

‘The Law’ in ‘The Law of Christ’

We know what ‘law’ is in ‘the law of Moses’,¹ but what about ‘law’ in ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2)?²

‘The law of Moses’ and ‘the law of Christ’ are (in the common parlance) very different beasts; that is, they are very different ‘entities’, ‘systems’, ‘regimes’. And they are poles apart, not only in content, but in their whole basis, approach, ethos, outlook, attitude and mindset. It is all to do with ‘Moses’ and ‘Christ’ (John 1:17). The two laws belong to two distinct, contrasting ages, and are very different ‘laws’. The law of Moses is a list of specific rules – the decalogue is *ten* commandments, after all. The law of Christ, however, is far wider, far bigger. And I am not thinking of a hundred commandments instead of ten! (Or, rather, a thousand commandments instead of the more-than six hundred in the Mosaic law!) The law of Christ is not a list at all. This is the point I am striving for. The law of Christ is a principle, an all-embracing principle. Anything more different to a list of rules, especially a list of ‘do not’s’, would be hard to imagine. Christ’s law is inflexible, but there is certain flexibility within it. Within limits, differences of judgement are allowed under Christ (see Rom. 14:1 – 15:7; Phil. 3:15-16, for instance). This is a remarkable aspect of the law of Christ. In general, law allows no room for conscience. In particular, the Mosaic law allows none. Summarising the essential difference between the two ‘laws’, the law of Moses and the law of Christ, we are talking about the difference between precept and principle.

The word ‘law’ takes different meanings in Scripture, according to the context.³ In the New Testament, ‘law’ often carries all the overtones of Jewish law, the *torah*, but not always.

¹ See my ‘What is The Law?’ (under the eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com); *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law* pp25-26.

² For this article, I have lightly edited my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law* pp214-218; see also pp336,481-483, adding a little more from other pages in that volume.

³ See note 1.

Sometimes it means ‘principle’ or something similar. Take ‘the law of faith’ (Rom. 3:27). I have already noted that Paul was not speaking about the ‘law’ of faith, in the sense of substituting faith in Christ for obedience to Mosaic commandments – in effect, one set of rules replaced by another. Rather, the idea is ‘principle’, the principle of faith. ‘The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:2), is another example. Many teachers have rightly called on other words in trying to get to grips with this concept – ‘principle’, ‘ordinance’, ‘norm’, ‘system’, ‘doctrine’, ‘teaching’, ‘order’, ‘method’, ‘demand’, ‘arrangement’, ‘force’ or ‘reign’.⁴ Paul spoke of ‘a pattern’ (Phil. 3:17). Boasting is excluded, said Paul. ‘By what law?’ On what basis? By what principle? Not by substituting faith in Christ for works under Moses. No! Boasting is excluded by the fact that the concept of works, obedience to law, has gone, and has been replaced by a totally new principle or system or arrangement (Rom. 3:27-28). Indeed, it is a new age, ‘the time of the new order’ (Heb. 9:10, NIV). Law has been replaced by gospel.⁵

So why did Paul use ‘law’ in Romans 3:27, and speak of ‘the law of faith’? Why did he not use something like ‘principle’? Above all, why did he not coin a word? This is a most interesting question. It seems a contradiction in terms. ‘The law of faith’, I ask you! Obviously, the apostle had good reason for his choice.⁶

Could it be because of the high regard the Jews had for the law? Or because the apostle wanted to avoid the charge of novelty? Was it a Hebraism? Could it amount to nothing more than ‘the doctrine or prescript of faith’? Could Paul have been using ‘law’ the way Greek-speaking Jews of the first century used

⁴ See my *Christ* pp279-298,481-527.

⁵ See my *Christ* pp75-98,158-177,369-391,448-468; my ‘Covenant Theology Tested’ (eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com; also on christmycovenant.com).

⁶ See my *Christ* pp314-320,552-555 for the close parallel with Paul’s deliberate use of the term ‘Israel’ in ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16). This describes the people of the new covenant. The law of Moses was for Israel after the flesh. The law of Christ is for spiritual Israel, the Israel of God. Paul showed that both ‘law’ and ‘Israel’ have been taken over and *transformed* in the new covenant. And do not forget Paul’s love of word play. I will say more on this.

it – in a general sense – just as we do today, when speaking of ‘the [so-called] law of averages’, ‘the laws of music’, ‘the law of unintended consequences’, ‘the law of diminishing returns’, and the like. As I say, it is a fascinating question: Why did Paul use the word ‘law’ in ‘the law of Christ’?

