

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE LAW¹

"We know that the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14)

How does the Holy Spirit relate to the *Torah*, the Mosaic Law?

Since this question can only be raised in a specifically Christian understanding of God, it can only be answered in the light of Christ's work. As was explored in my earlier article *The Relevance of Old Testament Law for Today: Part I*², Christ fulfilled the sacrificial requirements of the *Torah*; offering himself up as the perfect sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Christ showed himself to be master of the *Torah*, interpreting its moral precepts with a freedom and authority that was totally alien to the methods of the scribes and teachers of the law.

In the light of Christ's work, it is possible to see that the Holy Spirit inspired the Mosaic Law; that he interprets the Law; and that he impels and empowers obedience to the Law.

I. The Old Testament

A. The Law was inspired by the Holy Spirit: the Law is Spiritual

Is the Christian understanding of the Law that it is a jailer whose prisoners have been released by the death of Christ? Or is the Law a more positive force, whose position is relativised but nonetheless affirmed by the work of Christ? To put it crudely, is the Law a good thing or a bad thing?

Those who think that the Law is a bad thing do so for one of two reasons: either because the Law condemns us to death for our disobedience to it, and then does not lift a finger to help us; or because the Law is equated with human religious strivings which delude us into thinking that we can get right with God by our own efforts.

¹ I am grateful to Dr Jonathan Burnside of Bristol University for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The views and imperfections in the final work are mine alone.

² David McIlroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 148 *Law & Justice* 21.

The Apostle Paul seems to have been aware that chapters 1 to 6 of his letter to the Romans could be read as reaching this conclusion. Romans 7 therefore represents a skilful defence of the essential goodness of the Law³:

v.7 “Is the law sin? Certainly not!”

v.12 “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.”

v.14 “the law is spiritual”

v.16 “I agree that the law is good.”

v.22 “in my inner being I delight in God’s law”.

Even though it is difficult to be sure *precisely* which argument Paul was trying to meet; it is impossible to avoid, other than on *a priori* grounds, the sense of Paul’s defence of the Law. The Law is good.

In Romans 7:14, Paul even goes to so far as to describe the Law as ο νομος πνευματικος εστιν. The Law is *pneumatikos*, spiritual. In Paul’s usage of the word, *pneumatikos* functions as an adjective for the Holy Spirit, referring to that which belongs to, or pertains to, the Spirit⁴. What Paul is saying is that the Torah belongs to and was given by the Spirit! It is His Law⁵.

This insight is also to be found in the Old Testament. In Nehemiah 9:13, the writer praises the Lord God because “You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to [your people] from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. ... (v.20) You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. ... (v.30) For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets.” In this passage, the Spirit of God is seen as responsible for giving the instruction contained in the *Torah*, and for speaking through the prophets who constantly challenged the people’s unfaithfulness to the *Torah*.

³ N.T. Wright “[Romans] 7:7-25 is basically a defence of Torah against the imputations that it is identified with sin and that it is ultimately responsible for the death which results from its presence.”: *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 197.

⁴ Fee *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 29, 510.

⁵ Romans 7:14; C.E.B. Cranfield *International Critical Commentary on Romans Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 355.

The *Torah* represents an application in time and space of God's moral law. It is an expression of God's character⁶. It flows from his heart of love; it issues from his desire for a holy people, in relationship with himself⁷. Thus, his people are taught "Do not give false testimony", and this reflects the fact that God is truthful. His people are taught "Do not murder", and this reflects the fact that God is the author of life. His people are taught "Do not commit adultery" and this reflects the fact that God is faithful.

Theologically speaking, because God's moral law flows from God's moral nature⁸, as God is eternal and his nature immutable⁹, it follows that his ethical standards must be the same for all time¹⁰. This is not to give the moral law a life of its own, as something co-eternal with God. It is only because God is always true to his own nature that the principles of the moral law are unchanging, although their contextual application may vary. Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever because he is true to his nature and true to his word.

