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Paul and the law

By SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

The idea that Paul's negative statements refer to the ceremonial law, while the positive ones refer to the moral law, cannot be found in his writings.

In the Sabbath-Sunday debate, advocates of the view that the Old Testament law in general and the Sabbath in particular have been abrogated have appealed to Paul. But what was his attitude toward the law and the Sabbath?

Paul uses the term *law* at least 110 times in his Epistles, but not in a uniform way. *Law* refers to the Mosaic law (Gal. 4:21; Rom. 7:22, 25; 1 Cor. 9:9), the whole Old Testament (1 Cor. 14:21; Rom. 3:19, 21), the will of God written in the heart of Gentiles (Rom. 2:14, 15), the governing principle of conduct (works or faith—chap. 3:27), evil inclinations (chap. 7:21), the guidance of the Spirit (chap. 8:2). Sometimes the term is used in a personal way, as if it were God Himself: “Whatever the law [God] says it speaks to those who are under the law” (chap. 3:19).* Here the word *God* could be substituted for the word *law* (cf. chap. 4:15; 1 Cor. 9:8).

Did Paul teach that Christ abrogated the Mosaic law or Old Testament law (particularly the Ten Commandments) and consequently that Christians are no longer obligated to observe it? This view has predominated throughout much of Christian history and is still tenaciously defended by numerous antinomian churches.

A double concept

Several recent studies have challenged this traditional interpretation. They point out, for example, that Paul has a “double concept” of the law, “sometimes saying that it is good and has been fulfilled in Christ and sometimes that it is bad and has been abolished in Christ.”¹ For example, in Ephesians 2:15 Paul speaks of the law as having been “abolished” (K.J.V.) by Christ, while in Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law, but establishes it (K.J.V.). In Romans 7:6 Paul says that “now we are discharged from the law,” while a few verses later he writes that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (verse 12).

In Romans 10:4 Paul writes that “Christ is the end of the law,” while in chapter 8:3, 4 he explains that Christ came “in the likeness of sinful flesh . . . in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.” In chapter 3:28 he maintains that “a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law,” yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 he states that

“neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” In 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul designates the law as “the dispensation of death,” while in Romans 3:2 he views it as part of the “oracles of God” entrusted to the Jews.

A resolution of the tension

Is it possible to reconcile Paul's apparent contradictory statements about the law? How can Paul view the law both as “abolished” (Eph. 2:15) and established (Rom. 3:31, K.J.V.), unnecessary (see verse 28) and necessary (see 1 Cor. 7:19; Eph. 6:2, 3; 1 Tim. 1:8-10)? A popular explanation has been to say that Paul's negative statements refer to the Mosaic ceremonial law, while the positive ones refer to the moral law of Ten Commandments. Such an explanation, however, is based on an arbitrary distinction between moral and ceremonial laws, a distinction that cannot be found in Paul's writings.

Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a standard for Christian conduct.

In my view, the correct explanation comes from the different contexts in which Paul speaks of the law. When he speaks of the law in the context of salvation (justification—right standing before God), he clearly affirms that law-keeping is of no avail (Rom. 3:20). On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the law in the context of Christian conduct (sanctification—right living before God), then he maintains the value and validity of God's law (chaps. 7:7-12; 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 7:19). For example, when Paul speaks in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 of the various forms of human wickedness, he explicitly affirms “We know that the law is good” (verse 8).

Central to Paul's understanding of the law is the cross of Christ. From this perspective, he both negates and affirms the law. Negatively, the apostle repudiates the law as the basis of justification: “If justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). Positively, Paul teaches that the law is “holy,” “just,” “good,” and “spiritual” (Rom. 7:12, 14, 16; 1 Tim. 1:8) because it exposes sin and reveals God's ethical standards. Thus, he states that Christ came “in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” through the dynamic power of His Spirit (Rom. 8:4).

Three times Paul states, “Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision,” and each time he concludes this statement with a different phrase: “but keeping the

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*All Scripture quotations not otherwise credited are from the Revised Standard Version.

commandments of God''; ''but faith working through love''; ''but a new creation'' (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15). The parallelism suggests that Paul equates the keeping of God's commandments with a working faith and a new life in Christ. The Christian, then, is not under the law as a means of acceptance with God, but is under the law as a revelation of God's ethical standards for his life. Paul *rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a standard for Christian conduct.*

The law and the Gentiles

To see Paul's criticism of the law in perspective we must realize that he wrote his letters to congregations made up predominantly of Gentile converts, most of whom were former ''God fearers'' (see 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Cor. 12:2; Gal. 4:8; Rom. 11:13; 1:13; Col. 1:21; Eph. 2:11). Gentile Christians faced the problem of whether they could join God's people without first becoming ''Jews'' through circumcision.

A Jewish problem. Some Jews held that Gentiles had to observe only a limited number of commandments (Noachian laws). Others insisted that Gentiles had to observe the whole law, including circumcision.

