Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans

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I. INTRODUCTION

Paul's view of the Law is probably the most debated topic in New Testament studies[1] and Daniel Wallace notes that "[t]he problems and apparent contradictions in Paul's view of the Law are legion."[2]

Some commentators believe that Paul changed his view of the Law considerably between writing Galatians and Romans.[3] However, a careful analysis of Paul's statements about the Law in both letters will show that they are complementary, not contradictory. On the other hand, Sanders posited that Paul had no theology of the Law but merely responded in various ways to various circumstances which threatened his mission to the Jews and Gentiles. This is why he proclaimed the necessity of participation in Christ for salvation.[4]

However one views Paul's understanding of the Law, it should be noted that neither Galatians nor Romans are formal, systematic discussions of the Law. Rather, they are *ad hoc* documents dealing with specific pastoral issues.[5] Nowhere in the New Testament is there a complete discussion, so all we can do is make extrapolations from whatever Paul does say.[6]

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[1] K Snodgrass, "Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988) 93.
[2] D B Wallace, "Galatians 3:19-20: A Crux Interpretum for Paul's View of the Law", *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (Fall 1990) 225.
[3] G N Stanton, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen: J C B Mohr, 1996) 99.
[4] F Thielman, "Law" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by G F Hawthorne, R P Martin & D G Reid (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1993) 531.
[5] Snodgrass 97-98.
[6] Ibid 98.

II. THE LAW AND THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

1. The promise made to Abraham

God promised Abraham that he and his offspring would eventually receive as an eternal inheritance the land in which he was now living as an alien (Gen 12:7, 13:15, 17:7-8). Therefore, the Jew's inheritance is based on God's promise, not on the Law (cf. Gal 3:15-18). God's covenant with Abraham was based on faith and was not set aside or supplemented by the Law. Indeed, the Law was not issued until 430 years *after* the Abrahamic covenant was established (Gal 3:17).

This point is reiterated in Romans 4:13-14: the promise did not come through the Law, but through faith.

2. The Law and the Jews

In light of Romans 2:17-24, the Jews were apparently claiming that their knowledge and possession of the Law made them superior. The boasting described here is most probably "the belief that ethnic Israel is inalienably the people of the one true God and that her possession of the law, quite irrespective of her keeping of it, demonstrates this fact."[7] Paul, however, takes these people to task and exposes their hypocrisy. It is clear that the series of rhetorical questions in vv. 21-23 require negative answers. Despite their knowledge of the Law, the Jews still broke it, and God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of it (v. 24). Knowledge of the Law is of no value unless it is accompanied by obedience.[8] Thus, the offence which the Jews have committed is the breaking of the Law.

Just because the Jews have the Law does not mean they are righteous, or that they did not need to exercise faith. Although Leviticus 18:5 states that those who keep God's laws will live by them, T. R. Schreiner suggests that this does not teach that Israel should obey the Law in order to earn salvation, but rather, that obedience to the Law would be the intended result of God's saving work. He also points out that since sacrifices could be offered for sins committed, there would have been no thought that the Law could be obeyed perfectly, resulting in salvation.[9]

Striving for righteousness was a legitimate goal for the people of Israel. The goal was not wrong, but the path the people chose (i.e. works) was. The only way to achieve righteousness is by faith.[10]

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[7] N T Wright, "Law in Romans 2", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen: J C B Mohr, 1996) 139.
[8] R B Hays, "Three Dramatic Roles", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen: J C B Mohr, 1996) 152.
[9] T R Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5", *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (Spring 1993).
[10] Snodgrass 103.

3. Circumcision

Genesis 17:11 makes it clear that circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. However, it appears that a number of early Jewish believers were insisting that their uncircumcised fellow believers should also undergo circumcision.[11] Paul, however, vehemently opposes this idea (Gal 5:2-4). In Romans 4:9-12, Paul gives a calmer and a much more reasoned response to this issue. He points out that Abraham was declared righteous *before* he was circumcised. He received the circumcision as a sign and a seal of the righteousness he had by faith when he was still uncircumcised. Therefore, he is the father of all believers who have not been circumcised.

This raises the question: what is the point of circumcision? Not only that but why is it no longer necessary -- especially since it symbolises the Abrahamic covenant? In Romans 2:25-29, Paul argues that circumcision is only of value if the person obeys the Law, otherwise it is of no value at all. Indeed, he goes on to state that an uncircumcised non-Jew[12] who obeys the Law's requirements is more of a "Jew" than a truly ethnic Jew who does not obey the Law.