As I have argued elsewhere¹¹, the *Torah* consists of two parts: the Ten Commandments and "the decrees and laws [the Israelites were] to follow in the land that [they were] crossing the Jordan to possess."¹² The Ten Commandments were given by God himself; they therefore occupy a peculiarly exalted status¹³. However, the remainder of the Mosaic Law was also given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit¹⁴. "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."¹⁵

⁶ I am grateful to Dr Burnside for pointing out the emphasis which this truth deserves.

⁷ Leviticus 19:2.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas would agree with this proposition: *The Inaugural Sermons* (1256) (in Thomas Aquinas *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998) 6.

⁹ Malachi 3:6 "The Almighty changes not."

¹⁰ But this is not the same as saying that the revelation of the moral law was always the same. The Old Testament reveals a progressive revelation of God's character and moral standards, and part of what Paul is saying in Romans 1 and 2 is that human beings will be judged in accordance with the light that is available to them: Bruce *Tyndale Commentary on Romans* (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 2nd edn. 85.

¹¹ David McIlroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" (148) *Law & Justice* 21 @ 23-5.

¹² Deuteronomy 4:14.

¹³ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 93 argues that the Decalogue is primary and permanent, the covenant code of Exodus 21-23 which follows is contextual exposition based upon the general social demands of the Decalogue and is derivative and valid only for its age.

¹⁴ Although the Jews believed that it was given to Moses through angels; cf. Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19.

¹⁵ Romans 7:12. See also verse 16.

B. Torah and Wisdom

The intimate connection between the Holy Spirit and the *Torah* becomes clearer when we realise that the word *Torah*, although it is invariably translated in English versions of the Bible as *Law*, actually is closer in meaning to *instruction, direction or guidance*. "What is primarily involved in [the] Hebrew term [for law *torah*] is direction for life within the framework of [a] presupposed relationship" not the idea of regulations imposed by authority and backed by sanctions which is the connotation of the English word *law*¹⁶.

An appreciation that what is meant by *Torah* in the Old Testament, is divine instructions for life, makes it easier to understand how the Psalmists and others could regard it as a delight to meditate upon¹⁷.

The *Torah* does not purport to be a comprehensive legal code, covering every possible situation which would confront the people of Israel in the land of Canaan¹⁸. Such a task would be impossible. Rules always run out. Human law-making is a reiterative failure to classify reality.

Instead, *Torah* was intended to be a source of guidance for the Israelites. The priests were to instruct them in it¹⁹; they were to teach it to their children²⁰; they were to internalise it²¹; to grasp the gist of it; and meditate upon it; and to apply its guidance to the varying circumstances of their lives. It was not meant to operate as a graven written code but as a living, internalised source of ethical instruction. Obedience to *Torah* was meant to cultivate *character*, inform *values* and teach *wisdom*, so that a *wise* man would know how to apply the *Torah* in each of the circumstances of his life.

The Deuteronomist puts the following words into Moses' mouth: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me ... **Observe them carefully, for this**

¹⁶ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 91.

¹⁷ Psalm 119 is, in essence, a love poem to the *Torah*. See also Psalm 1:2; 112:1; Joshua 1:8 and Romans 7:22.

¹⁸ In the following section I am heavily indebted to Dr Burnside for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. The views expressed remain, however, my sole responsibility.

¹⁹ Leviticus 10:11; see also Joshua 1:8.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 5:9, 6:7, 20-5; 11:19.

²¹ Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations ..."²² Faithful observance of *Torah* was both to be informed by wisdom, and to be a demonstration of wisdom.

The book of Proverbs, the book of wisdom in the Old Testament, states its purpose as being "*For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair.*"²³ Meditation on the *Torah* was intended to produce these qualities of character, which would in turn lead to blessings from God²⁴. Such an internalising of *Torah* was a Spiritual exercise. Ultimately, the Old Testament writers recognised that wisdom was God-given²⁵.