Lloyd Gaston notes that ''it was because of this unclarity that legalism—the doing of certain works to win God's favor and be counted righteous—arose a Gentile and not a Jewish problem at all.''''² Salvation was for members of the covenant community; but since the God-fearers were not under the covenant, they had to establish their own righteousness to gain salvation. M. Barth has shown that the phrase ''works of the law'' does not appear in Jewish texts; it designates the

adoption of selected Jewish practices by the Gentiles to ensure their place among the covenant people of God.³ Recognition of this legalistic Gentile attitude provides a background for Paul's critical remarks about the law.

A Christian problem. The Jewish problem of whether Gentiles were saved within or without the covenant soon became also a Christian problem. After his conversion and divine commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul understood that Gentiles share in salvation without having to become part of the covenant community through circumcision. To defend this conviction Paul appeals in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to the example of Abraham, who, before he was circumcised, became the father of all who believe by faith.

In proclaiming His noncircumcision gospel, Paul faced a double challenge. On the one hand, he met opposition from Jews and Jewish Christians who failed to understand that through Christ God had fulfilled His promises to Abraham regarding the Gentiles. On the other hand, Paul had to deal with Gentiles who were tempted to adopt circumcision and other practices to ensure their salvation (Gal. 5:2-4).

Paul's criticism of the law

To counteract these tendencies, Paul had to speak critically of the law as a document of election. The concept of the covenant—so central in the Old Testament—came more and more to be expressed by the term *law (tôrâh, nomos)*.⁴ One's status before God came to be determined by one's attitude toward the law as a document of election and not by the obedience to specific commandments. In other words, *tôrâh-law* came to mean a revelation of God's electing will manifested in His covenant with Israel. Obviously this view created a problem for the uncircumcised Gentiles because they felt excluded from the assurance of salvation provided by the covenant.

This insecurity naturally led Gentiles to ''desire to be under law'' (Gal. 4:21), that is, to become full-fledged covenant members by receiving circumcision (see chap. 5:2). Paul felt compelled to react strongly against this trend because it undermined the universality of the gospel. To take away the Gentiles' ''desire to be under law,'' Paul appeals to the law (Penateuch), specifically to Abraham, arguing that his two children, Ishmael and Isaac, stand for two covenants, the first based on works and the second on faith (see chap. 4:22-31), the first offering slavery and the second resulting in freedom. The first, which bears ''children for slavery,'' is identified with the covenant of Mount Sinai (verse 24).

Why does Paul attack the Sinai covenant, which after all was established by the same God who made a covenant with Abraham? Did not the Sinai covenant contain provisions of grace and forgiveness (through the tabernacle—Exodus 25-30) besides principles of conduct (chapters 20-23)? The answer may be found in Paul's concern to establish the legitimacy of the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles.

Two gospels. To accomplish this he attacks the understanding of the law (covenant) as an exclusive document of election. Paul does not deny salvation to Jews who accepted Christ as the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. On the contrary, he acknowledges that just as he was ''entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised,'' so ''Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised'' (Gal. 2:7).

Paul does not explain the difference between the two

ADVENTIST SCRAPBOOK

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Lifelong assurance

Frederick Wheeler (1811-1910), the first Seventh-day Adventist minister in the world, fervently expected to see the Lord on October 22, 1844. Though sharing in the disappointment when Christ did not return as predicted, Elder Wheeler never lost his confidence or belief in Christ's soon return.

In two letters written near the end of his life Elder Wheeler speaks of that confidence. In 1902 he wrote to his son: ''We are evidently nearing the final close. The day for which we have looked [and] waited will soon dawn upon us and earth's drama will close. 'O let us be ready to hail the glad day.'''

A few months later he wrote to his great-granddaughter: ''I had a very strong desire and expectation that I should live to see the Lord come in the clouds of heaven and be here on the earth and witness the awfully sublime scenes connected with that event. But I shall likely fall asleep. I am not very anxious about it now, only that my days may close in peace so that I may share in the glorious rest that remains for the people of God.''

For Seventh-day Adventism's first minister, the promise of Christ's return was an enduring reality that ensured peace and assurance at the close of a long life of service.

gospels. We can presume that since the circumcision had become equated with the covenant, "the gospel of the circumcision" (literal translation) emphasized that Christ was the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. This would make it possible for Jews to be saved as Jews, that is, while retaining their identity as a covenant people.

Paul does not deny the value of circumcision for the Jews. On the contrary, he affirms, "Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision" (Rom. 2:25). Again in Romans 9 to 11, Paul does not rebuke the Jews for being "Jewish" in their lifestyle (see chap. 11:1), but rather for failing to understand that the Gentiles in Christ have equal access to the kingdom (see chap. 10:19).

