GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

What Law Is "Done Away" and What "Law" Do Christians Keep?

Some Christians believe that they should keep old covenant observances such as the weekly and annual Sabbaths. A person is a "true Christian" only if he or she observes Sabbaths and certain other old covenant requirements. But the truth is that these old worship regulations are not required today, and it is legalistic to teach that people must obey those rules in order to be accounted worthy of salvation.

Scripture tells us that salvation is a free gift of God that comes solely through the redemptive work of Christ. The way to obtain salvation is to have Christ in one's life, *period* (Romans 9:9-11), rather than having Christ *plus* keeping certain old covenant laws. This has led some to ask: Since there are no legal "requirements" for salvation, and our status with God is based solely on his saving grace through the redemptive work of Christ, are we "required" to keep *any* laws of God? Is teaching obedience to God really saying that salvation is obtained through Christ *plus* whatever law code, moral code or individual laws one claims Christians must keep?

We can answer the question by taking a careful look at the apostle Paul's teaching in the book of Galatians. Paul wrote Galatians because certain Jewish Christians had come to the churches of Galatia claiming that it was necessary for gentile Christians to observe the Law of Moses. They especially insisted that physical circumcision was necessary (Galatians 5:2). This was the general stance of many Jewish Christians. We see this, for example, in the position of the

Pharisees who had become Christians. They insisted at the church council in Jerusalem in A.D. 49, that, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

One point should be made clear before proceeding. The so-called "Judaizing" Jewish Christians whom Paul confronted in Galatians – or in Acts 15, for that matter – would not have opposed faith in Christ or trust in God. As devout Jews, they would have trusted God, and as Christians they would have accepted Christ as Savior. There is no indication in Galatians, and Paul nowhere says, that they failed to believe in Christ as Savior.

Further, as did the Jewish Christians, Paul also taught "that 'doing' was *integral* to life in the in-group and *required* of members," as E.P. Sanders points out in *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (page 158). This fact is obvious if one reads the entire letter to the Galatians. Certainly, Paul castigates the Judaizers in chapters 1 through 5:13 for their insistence that gentiles should keep certain old covenant religious observances. He also clearly explains that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ *alone*. On this point, Paul appealed to the example of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-19), who lived hundreds of years before the Law of Moses was given on Sinai, and who was accounted righteous by God *before* receiving the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17).

But, after thoroughly discussing this point, Paul begins to stress the fact that certain godly behaviors are integral to the Christian life. He says in 5:13: "You, my brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

Paul explains that Christians are called "to be free" from the kinds of demands the Judaizers were making (5:13). However, this "freedom" does not mean that Christians are free to sin or to "indulge the sinful nature." In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes the point quite directly with a rhetorical question. He asks in Romans 6:15: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" His answer is: "By no means!"

In Galatians, Paul summarizes the obligations or "works requirements" of Christians under the principle of loving our neighbor as ourselves (Galatians 5:14). This, says Paul, is a summary statement that sums up the "entire law." Which "law" is Paul talking about? The Law of Moses, of course, the law that contained the obligations of the old covenant. The principle he brings up, which is to love others as oneself, is itself found in Leviticus 19:18, a book best known for describing the intricate offerings that Israel was commanded to perform.

After stating the love principle, Paul goes on to show that Christians are obligated to "not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (5:16). He lists a number of behaviors, such as sexual immorality, idolatry and fits of rage, that Christians should avoid (5:19-21). After listing these sinful behaviors, Paul ends by adding the phrase "and the like," which means he expects the Galatians to understand that the sinfulness of other behaviors also ought to be obvious.

Paul issues a stern warning about these behaviors. "I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:21). This makes it clear that Paul was saying that Christians are obligated or required to avoid certain evil behaviors.

Paul then lists nine behaviors that the Galatians should exhibit in their lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). Such behaviors are the "fruit" of the Holy Spirit, and they reflect the perfection of the nature of God. Paul admonishes the Galatians that, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25).