This confluence between wisdom and obedience to *Torah* is hardly surprising, when one realises that for the Old Testament writers "The fear of the Lord - that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding"²⁶ or as Psalm 111:10 puts it: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding." Wisdom, love for God and right living are intimately connected.

That the qualities of *character* and of *wisdom* were the key attributes which the *Torah* was aiming to teach can be seen from the fact that they were the central qualities required of those who were to adjudicate on the *Torah*. Moses declared to the Israelites in his farewell speech that he had appointed as their judges 'wise, understanding and experienced men'²⁷. The judges were expected to be people who walked closely with God and did his will²⁸. Having these acknowledged character traits would enable the judges "to apply a sense of justice tempered by the conventional norms of practical wisdom"²⁹. Decisions which reflected the spirit of the *Torah* were the aim, applying its guidance to the varied situations which confronted the judges.

²² Deuteronomy 4:5-6.

²³ Proverbs 1:2-3.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 5:33; 6:24.

²⁵ Proverbs 2:6. See also Exodus 28:3; 1 Kings 4:29; 5:12; 2 Chronicles 1:10-12; 2 Chronicles 9:23; Job 12:13; Psalm 51:6.

²⁶ Job 28:28. See also Proverbs 9:10; 15:33 and Micah 6:9.

²⁷ Deuteronomy 1:15.

²⁸ Burnside "Inspired Justice" 3.

²⁹ Burnside "Inspired Justice" 3.

II. The New Testament

A. *Christ as Wisdom*

Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah, the Branch from the stump of Jesse, that "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him - **the Spirit of wisdom** and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord"³⁰, and he went on to state the effects of the Messiah being Spirit-filled: "he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth."³¹ In Isaiah's vision of the future, the Messiah was filled with the Spirit of wisdom in order to be able to do justice.

The Apostle Paul appropriated ideas which Jewish writers had given to divine Wisdom (*sophia*)³². In Proverbs 9:22-31, she is described as the 'craftsman at [God's] side', intimately involved in the creation of the world³³. Paul made this a centrepiece of his christological hymn in Colossians 1:15-20³⁴. "[Paul] saw Christ as Wisdom come in the flesh, and therefore whatever had been said of Wisdom in early Jewish thought, including its existence in heaven before creation was now predicated of Christ."³⁵

"The crucified Christ is the embodiment of God's plan of salvation, the true measure and the climatic expression of God's wisdom and power."³⁶ The effect, therefore, of regarding Christ as God's Wisdom is to unveil the paradoxical nature of that wisdom, which confounds the supposed wisdom of the world-system³⁷. A true understanding of the nature, the purposes and the glory of God is therefore mediated by a grasp of the person and work of Christ. And all of this can only be grasped by a revelation from the Holy Spirit³⁸.

³⁰ Isaiah 11:2.

³¹ Isaiah 11:3-4a.

³² Schnabel "Wisdom" in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* 967-73; Ziesler *Pauline Christianity* 32-5; 128-131.

³³ See also Job 28; Sirach 24; Wisdom of Solomon 8-9.

³⁴ N.T. Wright provides a convincing account of how this is done in chapter five of *The Climax of the Covenant* 99-119. The slimmed-down version is at pp.68-9 of *What St Paul Really Said*.

³⁵ See also 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; 8:6. B. Witherington III "Christology" in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* 103, 107; D. Guthrie and R.P. Martin "God" in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* 355-6; Schnabel "Wisdom" in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* 971; N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* 90-8, 131; Westerholm *Preface to the Study of Paul* 66; Sanders *Paul* 96; and Cranfield *On Romans* 51-68.

³⁶ Schnabel "Wisdom" in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* 970, apparently quoting Dunn although no reference is given!

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:10-2:10.