Almost certainly Paul was drawing upon the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek for Jews with no Hebrew, completed just over a hundred years before Christ, the version most often quoted in the New Testament. After all, this was the way the Greek-speaking Jews – who could not understand Hebrew – read or heard the Greek word for ‘law’. Did this matter? A great deal! They read it and *understood* it as a Greek word (*nomos*), not reading into it all the ideas and associations of the Hebrew word (*torah*) which it translated. Most of the scattered Jews of the time would have never read the law of Moses – they didn’t have a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures, and, at best, would have only heard it read. In any case, as I have explained, most of them couldn’t understand Hebrew. All this is highly relevant to Paul’s use of the word – and even more relevant to the way his non-Hebrew readers would have understood him.

And, of course, the same goes for us today. When Paul uses *nomos* in connection with the law of Moses, we should think in Jewish terms, but when used in connection with the law of Christ, we should think in this Greek way. In addition, the *torah* was more than rules and regulations.⁷ And in the new covenant, Christ is the *torah* in that his teaching is his *nomos*, and he himself *in toto* reveals God and what he requires of his people.

Then again, we must remember, Paul loved word play. He used it with ‘law’ in Romans 3:27: ‘Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what *law*? [The *law*] of works? No, but by the *law* of faith’. He used it in Romans 8:2-4: ‘For the *law* of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the *law* of sin and death. For what the *law* could not do in that it was weak through

⁷ The meaning of *torah* is ‘teaching’, ‘doctrine’, or ‘instruction’; the commonly accepted ‘law’ gives a wrong impression. We should, perhaps, think in terms of ‘custom, theory, guidance or system’ (see Wikipedia).

the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the *law* might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'. He used it in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, when he explained the way in which he approached sinners with the gospel, how he accommodated himself to his hearers, so that 'I might win the more'. In particular, he said: 'To those who are without *law*, [I became] as without *law* (not being without *law* towards God, but under *law* towards Christ), that I might win those who are without *law*'.⁸ It is very likely, therefore, that when he spoke of being 'under law towards Christ', 'under Christ's law', Paul deliberately chose to use 'law', precisely because of the association his word play entails. In particular, the apostle engaged in word play in 'the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2). For 'law', we could also speak of the standard, the norm, the principle of Christ. (See earlier on 'the law of faith').

The law of Christ! What a staggering choice of phrase! As I have said, 'the law of Christ' is a seeming contradiction in terms. And look where the apostle coined it – at the end of Galatians! Galatians, of all places! After all he has said in the letter, it seems as though Paul must have blundered, forgotten himself and written an absurdity. It has been rightly called 'a breathtaking paradox'; 'the law of Christ', indeed! But of course the apostle hadn't blundered! He knew what he was doing! By using such provocative language, latching on to the word 'law' and attaching it to 'Christ', Paul was deliberately drawing attention to what he was saying. He was a teacher! He wanted the Galatians to understand and remember! And what was he saying? Bearing in mind Paul's entire argument throughout the first five chapters of the letter, 'the law of Christ' must be, at the very least, different to the law of Moses. I go further. It must be in stark contrast to the law of Moses.

⁸ Rom. 9:6; Gal. 6:2,16; Phil. 3:3; 2 Thess. 3:11 (NIV); Philem. 10-11 are further examples of word play. God himself does it; see Mic. 1:8-16. Christ did it – see below. See my *Christ* pp172-176,460-464 for comments on Rom. 8:1-4.

Word play. Christ himself engaged in it: ‘Take my yoke upon you... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light’, he said (Matt. 11:29-30).⁹ The concept of a ‘yoke’ was current in such phrases as ‘yoke of the *torah*’ and ‘yoke of the commandments’. Clearly, however, Christ was speaking of a new yoke, an altogether different kind of yoke – ‘my yoke’ – not the old yoke of Moses, nor the Mosaic law as expounded by Christ. Christ, I repeat, was speaking of his *own* law, not the Mosaic law reinterpreted. There is a clear contrast between Christ’s yoke and the yoke of the law. The Jews would have recognised at once Christ’s word play, and would have readily grasped the substitution he was claiming, the substitution of himself and his law in the place of Moses and his law. The contrast is clear. The *Didache*, probably dating from about 80-140, called Christ’s commandments ‘the Lord’s yoke’. What a contrast there is between the two yokes. Christ’s is easy (Matt. 11:30),¹⁰ the opposite of Moses’ (Acts 15:10,28; Gal. 5:1). An easy *yoke*? What is this? Yet another contradiction in terms.

