

## **Romans 6:1      The place of the law in the life of the believer**

In the light of all Paul has said in Romans 5 concerning the abundance of God's grace,

**Romans 6:1** *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid!*

But what is sin? 1John 3:4 says sin is lawlessness (= Torahlessness). Should we continue to be lawbreakers? Of course not! Paul is saying we should obey the law. However this presents a stumblingblock to us as Christians because we have been taught that obeying the law is legalism. Of course, Paul is not talking about salvation in Romans 6, but he is talking about the new way of the Spirit (Romans 7:6) for those who are already saved by Jesus through faith.

Christians admit they have some sort of relationship to the Law of Moses even if they don't know exactly what it is. Most would consider the 10 Commandments as moral absolutes to be kept (though what about the Sabbath commandment?) The Christian charity The Jubilee Debt Campaign bases its theology on Leviticus 25 without any scruples. And of course the greatest commandment to *love your neighbour as yourself* comes from Leviticus. On the other hand, Christians don't go around getting circumcised or following the dietary requirements. What is going on here?

Paul is often difficult to understand. The great symbol of the Magna Carta was "Freedom under law." Yet Paul says, *You are not under law* (Romans 6:14). What does that mean? Charlton Heston, as Moses in the film "The 10 Commandments" smashed the stone tablets in front of the idolatrous Israelites with the words, "There is no freedom outside the law!" We may think on this occasion Hollywood got it right. But Paul appears in Galatians to describe the law as a yoke of slavery, something to be freed from. These difficulties in Paul, and many others not mentioned here, defy even the experts on Pauline theology. In the absence of clarity over the place of the law in the life of the believer in traditional Christian theology I offer these simple though perhaps surprising Biblical insights to help understand the place of the law in the life of the believer, which honour the Jewish roots of our faith.

### **1. The law isn't abolished**

Although it is widely taught that the law is abolished, and even that Jesus died to set us free from the law, this is contrary to Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:17-19). Has heaven and earth yet disappeared? Then, according to Jesus whom we claim to follow, nor has the law, not an iota, not a dot.

### **2. The first Jewish Christians continued to observe the whole law**

The first Jewish Christians knew of course obeying the law wasn't for salvation (e.g. Acts 15:1), but it was a matter of obedience to God as a Jewish person. We discover this obedience all over the Book of Acts. One example is the great man of faith, Ananias, whom Paul described as *a devout observer of the law* (Acts 9:11 cf Acts 22:12). The early Jewish believers didn't see any contradiction between faith in Jesus Christ and observing the law as an expression of their love for God. Many Pauline theologians recognise this (and the fact that Paul was law observant, see Acts 16:3; 18:18; 20:6; 20:16; 21:26; 23:1; 24:14,17; 25:8,10; 28:17). But they conclude the contradiction between Acts and Paul's letters is so great that Luke (the author of Acts) must have got it wrong. Yet isn't all of Scripture divinely inspired? Others have been re-examining Paul's letters in recent years.

### **3. Biblical law always had different requirements for gentiles**

Commonly the law is divided into ritual, ceremonial and moral parts, the idea being that the ritual and ceremonial parts have been fulfilled and/or abolished, but the moral parts still apply. There are major problems with this view.

Rather, it is better to recognise that biblical law had different requirements for different people. For example, Leviticus 12 applies to women not men, Jewish women not gentile women, and in fact can only be fully observed at the Temple. So in a literal sense Leviticus 12 doesn't apply to anyone these days but this doesn't mean that it's abolished. It is part of God's word, and it has some very interesting things to say about the nature of being clean and unclean.

This is just one example. But Biblical law also recognised different requirements for gentiles. The law was given specifically to Israel (Psalm 147:19-20). Laws such as circumcision that identified a person as Jewish were never applicable to gentiles, unless a gentile underwent a rigorous process of conversion. But, there were laws applicable to so-called Righteous Gentiles derived from the covenant made with Noah, with the whole of the human family. This makes some kind of sense. There are 4 requirements connected with the Noah Covenant, and these were developed into 7. They are called the Noachide laws.

Do not worship idols or other gods  
Do not blaspheme God's name  
Do not murder  
Do not commit sexual immorality  
Do not steal  
Do not eat things while they are still alive (i.e. meat with blood)  
Establish courts of justice

Biblical law distinguished between Jew and gentile. The Noachide laws are essentially ethical aspects of the law, and it's the ethical aspects of the law that Paul, the Apostle to the gentiles, expounds in his letters. The Noachide laws may have a bearing on Romans 2:14, where Paul talks about gentiles who *do by nature things required by the law ... even though they do not have the law*.

Acts 15, which is about the Jerusalem Council, addressed this same issue. The big question was whether gentile Christians needed to be circumcised (i.e. become Jewish) and obey the law of Moses. The conclusion of James (the brother of Jesus), Peter (the leading Apostle of Jesus) and Paul (Apostle to the gentiles) was that they did not. This was not because the law had been abolished, but because the gentiles were gentiles. James referred to Amos 9:11-12 which is a prophecy to show that the gentiles would have a big role in the Messianic kingdom. If they were to become circumcised and take on Jewish identity they would no longer be gentiles and the prophecy wouldn't be fulfilled.

#### **4. Born again Spirit filled Christians today are not lawbreakers, but are observing the law as it applies to them, even without realising it**

The law does have a place in the life of gentile Christians today and most are happily keeping it. Christians continue to actively spread the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all over the world, being a light to the nations. On the whole Christians are known for their high moral standards, honesty and high sexual ethics. Christians are men and women of prayer who love God's word. Whether we realise it or not, when we do these things and more, we are living out the law (Torah) as it applies to gentile disciples.

Furthermore Christians are concerned with matters of social justice, relieving the oppressed, feeding the hungry, education and health care. All these find their roots in the law, i.e. the OT Scriptures.

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May God give us understanding and add his blessing to His word.