Jesus, when he walked the earth, was the living embodiment of wisdom. Now that he is seated in heaven, wisdom is available to his people as one of the ministrations of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus can also be seen as the *Torah* come in the flesh. His ethical guidance surpasses the written law contained in *Torah* in depth, complexity and detail. And yet, he himself went out of his way to affirm the Mosaic Law³⁹. The only way to make sense of his words in Matthew 5:17-20 that: “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” is to regard Jesus as affirming the continuing validity of the moral principles of the *Torah*. That is what he is talking about; that is what he is going on to expound. Although the Sermon on the Mount is best understood as an exegesis of the Beatitudes in rabbinic style⁴⁰, it includes the dominical presentation of those of the Ten Commandments that Jesus’ generation had particularly misunderstood⁴¹.

Jesus spelt out in unmistakable terms what had always been the heart of the Mosaic Law⁴²: the call to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength⁴³; and to love one's neighbour as oneself⁴⁴. Nonetheless the basic framework within which such love is to express itself remains the same as it had always been: that given by the Ten Commandments⁴⁵. But Jesus' teaching, and that of the Apostles shows that the spirit of love takes us well beyond the bald prescriptions of the commandments. For example, the Old Testament commandment says: 'Do not commit adultery'. In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies."⁴⁶ There is far more to loving your wife than simply refraining from sleeping with someone else. This is simply the biblical *conditio sine qua non*. No list of rules could possibly exhaust the infinite implications of the exhortation to love your wife. Instead, husbands are expected to act out of

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:10.

³⁹ See David McIlroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 25-6.

⁴⁰ Roger Forster *The Kingdom of Jesus* 78-80.

⁴¹ David McIlroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 25-6.

⁴² Cranfield *On Romans* 43.

⁴³ Deuteronomy 6:4, 5.

⁴⁴ Leviticus 19:18.

⁴⁵ David McIlroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 29-31.

⁴⁶ Ephesians 5:25, 28.

a spirit of love towards their wives. Henceforth, it is to be love rather than law which is the primary constraint on our actions.

Quite simply, **Jesus turned the Law inside out**. Whereas *Torah* observance focussed on external purity; Jesus made it clear that it was not what was on the outside that made a man pure, but rather what was in his heart⁴⁷. Jesus taught that at the heart of the commands "Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery" was an obligation not to cherish anger and lust in our hearts⁴⁸. The early church's discovery that what God wanted was circumcision of heart not circumcision of foreskin⁴⁹ was in line with Jesus' teaching that what mattered to God was not (or was no longer) external ritual purity but rather inward purity of heart.

Ultimately, however, Jesus called us to Christ-likeness. We seek to be faithful to Christian principles; but in the final analysis what matters most of all, is similarity to the person of Christ.

B. The Holy Spirit interprets the Law

The moral principles inherent in the Mosaic Law are of continuing validity and applicability for Christians today because they were given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they reveal the character of God the Father, and they were affirmed by the life and teaching of God the Son.

The relevance of the *Torah* for Christians does **not** derive from the mere fact that it was given *to Moses*. The relevance of the moral principles contained in the *Torah* arises from its affirmation by the Trinity. The *Torah* reflects the eternal nature, the moral qualities, of the God the Father. It was given by the Holy Spirit. It was affirmed and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He completed its sacrificial rites. He lived out and expounded the principles of righteousness, to which the moral requirements of the Law were only a rough guide.

However, the Mosaic Law remains relevant to us as **guidance**, as an illustration of how the divine pattern for social life was intended to operate in a given society in a particular economic system. The Holy Spirit has ensured that it is so. It was he who was behind the

⁴⁷ Matthew 15:11, 16-20.

⁴⁸ Cf. Matthew 5:21-22 and 27-28 respectively.

inclusion of the books of the Law in the Christian canon⁵⁰. Not only were the books of the Old Testament included in the canon, but Paul declared that: “**All Scripture** is God-breathed and is **useful for** teaching, rebuking, correcting and **training in righteousness**” (2 Timothy 3:16). He must here be making the statement that the Scriptures which contain the Mosaic Law are useful for training in righteousness. It is the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would lead his followers into all truth, who reveals how.