And this raises the very point – the vital point – I am trying to make. Christ has his law, his yoke for his people, but this is not a new list of laws replacing the old list (although, of course, there are specific commands for believers to obey in the gospel; witness the abundance of such in the letters of the New Testament). In speaking of the law of Christ, Paul was not referring to a new set of ten commandments, using ‘law’ in the old sense. We are talking about the *new* covenant. The old law has been replaced by the new. And the phrase makes its appearance, remember, at the end of Galatians. The apostle, having resolutely stood up to the Judaisers, having endured personal stress in publicly rebuking Peter, and having taught the Galatians so thoroughly – all of which he had done in order to rescue believers from the bondage of the Mosaic law – would not, as he closed his letter, bind believers with an even tighter and heavier yoke. It would have been unthinkable! He was not setting out a new legalism with the commands of Moses replaced by the

⁹ See Christ’s play on ‘rock’ in Matt. 16:18.

¹⁰ Is there another word play here (in the Greek) between *chrētos* (easy) and *christos* (anointed, Christ)?

commands of Christ. For progressive sanctification,¹¹ what is wanted is not mere conformity to a set of rules, especially negative, but consecration, dedication and likeness to Christ.

In short, while the law of Christ is a real law, it is a *new* law, a law very unlike the law of Moses. Consequently, when we speak of Christ's *yoke*, 'the believers' *rule*', 'the *law* of Christ', we should not think in Jewish terms, of the *torah*. Rather, we should think in terms of the broader, fuller, first-century meaning of the Greek word *nomos*. This is the way to understand 'the law of Christ', since this was the way the non-Hebrew-speaking believers of the first century (the overwhelming majority) would have understood Paul's words, written in Greek. We must put the same overtones on 'the *law* of Christ' as they did, and not impose Jewish nuances on the phrase.

Paul saw Christ as the new Moses in a new covenant, teaching his own law, a new *torah*, with the idea of *torah* qualified as above. So it would be better to think of the law of Christ, not as a set of rules, commandments and prohibitions, but rather as a life-principle within the believer empowered by the Spirit of Christ. It is Christ's teaching, life, death, and resurrection, and the coming of his Spirit upon and in his people, and the deposit of all truth from Christ into which he led the apostles (John 14:26; 16:12-15), which is the believer's new *torah*, the law of Christ. The law of Christ is not a list. It is power! 'The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power' (1 Cor. 4:20, NIV).

¹¹ By 'progressive sanctification', I mean the believer's imperfect (in this life) outworking of the perfect positional-sanctification he has in Christ by virtue of his union with Christ at his conversion. The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God's sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. (See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12). In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

A vital principle

In saying this, I would not be misunderstood. There are commands in the new covenant: a host of them! And we must maintain the union between the Spirit and the word. It is not a question of the Spirit or the Scriptures; it is not the Spirit above the Scriptures; it is the Spirit and the Scriptures! Indeed, in Christ there is more: in the new covenant, God not only gives his people the Scriptures, and also gives them his Spirit, but he writes his law – the gospel, Christ – on their hearts. The believer, therefore, is under all three, moved by all three, guided by all three: the Scriptures, the Spirit, and the law written in his heart, all three mutually calibrating each other,¹² and all three stirring the believer to assurance and progressive sanctification.

Douglas J.Moo:

Indeed, while not being ‘under the law’, [Paul] recognises a continuing obligation to ‘God’s law’, in the form of ‘Christ’s law’ (the Greek is *ennomos Christou*). The conceptualisation of this text provides as neat a summary of my view [Moo’s, and mine – DG] of the law as the New Testament affords. It suggests that ‘God’s law’ comes to his people in two forms: to Israel in the form of ‘law’, *torah*, and to Christians in the form of ‘Christ’s law’. Here we find the ‘new-covenant theology’ emphasis on two contrasting covenants worked out in terms of two different ‘laws’. But the key question remains: How different are they?