It is unlikely that Paul was against circumcision altogether. His opposition to it was primarily motivated by those who believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation and a right relationship with God. In answer to the question of the value of circumcision in Romans 3:1, Paul responds positively. Circumcision is a *symbol* (and that is all it is) which identifies the Jews as those people who have been entrusted with the very words of God. As Stanton comments: "Paul removes circumcision and the Law from the pedestal on which they had been placed."[13]

Note also that Paul had no problem with circumcising Timothy (Acts 16:3) for the sake of the unbelieving Jews around Lystra and Iconium, so that his mission to them would not be hindered.

III. THE CURSE OF THE LAW

1. An unattainable standard

In Galatians 3:10-13, Paul states that anyone who relies on observing the Law in order to gain salvation is "cursed" because Deuteronomy 27:26 states: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." This quotation clearly implies that it is simply impossible for someone to "continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."[14] The Law is an unattainable standard because no-one has the capacity to be completely obedient all the time.

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[11] See Gal 5:1-11, 6:12. Also, cf. Acts 15:1-5.
[12] Wright (134-135) points out that here Paul is speaking of Gentile Christians. The language of 2:29 is similar to that of 7:6, 2 Cor 3:6 and Phil 3:3, where Paul is clearly talking about Christians.
[13] Stanton, 108.
[14] Ibid 110.

It is only through Christ becoming a curse for us, that we may be redeemed.

2. Slavery

In Galatians 4:22-31, Paul uses the sons of Abraham as an analogy to communicate that the Law brings slavery. The mother of each son represents the two covenants: Hagar, the slave woman, represents the Mosaic covenant (the Law) and Sarah, a free woman, represents the Abrahamic covenant (the promise). Hagar's son, Ishmael, is a child of slavery, but Sarah's son, Isaac, is a child of the promise. The slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance of the free woman's son. In a figurative sense, Christians are therefore children of the free woman, and are made righteous through faith not through slavishly observing the Law.

In Romans 7:14-25, Paul shares his own personal struggles with the slavery that is brought about by the Law and sin. He finds himself in the predicament of doing what he does *not* want to do, and not doing what he *does* want to do. Paul asserts that this is caused by the Law being at work in the members of his body, making him a prisoner of the Law of sin. In the realm of his body, Paul is a slave to the Law of sin (i.e. the Law which brings about sin).

In addition, Cranfield points out that the Law encourages legalism -- an arrogant confidence of being able to fulfil it,[15] which ultimately leads to slavery.[16] Christians have been set free from the bondage of sin to be free – not to become slaves again (Gal 5:1).

3. Sin and death

Because the Law is an unattainable standard and because it results in slavery, it is identified as "the Law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). It brings wrath by creating the necessary conditions for culpability i.e. knowledge of good and evil (cf. Rom 4:15; 5:13)[17] and then demands a righteousness which it has no power to produce (cf. Rom 8:3-4).[18] Because no human being is able to meet the Law's requirements, all are unrighteous, and therefore deserve God's condemnation and curse.[19]

In essence, sin works through the flesh and uses the Law to cause death.[20] However, the Law was not meant to be this way. Paul points out in Romans 7:13 that sin has co-opted Law and pressed it into a service for which it was not originally intended. Sin has commandeered Law and now uses it to accomplish death.[21]

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[15] C E B Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 847.
[16] Ibid 851.
[17] Hays 157.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 848. Hays 155.
[20] Snodgrass 104.
[21] Ibid 99.

IV. CHRIST AND THE LAW

1. Christ releases us from the Law

In Romans 7:1-6, Paul argues that we are now released from the Law. In the same way that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, we are bound to the Law "as long as we live." But now we have died to the Law because of Christ's death on the cross in our place. This means that our bond with the Law has been broken and we have now been released.

This is reiterated in Galatians 2:19. Because of the Law, Paul was condemned to die, but this sentence was served by Christ in his place. Dying through the Law also means that Paul died to the Law, since death results in Paul no longer being under the Law.[22]

In Romans 8:1-2, Paul announces that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ, because "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set [us] free from the law of sin and death." Cranfield suggests that since v.1 is the conclusion drawn from 7:1-6, and given the use of gar at the beginning of v. 2, it is likely that v. 2 is in some way parallel to the concluding sentence of 7:1-6.[23] Being set free from the Law of sin and death by the Law of the Spirit of life is another way of saying that "we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."[24] Sin is no longer our master, because we are now not under law, but under grace (Rom 6:14).