Absence of the term "forgiveness." To defend his gospel to the uncircumcised, Paul emphasizes that justification comes "by faith apart from works of law" (chap. 3:28; see also Gal. 3:8). While *justification* and related words occur in Paul's writings more than 80 times, *forgiveness* and *repentance* are noticeably absent. One reason may be that *repentance* implies turning back to the God of the covenant, and Paul was appealing to the Gentiles to turn to God for the first time.

A second reason is that forgiveness—a predominant concept in most of the Scriptures—has to do with the personal dimension of salvation. Paul's concern, however, was not its personal but its universal dimension. He stresses this by teaching justification "by faith apart from the works of law" (Rom. 3:28), which enables him to defend salvation for both Jews and Gentiles, as the next verse indicates: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also." (See also chap. 1:16, 17.)

Conclusion

This background helps us to understand that what Paul attacks is not the value of the law as a guide to Christian conduct. On the contrary, he emphatically affirms that Christ came "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (chap. 8:4). Paul criticizes not the moral but the soteriological understanding of the law, that is, the law viewed as a document of election that includes the Jews and excludes the Gentiles.

The mounting pressure of Judaizers who were urging circumcision upon the Gentiles made it necessary for Paul to attack the exclusive-covenant concept of the law.

The failure to distinguish in Paul's writings between his moral and soteriological usages of the law, and the failure to recognize that his criticism of the law is directed not toward Jewish Christians but toward Gentile Judaizers, has led many to conclude erroneously that Paul was an antinomian who rejected the validity of the law as a whole. Such a view is totally unwarranted because, as we have shown, Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a moral standard of Christian conduct. □

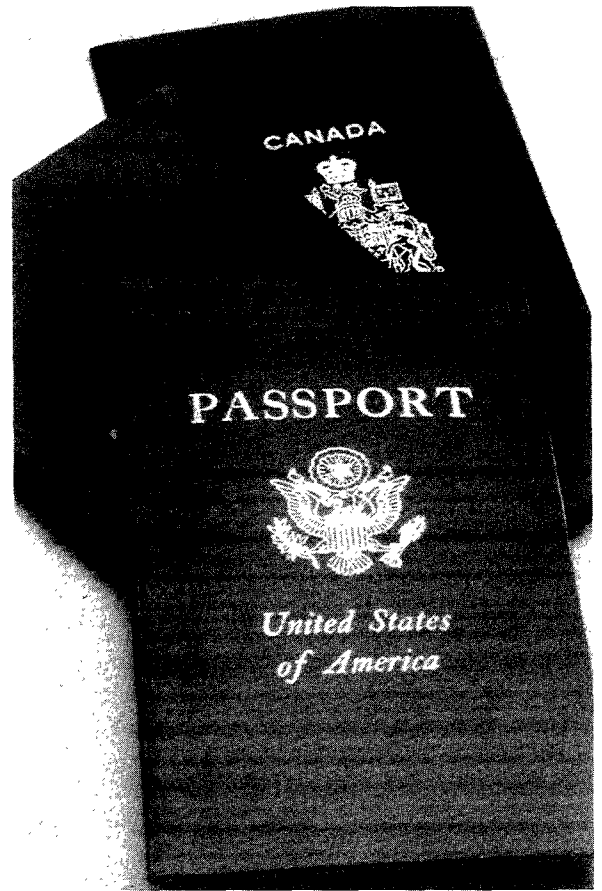
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¹ Lloyd Gaston, "Paul and the Torah," in Alan T. Davis, ed., *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (1979), p. 62.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³ See Marcus Barth, *The Anchor Bible: Ephesians* (1974), pp. 244-248.

⁴ See D. Rossler, *Gesetz und Geschichte* (1960); E. P. Saunders, page 41, concludes: "Salvation comes by membership in the covenant, while obedience to the commandments preserves one's place in the covenant."



My passport

By EDNA MAY OLSEN

Passports and tickets in hand, we joined the long line of travelers at the airport check-in counter.

Ahead of us was a young man, clearly in some kind of difficulty, although at first we couldn't imagine what his problem was. He searched through his pockets and battered briefcase, and then, as light dawned, slapped his forehead in despair.

"I must have left it in the desk drawer at the hotel," he groaned, and then, casting an agonized look at the passenger agent, begged, "Don't go without me; I'll be back."

He had forgotten his passport, and the airplane left without him.

An acquaintance, who had recently spent several weeks in a country where conditions were less than desirable, told us of her homesickness while there. She made certain that every day found her prepared for the time when she could board an airplane for home.

"Know what I did first thing every morning?" she confided. "I kissed my passport." Her passport represented hope and a means of entering a country she loved.

Jesus and all He stands for is our passport to the kingdom. Without Him we have no chance of entering heaven. Do we make sure our connections with Him are always fresh and living? That nothing has been forgotten that might bar our entry into that better land, to live with Him forever?

Do we "kiss our passport" every morning?