

Is the Christian under Law or Not under Law?

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The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that the moral law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is binding on all men, whether believers or unbelievers. All humans, therefore, are under the moral law as a duty owed to God according to the Westminster Confession.

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which *He bound him and all his posterity* to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it. (Westminster Confession of Faith 19:1)

This law, after his fall, *continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness*; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man. (WCF 19:2)

The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. (WCF 19:5)

But for many Christians, such teaching seems to contradict the explicit teaching of the Apostle Paul that the believer is not under law.

For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are *not under the law*, but under grace. (Rom. 6:14 NIV)

Before the coming of this faith, *we were held in custody under the law*, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, *we are no longer under a guardian*. (Gal. 3:23-25)

If the Bible clearly says that the believer is not under law, how can the confession affirm just the opposite? It is not that the Westminster divines were unaware of the above passages. Indeed, they recognized the tension and added that “Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.”

In the Westminster standards, the term “law” is used in at least four different senses. It is used for the moral law, for the Old Covenant, for the ceremonies required under the Old Covenant and for the judicial laws of the Old Covenant.

According to the Westminster Confession, the Christian is not under the Old Covenant administration, not under the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant, and not under the judicial laws of the Old Covenant. Neither is he under the moral law as a covenant of works, but he is under the moral law as duty and obligation to his Creator. These distinctions found in the Westminster Confession mirror the different uses of the word “law” (νόμος) in the New Testament, but many Christians read the New Testament assuming the word “law” always means the same thing whenever it is used. Therefore, these same Christians would think that Therefore, these same Christians would think that because Paul says we are “not under law,” the Westminster Confession errs in saying we are under the moral law as a standard of behavior. Some translations seek to avoid some of this confusion by adding “the” in front of “law” or capitalizing “Law” when the translators think the text is referring to the Old Covenant, the books of Moses or the Ten Commandments. This intended aid only adds to the confusion for many readers. In part, this is because “the law” or “the Law” is still ambiguous. No such nice distinctions exist in the Greek text. Ancient Greek was not written with lower case and upper case letters like English is written, and the English definite article is not a simple equivalent of the Greek definite article (ὁ, ἡ, τό). The New Testament does use the term “law” with a considerable variation in meaning. The differences in meaning, however, are a result of how context controls meaning.

In 1 Corinthians we find a passage where Paul uses the term “law” in more than one sense.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law though *I myself am not under the law*, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law though *I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law*, so as to win those not having the law.
1 Corinthians 9:20-21 (NIV)

Paul seems to be double-minded about the matter of being under law. In this passage he affirms that he is both not under law and under law. He says, “I myself am not under the law,” but then seems to contradict himself by saying, “I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law.” When a writer uses such contradictory language, it is often the case that although the same words are used, the meaning is different. In other words, Paul uses the term “law” to mean more than one thing.

So then, is the Christian “not under law” or is he “not free from God’s law”? The answer is yes. Both are true statements when properly understood within both their immediate literary contexts and the larger context of the whole of biblical revelation.

Let us first consider the larger context of the whole of biblical revelation. The foundation of biblical revelation is that God created man according to his image and likeness. Every biblical writer assumes and builds upon this foundational truth about man: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26-27).

When God created man according to his own image and likeness, God made man to be a revelation of his goodness, since man was made according to the image and likeness of the good

God. As it is said in the Psalms, “Good and upright is the Lord” (Psalm 25:8). If man was created according to the image and likeness of God, man must be “good and upright” since God is such. God made man to be a living expression of God’s goodness, for God breathed into him the breath of life.

Being made according to the image and likeness of God, man has both knowledge of the good, and an obligation to do the good. This is inherent to the notion that the good God made man in his image and likeness. If man had no knowledge of the good and felt no obligation to do the good, he would be unlike God. For man cannot be the image of God without knowing God and his goodness, and man cannot live as the image of God without conforming himself to God and his goodness.

Thus man has within his nature, as a creature, a moral sense and a moral obligation. The Westminster Confession of Faith refers to this human reality of moral sense and moral obligation as the “law written on the heart,” the “law of nature,” “the light of nature,” and the “moral law.”

After God made all other creatures, he created man, man and female ... having the law of God written on their hearts.... (WCF 4:2)

God gave to Adam a law. ... This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness ... commonly called moral.... (WCF 19:1-3)

The light of nature showeth that there is God, who ... is good and doth good unto all ... as it is the law of nature.... (WCF 21:1, 7)

Any discussion of the senses in which the Christian is under law and not under law must be conducted in the context of the creation narrative in which God made man according to his image and likeness. Therefore, any doctrine that redeemed man is not under the obligation of God’s moral law is a denial that God made man according to his image and likeness, and that, in Christ, God is now renewing men according to his image.

The narrative of creation is the ultimate context in which all the other words of the Bible must be interpreted and understood. Man cannot be free from the obligation of God’s moral law without ceasing to be man, namely, the one made according to the image and likeness of God. Therefore, in the context of the creation narrative, the following passages cannot be understood as saying that men are not under the rule of God’s moral law. “For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). “Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law.... Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (Gal. 3:23, 25).