“We can speak of ‘Old Testament times’ or ‘the Old Testament epoch’ as of a period that is over and past, without implying that the Old Testament is no longer authoritative scripture for the Christian church. With the accomplishment of Jesus Christ’s work the epoch of the law’s unique authority had indeed come to an end; but it does not follow that the law had ceased to have validity for those who believe in him. Commandments like ‘thou shalt have none other gods before me’, ‘thou shalt do no murder’, ‘thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour’, ‘thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’, did not cease to point the way to freedom and community and fulfilment, though they could now be more clearly recognized as God’s fatherly guidance for his children.”⁵¹

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ⁵². His interpretative work is consequent upon that of Christ’s. The biblical theologian performs a valuable task when he illuminates what the Torah meant in its original context, but its ethical implications for Christians today, can only be grasped by interpreting it in the light of Christ’s teaching and work.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom⁵³; it is his leading we must follow as we seek to determine its relevance for our times. The Holy Spirit’s guidance is invaluable, because for us, the interpretative task is more difficult, because we are removed in time and culture from the agrarian society to whom the *Torah* was given. Our interpretative task is also transformed by the statements which Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament writers make about the subject-matter of *Torah*. Nonetheless, *mutatis mutandi* (with all necessary

⁴⁹ Acts 15.

⁵⁰ D.M. Lloyd-Jones *Romans: Atonement and Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970) 38.

⁵¹ Cranfield *On Romans* 116.

⁵² Romans 8:9. The juxtaposition of ‘the Spirit of God’ and ‘the Spirit of Christ’ in this verse and the two following, without conscious transition between the phrases is ample evidence of their identity in Paul’s thought: see Gordon Fee *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (London: Hodder, 1997) 31; B. Witherington III “Christology” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 107-8 and T. Paige “Holy Spirit” at 408-11 in the same volume.

⁵³ Ephesians 1:17.

changes), as Christopher Wright has convincingly argued, the moral principles to be found in the *Torah* are relevant to all human societies⁵⁴.

As Cranfield expresses it: “Paul regards the Old Testament law as having continuing validity for Christians, though recognizing – and this is extremely important – that, because its true meaning has now been made manifest in Jesus Christ, the relation of Christians to it is fundamentally different from the relation to it of those who do not yet believe in him. They will no longer imagine that it is something which they can so adequately fulfil as to establish a claim on God. Nor will they any more understand it in isolation from him, who is its ‘goal’⁵⁵. But they will understand it, as it is illuminated and clarified by the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ, as being both witness to him and his saving work and also a God-given guide for their attempts to live as God’s children.”⁵⁶

III. The Holy Spirit impels and empowers obedience to the Law

But if the Law is spiritual, and has been affirmed by Christ; why has it received such a bad press, and why was it necessary for Christ to die? Because the practical result of the Law, before and without Christ, was death⁵⁷. In Romans 7, Paul is at pains to explain how this came about. It was not the fault of the commandments, he stresses. Commandments such as “Do not covet” are holy, righteous and good.

It is the absence of the Holy Spirit's power and the all-pervading presence of sin which turned Law's wise guidance into a bondage and a slavery, bringing condemnation and death in its wake.

The problem of the Old Covenant is not to do with the nature of the Law and its commandments, it is to do with human nature. “[T]he very commandment that was intended

⁵⁴ Christopher Wright argues that instead of attempting to distil a separate element of moral law from the Pentateuch, instead our focus should be on “looking for moral principles that underlie any or all of the laws – whatever category we think they come into.” *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983) 14, 152. Similarly, I. Howard Marshall argues that when dealing with any biblical exhortation “we must inquire into the underlying theological and ethical principles which are expressed in it and then proceed to work out how to translate those principles into appropriate exhortations for today.”: “Using the Bible in Ethics” in David F. Wright (ed.) *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979) 50.