Paul continues talking about the obligations of the Christian life in Galatians 6. He admonishes the Galatians that people will reap what they sow (6:7). "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (6:8). The Christians in Galatia are to "not become weary in doing good" (6:9). Again, Paul stresses that "good works" are characteristic of Christians.

For Paul, true faith in Christ and the obligation to do good works mix together perfectly well. But at least two things should be seen.

First, Paul nowhere says that these good works save us. We are saved by the grace of God through faith. It is purely a gift of God. We are saved by the grace of God, and *continue* in a saved state because we have the life of God that comes through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and which is made possible by the redemptive work of Christ.

Paul says, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:11). It is God who saves, who gives us life, not the keeping of any law or standard of behavior. We are not saved by any kind of works. (The clearest statement of this is in Ephesians 2:8-10. However, even there, Paul goes on to show that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.")

The second thing we should notice about Paul's admonition is that the "good works" requirement for Christians does not include any old covenant cultic (that is, worship system) requirements. Nowhere in Paul's letters does he mention Jewish customs such as the Sabbath rests, food laws, circumcision, offering sacrifices, strict percentage tithing, and so on, as obligatory Christian behaviors. In fact, physical circumcision is blatantly ruled out in several places in the New Testament. As a rite, it does not matter to Christians (Galatians 6:15). Any Mosaic food laws, purity laws or other cultic customs that divide Christians are prohibited (Galatians 2:11-15).

In Colossians, Paul says that "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" – all commanded in the Law of Moses – are each but a "shadow of the reality, which is Christ" (Colossians 3:16). He counsels the Colossians to not let anyone condemn them if they do not observe such days, or in how they might observe them. In Romans 14 – under different circumstances – Paul said that beliefs about foods and "sacred days" are not to be construed as commands from the Lord, and their observance by weaker members is an individual matter (Romans 14:1-8). Christians should not condemn each other about such practices.

Paul has even stronger things to say about the observance of "special days and months and seasons and years" in Galatians 4:10. He says that to believe that such worship practices, based on the Law of Moses, are required in order to be among those who are "in" Christ's body, the church, is to be enslaved to a new idolatry! (Galatians 4:8).

There is a sense in which Paul says Christians, and this would include Jewish Christians, do not keep and are not under the authority of the Mosaic Law. He says to the Roman Christians: "So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another" (Romans 7:4). A few verses later, Paul points out: "By dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (verse 6).

There is for Paul, then, an understanding that the Law of Moses, Israel's "written code" is the "old" way, and that Christians serve God and humanity in a "new" way of the Spirit. Thus, the Law of Moses (with its Ten Commandments) is "done away" as a written code, and is replaced by the "law of Christ," a spiritual law that is internalized through the Holy Spirit.

The Law of Moses contains a legal description of the fundamental principles of God's character – love. It tells us, as did Christ and Paul, that we are

to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8 with Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5). This is straight from the Law of Moses, as are many other commands that apply to Christians, such as not killing, not stealing, and not being idolatrous.

So the law of Christ is consistent with the Law of Moses, but it transcends that law. Paul puts it in these terms. He says that through Christ we are saved from "the law of sin and death," from which "the law" (the Law of Moses or Torah) could not save us (Romans 8:1-3). He goes on by saying: "And so he [Christ] condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the *righteous requirements* of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (verse 4, emphasis added). The "righteous requirements" are the behaviors that those who live "according to the Spirit" or "in step with the Spirit" will live by (Galatians 5:26).

It is clear from the New Testament "sin and virtue" lists (such as Galatians 5:13-25) and the epistles what kinds of old covenant regulations are not necessary for Christians to observe. These are the observances that set Israel apart from the nations. They include physical circumcision, resting on days of the week and year, food laws, offering of sacrifices, temple worship, purification rites, strict percentage tithing on farm and husbandry increase, and similar worship regulations.

In fact, such practices were considered by Jews to be "boundary marker" observances to determine who was "in" and who was "out" of the people of God. Observances such as the ones described above served to distinguish who was of Israel or who was a Jew, and therefore under the covenant, and who was not. Of course, the ultimate "boundary marker" for an Israelite was birth. The person born an Israelite was an Israelite. But, especially after the days of the Maccabees, the "boundary marker" ordinances served to distinguish those who *remained* "in" the covenant from those who were considered reprobate, as well as to distinguish Jews from Gentiles.