2. Christ, the fulfilment/end/goal of the Law

In Romans 10:4, Paul declares that "Christ is the end of the Law." The word translated "end" (NIV) is teloj, and could also be rendered as "goal" or possibly "fulfilment" and there has been much dispute in regard to how or in what way Christ is the end/goal/fulfilment of the Law.[25]

Cranfield argues that the Law contains promises which look forward and bear witness to Christ. It has Christ as its goal by virtue of its revelation of God's will. It points to Christ who will be perfectly obedient and completely righteous (cf. Rom 10:5).[26] Furthermore, ceremonies and sacrifices only have real meaning when Christ is the Law's goal.[27]

However, this interpretation is unlikely given the context and the qualifying phrase e)j dikaiosunh panti\tw|pisteuonti, which implies that "Christ is the end of the law" only for "those who believe."[28] Verse 3 speaks of how the Jews sought to establish their

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[22] F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982) 143.
[23] C E B Cranfield, *Romans* vol. I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 374-375.
[24] Ibid 375.
[25] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 515.
[26] Ibid 849.
[27] Ibid.
[28] J Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* vol. 2, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968) 50. Note that ei) should be understood as meaning "with respect to." See BAGD (sec 5).

own righteousness based on observing the Law rather than submitting to God's righteousness based on faith. Therefore, as Schreiner suggests, Paul is stating that "Christ is the end of using the Law to establish one's own righteousness."[29] It is through faith in Christ that a person is able to attain righteousness. In Paul's reinterpretation of the circumstances of Isaac and Ishmael (Gal 4:22-31), those who belong to Christ trace their line of descent directly back to Abraham and so by-pass the Law.[30]

Klyne Snodgrass notes that the centre of gravity for Paul and other Jews was the Law, but now that centre is found in Christ: "The spotlight has been turned from the Law and placed on Christ, and accordingly one must turn to Christ (2 Cor 3:16)." However, Snodgrass also points out that this "turning to Christ is done *in keeping* with Old Testament faith, not in rejection of it."[31] Indeed, those who are members of the new covenant fulfil the Law (cf. Ezek 36, Jer 31 and Deut 30). Christians are "law keepers" not because they have observed all of the Law's commandments, but because what the Law intended yet could not do, has been brought to fulfilment in them.[32] N. T. Wright suggests it is a matter of "status" not achievement.[33]

3. Did Christ abolish the Law?

Paul clearly affirms that he upholds the Law (Rom 3:31), yet he also says that we have died to it, been cut off from it, and released from it (Rom 7:4, 6)? Indeed, in Ephesians 2:15, Paul explicitly states that the Law has been abolished! How can Paul reinforce the Laws commandments (Gal 5:14), expecting people to obey, then in v. 19 state that we are no longer under the Law?

Firstly, it should be noted that Paul did not advocate antinomianism. It is clear from Romans 6:1-2 that he had no sympathy for such a belief.[34] However, in light of the clause "until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come" in Galatians 3:19, Wallace argues that Paul did, in some sense, see the Law as abolished.[35]

On the other hand, since many of the Old Testament moral laws are still binding for Christians today, it is difficult to see how Christ is the *absolute* end of the Law.[36] Indeed, Thielman points out that Paul never implies each specific command in the Law is now obsolete. Rather, it is the code viewed as a whole which has now been superseded.[37]

How, then, are we to understand Paul's statements which indicate that we are no longer under the Law, or that we have been released from the Law? What did Paul mean in Ephesians 2:15?

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[29] Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5"
[30] Stanton 108.
[31] Snodgrass 97, original emphasis.
[32] Wright 138.
[33] Ibid 139.
[34] See Snodgrass 96.
[35] Wallace 240.
[36] Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5".
[37] Thielman 539.

In light of the preceding analysis, it should be clear that what we are released from is the burden of trying to attain righteousness through observing the Law. It is this burden that has been abolished. In addition, now that Christ has come, His teaching has either superseded or extended the teaching of the Law. We now have a much fuller and more complete standard to live by -- the Lord Jesus Christ.[38]

V. SALVATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS: BY FAITH OR BY LAW?

In Galatians 3:1-9 and Romans 3:21-4:8, Paul makes it abundantly clear that salvation can only be gained through faith and not through observing the Law. Indeed, as Paul states in Galatians 2:21 "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Galatians 2:16, which J. Lambrecht and G. Stanton considers to be the centre of Paul's reasoning in that letter,[39] states that nobody can be justified by the Law, but only through Christ. The future passive dikaiwqhsetai shows that what is at stake is not just the *maintenance* of one's standing before God but one's ultimate status.[40]

Schreiner notes that Paul uses both Abraham and David (Rom 4:1-8) as examples to demonstrate that salvation has always been by faith.[41] He also points out that "nowhere does [Paul] ever say that righteousness comes "from" the law."[42]

VI. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

1. Its goodness

Although the Law appears to be always presented negatively, Paul affirms that it is actually good, holy, spiritual, and righteous (Rom 7:12, 14, 16, 22). Indeed, it is a privilege to have the Law (Rom 3:2; 9:4).[43] Also, the Law is still a revelation of the will of God.[44] Although the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the Law (i.e. through Christ), the Law continues to attest to this righteousness.[45]

But how does this positive aspect of the Law fit with all the negative aspects?