⁵⁵ Romans 10:4.

⁵⁶ Cranfield *On Romans and other New Testament Essays* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 42.

⁵⁷ Romans 7:7-11.

to bring life actually brought death”⁵⁸ because “sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.”⁵⁹ “... the law was powerless .. in that it was weakened by the sinful nature”⁶⁰.

The problem is not the Law's nature or moral content; it is its powerlessness in the face of human sin-fullness⁶¹. As N.T. Wright clearly spells out: “the ‘problem of Romans 7’ ... is emphatically *not* that of ‘man under the law’ ... but of ‘the law under man’, or, more specifically, under flesh.”⁶²

"The failure of the former covenant, the covenant of law, was that even though the Torah was 'Spiritual' in the sense that it came by way of Spirit-inspiration (Rom 7:14), and even though it came with glory (2 Cor 3:7), it was not accompanied by the empowering Spirit. Indeed, it was written on stone tablets, which for Paul represented its deadness, its basic inability to set people free. It had become a covenant of letter (a merely written code of laws requiring obedience) leading to death (Rom 2:29; 7:6; 2 Cor 3:5-6) ...”⁶³

The history of the Israelite kingdoms is that time and again, the Old Testament prophets called the people of God back to live lives of covenant faithfulness. Time and again, they provided unwilling and incapable of doing so. Eventually, the predictions of judgment came true and the people of first Israel and then Judah were taken into exile. Then, to those great prophets of the time of exile, Jeremiah⁶⁴ and Ezekiel, were given visions of a new covenant, in which God himself would cleanse his people, and give them a new heart and a new spirit⁶⁵. Under this new covenant, God promised to “**put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws.**”⁶⁶ For Ezekiel, the purpose of the gift of the life-giving Spirit was to move God’s people to follow his decrees.

⁵⁸ Romans 7:10.

⁵⁹ Romans 7:11.

⁶⁰ Romans 8:3.

⁶¹ Romans 8:3 "... the law was powerless ... in that it was weakened by the sinful nature ..." See Fee *God's Empowering Presence* 513.

⁶² N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* 209.

⁶³ Gordon Fee *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* 100.

⁶⁴ Jeremiah 31:33-34.

⁶⁵ Ezekiel 36:26.

⁶⁶ Ezekiel 36:27; see also Ezekiel 11:19-20. Graeme Goldsworthy *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1981, 1994) 81; Taylor *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary on Ezekiel* (Leicester: IVP, 1969) 215.

Three scholars in particular, Gordon Fee, Charles Cranfield, and N.T. Wright, however, have argued that a grasp of the importance of the idea of “covenant” is essential to understanding Paul’s thinking in this and other areas. What is difficult is that the three then reach divergent conclusions about the impact of Paul’s new covenant theology on his attitude to the Torah. For Fee⁶⁷ and N.T. Wright⁶⁸, the Torah is a good thing, whose time is up. They rightly stress that with the arrival of the Messiah, the time of Torah is up. However, Cranfield⁶⁹ argues that the Torah is a good thing, whose true nature and purpose can only be discerned and fulfilled by those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so.

Fee is right to stress that "We live as strangers on earth; our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). Ethical life, therefore, does not consist of rules to live by. Rather, empowered by the Spirit, we now live the life of the future in the present age, the life that characterizes God himself."⁷⁰

But what does that life look like? It is not informed by the ethical guidance revealed in the *Torah*? "... in what does [sanctified] behaviour consist? In doing the will of God as summarised in the Ten Commandments."⁷¹ If its content is the same whether or not aspects of the Mosaic Law or principles derived from it are regarded as of continuing validity, the debate as to whether Christian moral principles are to be discerned through the Mosaic Law or apart from the Mosaic Law, can look like so much theological hair-splitting.