We could examine each of these practices to show how they distinguished between the "good" and the "bad" Jew and between Jew and gentile. But let us take only the matter of temple worship. The person who worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem was "in" because that is where the Lord's presence was, and that was where the Jew was commanded to sacrifice and to observe the annual festivals (Deuteronomy 12:4-7, 11, 17-18, 26; 14:23-25; 16: 2, 5, 11, 15-16). (Prior to the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem, Israelites were to gather around the moveable tabernacle.)

But Jesus spoke of a time when God would not be worshipped in the Jerusalem temple. In fact, there would be no such thing as a "holy place" (John 4:21-23). Temple worship would no longer "mark" a person who was in a covenant relationship with God. That time, the era of the new covenant, fully arrived with the completion of Jesus' redemptive work. Today, Christian "worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth" (verse 24), rather than in a specific building or during a specific time.

Summarizing our understanding

It was clear to Jews, and some reflection should make it clear to us, that there is a difference between the "boundary marker" observances such as Sabbath rests, circumcision, food and purification laws, and the commands that have to do with the moral-spiritual life. For example, the laws against murder or adultery are not "boundary marker" observances. They have no ritualistic significance. All people are expected to love their neighbor as themselves in these and other ways, not just Jews. These are behaviors that are applicable to all people.

What is the lesson for Christians in this understanding? When we consider all the laws that God has ever given, we must always ask whether such and such a law is something that has universal moral-spiritual significance, or is simply a worship observance required for the old covenant system. To honor one's parents or to worship God rather than idols is not a cultic law. On the other hand, sacrificial offerings, the Sabbath rest commands, circumcision or food laws were cultic.

When we speak of the Law of Moses as being "done away" or when it is said that Christians are not obligated to do "works" in order to be saved, we have to understand the limitations of these comments. The kind of "works" from the Law of Moses that are prohibited or are unnecessary are the "boundary marker" or cultic regulations. The "righteous requirements," on the other hand, reflect God's righteousness and his nature of love. We are not saved *by* doing such good works, of course, nor can we do them perfectly, but it is still appropriate that we *do* them. It is not simply a question of doing or not doing "works," but *which kinds* of "works" Christians will be doing as they are led by the Spirit.

As Sanders points out in his previously mentioned book: "Paul's objection was not that the Mosaic law requires 'doing,' but that if acceptance of the Mosaic law were the crucial point for membership in God's people, the descendents of Abraham, Christ would have died in vain (Gal. 2:21)" (page 159). Doing "good works" as such is not a denial of faith. The issue in Galatians was whether

membership in the "Israel of God" – the church – required the doing of those aspects of the Law of Moses that marked "boundaries" between those who were "in" and those who were "out." These included circumcision, Jewish food laws, weekly and annual Sabbath rests, among others.

To summarize, we are placed "in" the church and we stay "in" by the indwelling Holy Spirit, who regenerates us. While "good works," made possible by the Spirit, as a response to God's gracious gift are Christian obligations, "boundary marker" cultic observances are not. But no works save us. We are saved by Christ *alone*.

In past years, the Worldwide Church of God (now Grace Communion International) believed that certain "boundary marker" laws from the Law of Moses were required for Christians. Obedience to these laws determined, in our minds, whether we were "in," that is, whether we were true Christians or not. The keeping of the weekly Sabbath, the annual Sabbaths, the food laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, multiple tithing – all straight out of the Law of Moses – were said to be requirements that determined whether a person was a true Christian.

By giving up these practices, and by realizing that they are not "signs" of who is in and who is "out," we reaffirm our unity with Christians in all churches and all historical eras. We are freed from secularism and "freed from the law," that is, from coming under the authority and penalty of the Law of Moses. But we are not free to be lawless. Christ himself is our "Law," who resides in us through the Holy Spirit, so that we might walk in his righteousness.

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