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[38] Wallace 240.
[39] J Lambrecht, "Paul's Reasoning in Galatians 2:11-21", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen: J C B Mohr, 1996) 66. Stanton (103) describes it as "a programmatic statement which is expounded and underlined in the sections of Galatians which follow."
[40] Stanton 104.
[41] Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5"
[42] Ibid. Original emphasis.
[43] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 846.
[44] Hays 151.
[45] Ibid 158.

Cranfield points out that there is no Greek word for the terms "legalism" or "legalist", so Paul's negative statements about the Law most probably refer to legalism (misuse of the Law), rather than the Law itself.[46]

Snodgrass argues that "*[t]he determinant for the law is the sphere in which it is placed*…it occurs in a context and in connection with something else."[47] The use qualitative genitive phrases reflects not the nature of the Law but the context in which it is found. Thus, as the "Law of Christ" (Gal 6:2) or "Law of the Spirit of life" (Rom 8:2) it is good. But as the "Law of sin and death" it is a curse.[48]

2. To highlight sin

Cranfield points out that, according to Romans 5:13f, sin was already in the world and men were already sinners before the Law was given. However, they had not always disobeyed a direct command in the same way Adam did. In the absence of the Law, sin, although a reality, was not clearly recognisable as sin (Rom 3:20). Therefore, the Law enhances sin by introducing the dimension of conscious wilful disobedience. Therefore, rather than restraining sin, the Law revealed it.[49]

The Law was given "because of transgressions" (Gal 3:19), in the sense that it clearly and explicitly revealed Israel's sin.[50] It made sin specific and well-defined by putting in place regulations that must be kept. Any failure to keep these regulations resulted in a transgression.

Snodgrass notes that Paul often introduces a concept briefly, but does not elaborate on it much until later. This seems to be the case for Romans 5:20 and 7:7-13.[51] The Law causes sin to increase because it increases our knowledge of God's standard and makes us more aware of the ways in which we can rebel against God. In fact, it could be said that the Law prompts humans to deliberately rebel against God[52] by suggesting new ways in which humans can disobey. In this regard, the Law shows how truly insidious sin is.[53]

3. As a pedagogical instructor

In Galatians 3:24-25, Paul indicates that the Law was our paidagwgoj, which has been rendered a number of different ways, including "shoolmaster" (KJV), "tutor"

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[46] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 853.
[47] Snodgrass 99. Original emphasis.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Wallace 238.
[50] Thielman 538-539. Wallace (236) points out that xarin in Galatians 3:19 should be viewed prospectively and therefore translated as "for the purpose of" rather than "because". This is because a transgression against a known law cannot occur until the law being transgressed has actually been given.
[51] Snodgrass 104.
[52] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 846-847.
[53] Thielman 541.

(ASV, NASB, NKJV), "custodian" (RSV) and "disciplinarian" (NRSV). The NIV, on the other hand, renders it using the verbal clause "put in charge." The paidagwgoj was a personal attendant (usually a slave) who accompanied a male child wherever he went from the time he left his nurse's care. His duty was to discipline the child, teach him good manners, take him to school and ensure he learnt what he was taught. The paidagwgoj also imposed any necessary restraint on the child's liberty until he reached maturity, and could be trusted to act responsibly. Note, however, that the paidagwgoj was not a "teacher" or "instructor" in an academic sense.[54]

Stanton suggests the paidagwgoj analogy communicates an aspect of "unpleasant restraint for a limited period."[55] Thielman concurs. He states that the analogy highlights the Law's purpose as identifying and punishing sin. It also highlights its temporary nature.[56]

Bruce posits that the preposition eij has temporal force: "until Christ."[57] Indeed, given the temporal nature of both v. 23 and v. 25, this is certainly the correct understanding. In the same way the paidagwgoj was appointed to guide the child *only until he reached maturity*, the Law was only in force until the coming of Christ, when people could be justified by faith in Him. Now that Christ has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the Law (v. 25).

VII. CONCLUSION

It should be noted that nowhere does Paul state a systematic doctrine of the Law. Rather, he seeks to "destablize an enthroned position that associates the Law with the privileged status of the elect Jewish people."[58]

While the Law is an unattainable standard, it also reflects the will of God as well as His holiness and righteousness. While the Law is a curse which leads to sin and death, it is also good, holy, righteous and spiritual. While the Law, as a code, has been abolished, many of its individual commands are still applicable.

But the most important truth about the Law presented in Galatians and Romans, is that we are not required to obey it in order to gain salvation. Because the Law results in slavery, Christ has released us from its bondage. The work of Christ signals the end of Law as a means of justification. Salvation can only be gained through faith and not by observance of the Law.

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[54] See Bruce 182.
[55] Stanton 114.
[56] Thielman 539.
[57] Bruce 183. The NIV's rendering, "to lead us to Christ," appears to take too much liberty with the text.
[58] Hays 158.