As we shall see later, when these texts are examined in their immediate literary contexts, the correct sense of “law” will be apparent, but the sense of “moral law” cannot be imported into these passages without contradicting the truth that God made man according to his image and likeness. So then, the later language of the Bible asserting that the believing man is “not under law but under grace” cannot rationally be understood to mean that the believing man is free from

the obligation of God's moral law. For to be free from the moral law is no longer to be according to God's image and likeness.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col. 3:9-10)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22-24)

The believing man is being restored to the image of God and is being made like God in true holiness and righteousness. Or, as Jesus put it, "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Prior to God speaking his moral law at Mt. Sinai, men knew right from wrong, and God interacted with men in terms of this moral sense and obligation. We see this with Cain (Gen. 4:6-7), with Noah (Gen. 6:9), and with Abraham (Gen. 18:23). In each case, Scripture presumes that humans know right from and wrong and that they ought to do the right. Thus, in the context of the creation narrative, the language of "not under law" cannot be understood to mean "not under obligation to keep the moral law of God." While there are legitimate senses in which the Christian is "not under law" (which we will explore later), the Christian is most certainly under the instruction and obligation of the moral law of God.

In a number of places, the New Testament affirms the abiding validity of the moral commandments.

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order *that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us*, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3-4)

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore *love is the fulfillment of the law*. Romans 13:8-10 (NIV)

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker. (Jas. 2:8-11)

So then, if the moral law is abiding in its validity, then what does it mean to say that the Christian is “not under law.” In what sense or senses does the New Testament teach that the Christian is “not under law”.

First, Jesus uses the expression “the Law and the Prophets” to refer to the epoch of the Old Covenant which ends with the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it. (Luke 16:16)

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven is advancing violently, and violent people have been ceasing it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. (Matt. 11:11-13 NIV, 1984 version)

In this usage, “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the era of time in which the Old Covenant is in force. The coming of the Kingdom of God means that the covenant administration of the Law and the Prophets has ended. The Christian is not under the covenant administration of the Law and the Prophets, but is now in the Kingdom of God. The covenant order of the Kingdom of God is the New Covenant.

Paul also speaks about the end of the covenant administration that is the Law. But in this usage there is a focus on the ceremonial requirements of that covenant administration and, in particular, circumcision: “Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (Gal. 3:23-25). Of course, in the same letter Paul teaches the abiding validity of what we call the moral law, that is, the law of love: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:6, 14). This contrast between the moral law and the ceremonial law is the variation in the meaning of “law” used 1 Corinthians 9:20-21.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law (ceremonies) I became like one under the law (ceremonies) though I myself am not under the law (ceremonies), so as to win those under the law (ceremonies). To those not having the law (covenant with its ceremonies) I became like one not having the law (covenant with its ceremonies) though I am not free from God’s law (moral) but am under Christ’s law (love), so as to win those not having the law (covenant with its ceremonies).
(Parenthetical comments added by the author)

The Writer to the Hebrews also indicates this change of covenant administration with a focus on the ceremonial requirements and, in particular, the priesthood and sacrifices: “For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.... The former regulation is set aside

because it was weak and useless for the law made nothing perfect, and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (Hebrews 7:12, 18-19). However, the variations in the meaning of “law” observed above do not explain the troublesome language of Romans 6:14: “For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.” If we take “under law” to mean under the moral law, we take the text out of its context of meaning (creation narrative) and make it conflict with the overall teaching of Scripture. If we take “under law” to mean under the Old Covenant administration, we make it conflict with the testimony of the Law itself that God is gracious and merciful to sinners.

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exod. 34:6-7)

If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. (Psalm 130:3-4)

Furthermore, the issue of the ceremonies of the law is completely out of context. Paul in Romans 6 is not discussing circumcision, but the problem of the struggle with indwelling sin. So then, what does Paul mean by “law” in Romans 6:14, and why are we not “under law” but instead are “under grace?”

In the period after the return from captivity, an interpretation of the Law of Moses, that is, of the Old Covenant, developed which was a profound distortion of the real meaning of the Covenant. This was the understanding of the Law expressed by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in the Gospels narratives. In this misinterpretation, the minimal keeping of the moral law and the strict outward performances of the ceremonies of the law according to the custom of the fathers constituted righteousness before God. The spiritual effect of this misinterpretation was boasting before God.

Earlier in Romans, Paul contrasted this Pharisaical interpretation of the law with the proper meaning of the law.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the “law” that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. (Rom. 3:27-31)

The gospel of justification by faith does not annul the law in its proper and intended sense, but rather upholds the law in its correct meaning over against its abuse at the hands of the Pharisees who perverted it into a law of works and boasting. Such self-righteous boasting before God, however, serves only to increase sin. Those who follow such a religious program can never be free of the enslaving power of sin because their misinterpretation annuls the possibility of true faith.

The believer in Jesus, however, is not under law in this perverted sense, but is under grace. Of course, Abraham, Moses, and David were also under grace and not under law in the sense of “under law” in Romans 6:14. They also were justified by faith and saved by grace. They did not boast before God as did the Pharisees, but had true and saving faith.

So then, the meaning of law in Romans 6:14 may be stated thus:

For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law (as a law of works resulting in boasting before God), but under grace (by which you believe that God in his grace forgives sinners through sacrifice of his Son). (Parenthetical comments added by the author)

Therefore, the Christian is “not under law” in the sense that he is not under the Pharisaical misinterpretation of the Law as a law of works, that is, of justification by works of law. As we noted earlier, the Christian is “not under law” in the sense that he is not under the Old Covenant administration with its ceremonies, its judicial system, and viewing the moral law as a means of salvation. and the moral law as a law written on stone. But the Christian is under law in that he is instructed by and obligated to keep the moral law of God, that is, the law of love.

To be under the obligation of the moral law of God is a good thing. Life is better lived as Jesus taught us to live: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12 translation by the author). To keep that moral law is to be like God, and so realized the meaning of our humanity, namely, those made after the image and likeness of God: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).