Generally, however, commentators consider it a reference to the Mosaic law, including H. Betz, *Galatians*, 288–289; James D. G. Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 313; F. Matera, *Galatians*, 204; and J. Martyn, *Galatians*, 499–500.

12. BDAG, 828.

13. J. Martyn, *Galatians*, 488.

that of Christ—that the people of Galatia are to fulfill, certainly not a body of law with regulations. Galatians 6:2 comes after thirty (of the thirty-one) references to the law of Moses, mostly against which Paul contends. He has shown by now that righteousness by works of the law of Moses is futile; it is a hopeless way to go. The law of Moses can no longer serve as a guide; its precepts cannot be a pattern for life, for they lead to enslavement. Instead, there is a different way for those who are believers in Christ. By taking care of one another in love, members of the community comport themselves in accord with the only pattern that counts. In short, since the entire conversation has been all about law, this pattern of life to follow can be called “the law of Christ.” As Richard Hays has written with an economy of expression: “The Galatians want to be under law (4:21); Paul ironically accedes to their desire by exhorting them to live by the ‘law’ of Christ.”¹⁴ Although some interpreters have suggested that Paul adopted the phrase “the law of Christ” from his opponents,¹⁵ that can hardly be established.¹⁶ In actual fact, the opponents seek to have the Galatians observe none other than the law of Moses. The phrase can probably be attributed to Paul himself, who makes positive use of it.

(4) It is not likely that, for Paul, “the law of Christ” was considered the law of Moses refurbished in light of the teachings of Jesus or the Christ event in general.¹⁷ The consistent and unrelenting opposition to the imposition of the law of Moses upon believers in the letter precludes that.¹⁸ If the law of Christ is a refined version of the law of Moses, one must ask concerning what precepts of the Mosaic law (that is, what moral precepts, not to mention ritual and dietary ones) would be included in addition to the love commandment.

Based on reading the Letter to the Galatians from its beginning up to 6:2, one finds a multitude of ethical teachings that cohere with one another into a pattern of life, presumably the pattern referred to as “the law of Christ.” The life of the believer is one in which one is baptized and thereby clothed with Christ (3:27); outward distinctions of ethnicity, social status, and gender, though apparent, do not divide those who belong together as one in Christ (3:28); “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (5:6); called to freedom, believers are to be “slaves to one another” through love (5:13); “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14); believers “live by the Spirit” and are “led by the Spirit”

(5:16, 18, 25); they exhibit the “fruit of the Spirit,” which consists of a list of behaviors that are common to both Jewish and Greco-Roman ethical traditions (5:22–25)¹⁹; and they are to “work for the good of all, especially for those of the family of faith” (6:10). All these cohere as in a palette of colors to make up a portrait of the life of one who is in Christ. No one item need be singled out as the sole definition of “the law of Christ.” The blend can stand as a coherent pattern.

By way of a summary, “the law of Christ” of which Paul speaks in Galatians is, first, that guidance that comes from being a person in Christ, led by the Spirit, and directed by the love commandment to live in community in mutual service to one another. That is primary. But lest that lack sufficient specificity, the life of the believer is to be given direction by those ethical teachings common to both Jews and Gentiles that promote ways of living that cohere with what has been identified as primary.

Concluding comment

The ethical teachings of Paul in Galatians cohere with what he says elsewhere in his letters. Briefly put, the life of the believer is bound up with obedience to Christ, who is one’s Lord. Whatever is consistent with that life can be endorsed as a guide for living. That can include basic moral teachings of the Old Testament (such as the Decalogue, Rom 7:7; 13:9, and other texts woven into exhortations, such as Rom 14:10–12; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1), teachings of Jesus (1 Cor 7:10–11; 9:14; plus possible allusions elsewhere, as Rom 12:14 and 14:13), the example of Christ’s self-giving in service to others (Rom 15:2–3, 7; Phil 2:3–8), early Christian ethical traditions he had received (such as the ethical implications of baptism, Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:27, and behavior at the Lord’s Supper, 1 Cor 11:17–34), and certain virtues of the Hellenistic pagan world (Gal 5:22–23; Phil 4:8–9).²⁰ The believer does not walk according to the prescriptions of the law of Moses, but in newness of life (Rom 6:4) and according to the Spirit (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:25) under the lordship of Christ. The life of the believer is one of “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). Loving one’s neighbor is fulfilling the law (Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14). To explore these many connections in detail goes far beyond the scope of this article. Here the aim has been more limited: to consider how the peculiar phrase “the law of Christ,” though enigmatic, fits in a general way within Paul’s ethical thinking.

14. R. Hays, “Christology and Ethics in Galatians,” 276.

15. H. Betz, *Galatians*, 300. According to Betz, the first to present the hypothesis was Dieter Georgi, “Exegetische Anmerkungen zur Auseinandersetzung mit den Einwänden gegen die Thesen der Bruderschaften,” *Christusbekennnis im Atomzeitalter* (Theologische Existenz Heute 70; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1959), 111–112.

16. R. Hays, “Christology and Ethics in Galatians,” 274; J. Martyn, *Galatians*, 548.

17. Contra E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 97–98; J. Dunn, *Galatians*, 322–323; J. Martyn, *Galatians*, 554–558.

18. B. Rosner, *Paul and the Law*, 116–117; similarly, R. Hays, “Christology and Ethics in Galatians,” 276.

19. H. Betz, *Galatians*, 281–283, provides data from ancient sources and concludes that “the individual concepts are not in any way specifically ‘Christian,’ but represent the conventional morality of the time” (p. 282); similarly, and with additional data from ancient sources, J. Martyn, *Galatians*, 483 (n. 43).

20. On Gal 5:22–23, see previous note; on Phil 4:8–9, cf. John Reumann, *Philippians* (Anchor Yale Bible 33B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 622. He says about 4:1–9: “Most is Greco-Roman, almost nothing OT/Jewish.” A thorough survey and discussion of the many sources of Paul’s ethics (Old Testament and Jewish, Greco-Roman, and the teachings of Jesus) is provided by V. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, 25–67.