If, however, as seems highly likely, Paul did not regard his theology of the Holy Spirit as a complete innovation but rather as the fulfilment of the new covenant prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, then it must be interpreted in the light of those prophecies. Ezekiel is quite clear that the Holy Spirit will be given to move God's people to follow his decrees and be careful to keep his laws.

Just as Christ has objectively turned the Law inside out; so the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of believers, bringing out conformity to Christ's character, a display of faithful obedience to God, worked from the inside out.

⁶⁷ Fee *God's Empowering Presence* 507-8.

⁶⁸ N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* 241-2.

⁶⁹ Cranfield *International Critical Commentary on Romans Vol.1* 356.

⁷⁰ Gordon Fee *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* 52.

⁷¹ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* (Philippsburg: P&R, 1997) xix.

The changed relationship of the people of God to the moral aspects of the Mosaic Law arises not from the abolition or completion of the Law itself⁷² but instead from the changed nature of the people of God. Following the crucifixion-resurrection event, the "new" people of God are (1) no longer ethnically defined, instead they are those who are (2) 'in Christ', and (3) 'Spirit-indwelt'.

(1) The multi-ethnic nature of the people of God

The people of God under the New Covenant are not defined on ethnic lines. Those practices under Torah which became ethnically distinctive of the Jews have been rendered redundant; they no longer function as boundary-markers.

J.G. Dunn is therefore right to argue that Paul retains a positive view of the Law, except in so far as it was relied upon by the Jews as a badge of membership to the exclusive club of favour with God⁷³. Paul therefore challenges and critiques the 'works of the Law' which were most distinctive of Jewish practice and which he saw as barriers to true brotherhood between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

(2) The people of God are those who are 'in Christ'

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ marked the great turning point of world history. Henceforth, the time of the new covenant has begun. The rite of baptism symbolises the Christian's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ⁷⁴. But this being 'in Christ' not only meant a changed relationship to God, it carried with it the obligation to 'live a new life'⁷⁵, one which was 'dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus'⁷⁶.

Paul's expectation was that the new birth in his readers would be evidenced by a new life. What would this new life look like? It would be Christ-like. It would be full of love for God and one's fellow human beings. It would, in short, be one which sought to fulfil the

⁷² In response to the argument that as Christ has completed the Law in all its aspects it is now a dead letter; the theological response must be that as the Church is 'in these in-between times' the Body of Christ it must continue his work of faithful obedience to the moral Law.

⁷³ See also N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* 242.

⁷⁴ Romans 6:3-11.

⁷⁵ Romans 6:4.

⁷⁶ Romans 6:11.

righteous requirement of the Law⁷⁷, which we can do, in so far as we are walking "in keeping with the Spirit"⁷⁸.

(3) The people of God are those who are indwelt by the Spirit

What changes under the New Covenant is not that the ethical demands of the Mosaic Law no longer apply to Christians (they continue to apply but are super-added to by Jesus' new commandment⁷⁹) but that thanks to the Holy Spirit, our Lord's commands (which as we have seen include the ethical implications of the Mosaic Law) are written on his people's hearts and minds (Hebrews 10:16; Jeremiah 31:33).⁸⁰

"The difference between the old and the new covenants is that under the old that law is written on tablets of stone ... whereas under the new the law is written internally within the redeemed heart by the dynamic regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, so that through faith in Christ ... man no longer hates but loves God's law, and is enabled to fulfil its precepts."⁸¹

For what purpose was the Holy Spirit given? It is important not to be reductionist in our theology, as the ministry of Holy Spirit is multi-faceted, but one of the reasons for which he was given is in order that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Romans 8:4), so that Ezekiel's prophecy that under the New Covenant, God's people will "walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them" might be fulfilled⁸².

Cranfield is therefore absolutely right that "... the liberation which the Holy Spirit effects must include a beginning in the lives of Christians of that fulfilment of the law which God intended to bring about when he sent his Son to deal with sin."⁸³ Mere faith without works is

⁷⁷ Cf. Romans 8:4. Scholarly opinion divides on whether this is a reference back to the completed work of Christ on the cross, and which is the subject-matter of verse 3: see for example N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* 200ff; or forward to Christian ethical obligations. For a good discussion of the matter, and an expression of a view which holds both positions together: see Fee *God's Empowering Presence* 528-38.