‘To answer this question’, Moo said, ‘we return to Galatians’; in particular, to Galatians 5:13 – 6:2. Moo went on:

To recapitulate: ...The teaching of the New Testament on the matter of the law of God is neatly summarised in the distinctions that Paul draws in 1 Cor. 9:20-21: the law of Moses, the *torah* (‘law’ simply), was given to the people of Israel to govern them until the coming of the Messiah; since his coming, the people of God are governed by the ‘law of Christ’. Biblical law, in other words, is firmly attached to

¹² As just one example, link Rom. 8:1-4,9 with Gal. 6:2 and 2 Tim. 3:15-16. See my *Christ* pp154,231-232,256-257, for instance.

the temporal two-covenant structure that is the hallmark of ‘new-covenant theology’.¹³

Moo again, now answering the question: ‘What will guide and empower’ believers – seeing they are not under the law? The answer, as he said, contains two components – the Spirit and, ‘surprisingly, perhaps’, the law.¹⁴ Ah! But which law? Moo:

The other reference to ‘law’ in this concluding section of Galatians comes in Gal. 6:2... The interpretation of the phrase ‘law of Christ’ is central to my [Moo’s and mine – DG] argument. Unfortunately, Paul provides little contextual information.¹⁵ We have, however, already noticed that Paul uses similar language in 1 Cor. 9:21, where, the context suggests [it makes it plain!] ‘the law of Christ’ is distinguished from the Mosaic law. Coupled with the claim that Christians are no longer ‘under the (Mosaic) law’, this makes it unlikely [it rules out the possibility!] that the ‘law of Christ’ is the Mosaic law interpreted and fulfilled by Christ. Rather, the phrase is more likely [it makes it certain!] [to be] Paul’s answer to those who might conclude that his law-free gospel provides no standards of guidance for believers.¹⁶ On the contrary, Paul says, though no longer directly responsible to Moses’ law, Christians are bound to Christ’s law. In what does this ‘law’ consist? Since... Gal. 5:14..., the demand for love [must be] a central component of the ‘law of Christ’. But it is unlikely that Paul confines the law to this demand alone, for, as we have seen, Paul also stresses in this context the fruit-bearing ministry of the 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... Jer. 31:31-34... Ezek. 36:26-27. It is more difficult to determine whether the law of Christ includes specific teachings and principles... I think it highly probable [it is certain!] that Paul thought of the law of Christ as including within it teachings of Jesus and the apostolic witness, based on his life and teaching.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo: ‘The Covenants and the Mosaic Law: The View from Galatians’, Affinity Theological Study Conference: *The End of the Law?*, February, 2009, pp20,27.

¹⁴ See above for the staggering nature of this phrase: ‘the law of Christ’.

¹⁵ Is it because the early believers knew full-well what the apostle was talking about?

¹⁶ A routine – but false – accusation levelled against all who advocate new-covenant theology.

Moo, in part, quoting Richard N. Longenecker:

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’. Does the ‘law of Christ’ include Mosaic commandments? Of course.¹⁷

On the whole, a fine statement, but, as so often, Moo could have been stronger at certain points. The biblical evidence is overwhelming – ‘the law of Christ’ cannot be confined to the ten commandments. It certainly cannot be encapsulated in any list. And while the believer is under the entirety of God’s word – all of it, including the Mosaic law (all of it, not just the ten commandments!) as nuanced by the new covenant – he has God’s Spirit moving him and enabling him to fulfil that word. Alas, this fulfilment will never be perfect in this life. Nevertheless, ‘the righteous requirement’¹⁸ of the law’ *is* fulfilled in believers by the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). The child of God is fully, perfectly, justified and positionally sanctified, he is assured by the witness of the Spirit, and he is being progressively sanctified by God’s grace in the power of that self-same Holy Spirit, the Spirit of holiness. Furthermore, he is being transformed into Christ’s likeness with ever-increasing glory now (2 Cor. 3:18, NIV), and will, at Christ’s return, be absolutely glorified by being made into his Saviour’s likeness (John 17:24; Rom. 8:29-30; 1 John 3:2-3).

This is what we must understand by ‘the law’ in ‘the law of Christ’. To distort the law of Christ by mixing it with the law of Moses, thereby forging a hybrid, a mongrel sort of ‘Mosaic law of Christ’, is tragic. Sadly, it is commonly done, leading multitudes of believers into a gloomy valley, where a weary, relentless struggle leads to a sense of increasing failure. How very different is this to the spirit of the new covenant, with its sense of ever-increasing glory and inexpressible joy in a life of growing Christ-likeness (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:8-9).

¹⁷ Moo pp21-22.

¹⁸ The singular ‘requirement’ is what Paul wrote.