⁷⁸ Fee *God's Empowering Presence* 537.

⁷⁹ "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34). As to the relationship between this new commandment and the Mosaic law, see David McLroy "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 31-4.

⁸⁰ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984) 199.

⁸¹ Philip E. Hughes *Commentary on Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980) 96ff, quoted in Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 147; see also Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 160.

⁸² Ezekiel 11:19-20 and cf. 36:26-27. Kenneth Prior *The Way of Holiness* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1969, rev. 1982, 1994) 121.

⁸³ Cranfield *On Romans* 42.

dead⁸⁴. As the Apostle John stressed in his theology: love for God must result in obedience to God⁸⁵.

Conclusion

Is the Mosaic law a dead letter? In and of itself, yes. A certain level of moral behaviour can be maintained, most of the time, by the external constraints of law. But law cannot make human beings good. It is powerless to do so. At best, it can provide prudential reasons for human beings to choose not to be bad⁸⁶. But the message of the New Testament is that the truly upright/ righteous life, can only be lived from the inside out. An external written code can only constrain and bind⁸⁷; true freedom requires **conscientious obedience**, a service to God in newness of Spirit. And that is possible for Christians, says Paul, because God has given us "a spirit of power and love and self-control."⁸⁸

Does that then render the Mosaic law redundant? No. Charles Cranfield, who argues strongly for the continuing relevance of the Mosaic Law for the Christian believer⁸⁹, draws out from Paul's declaration in Romans 7:14 that the Law is Spiritual, the implication that "being spiritual, [the Law] cannot be properly understood except by the help of the same Spirit by whom it was given (cf. 1 Cor 2:10-16). It is only those who have the Spirit who can truly acknowledge the law and consent to it with their minds (cf. Rom 7:16, 22, 23, 25b) and also in their lives make a beginning of obedience to it (cf Rom 8:1ff). Those who do not have the Spirit grasp only the letter (cf Rom 7:6), and the letter bereft of the Spirit kills (cf 2 Cor 3:6)."⁹⁰

⁸⁴ James 2:17.

⁸⁵ John 14:23-4; 15:9-17; 1 John 2:3; 3:10, 23.

⁸⁶ A complete account of why people *tend* to obey the law would have to place a heavy stress on the social and cultural factors which lead to law-keeping: fear of loss of reputation, of loss of possessions etc.

⁸⁷ Romans 7:6.

⁸⁸ 2 Timothy 1:7.

⁸⁹ Reaching a similar conclusion to the one I argued for in "The Relevance of the Old Testament Law for Today: Part I" 148 *Law & Justice* 21.

⁹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield *International Critical Commentary on Romans Vol. 1* 356. See also Nigel Wright *The Radical Kingdom: Restoration in Theory and Practice* (Kingsway, 1986) p.22-3 "... the Old Testament, **of itself**, is not to be normative for us. This is an important point which goes to the heart of the restoration principle itself. Jesus and the New Testament are normative for us, so no part of the Old Testament can be treated a-Christologically and accorded this status. ... This does not mean that the Old Testament is of no value; far from it. It does mean, however, that **Old Testament material is illustrative rather than normative and that it must always be interpreted through Christ**, who is the fulfilment of the law, and not apart from him." (emphasis mine).

For Christians, ethical decisions are not to be made on the basis of slavish obedience to an external written code, but in line with internal guidance given by the Holy Spirit⁹¹, illuminated and informed by a study of the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and a consideration of the moral principles to be derived from the Mosaic Law. When enlivened and interpreted by the Holy Spirit, the Torah remains a valuable guide to moral action.

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⁹¹ Bruce *The Tyndale Commentary on Romans* 153.