



## Legal Aid

### ***We need help with the law — and get it***

Dr Francis Macnab, minister of St Michael's Uniting Church in Melbourne, is currently busy advocating what he calls an evolving "New Faith" to replace the primitive religion of Bible-loving Christians. He regards Abraham as a concoction, Moses as a mass murderer and Jesus as very important but not necessarily the Son of God. He has put up hoardings such as *"The Ten Commandments, The Most Negative Document Ever Written"* which even brought the criticism of the Uniting Church Synod. One was glad to see an excellent positive statement of the Ten Commandments on a board erected by Scots Church immediately over the road.

While the great truths of the Christian faith are clear in the Scriptures, particularly the salvation wrought by Christ and the consequent gift of the Holy Spirit, not all passages are equally clear. The hard parts of Scripture can be to our advantage since they force us to engage heart and mind in a prayerful study of the difficult places.

To some, perhaps many, there are questions about the Old Testament and the law of Moses which included the Ten Commandments as an important element. Are we really still under these, you may ask? In this article I'd like to look at a major theme in Paul's letter to the Galatians, the theme of the place of the law.

Paul wrote to the Galatians around AD 49 because they were turning to a different gospel (1:7). The church in Galatia (in modern Turkey) was essentially a Gentile church but was being impacted by some of Jewish background. They were tempted to come under the law of Moses (4:21ff), and thought that the salvation they had obtained through believing in Christ needed to be completed by human effort (3:30).

It was being taught that it was necessary for salvation to keep Jewish practices, particularly circumcision. In this context (that concerning Timothy in Acts 16:3 was quite different and did not involve the nature of salvation) Paul regarded acceptance of circumcision as bringing one under obligation to observe the entire law of Moses (5:3), thus separating one from Christ (5:41) and bringing him or her under the law's curse (3:10). Indeed, he regards the earthly Jerusalem of his time as in slavery (4:25), and contrasts it with the spiritual Jerusalem which was free. How are we to understand all this?

We can set out the logic of Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:1-4:7 in this way:

3:1-5. The Galatian Christians had come to faith in Jesus Christ as crucified for them, and had received the Spirit so that they might live by the Spirit. By seeking to come under the Mosaic covenant they were making a fatal mistake since law observance does not secure the Spirit.

3:6-9. Abraham is the great example of the man who believed God and was reckoned righteous through his faith in God's promises (Gen. 15:6), and this before circumcision was given (Gen. 17). In fact, God said (Gen. 12) that all nations would be blessed in Abraham. God was saying that He would declare all righteous who had a faith like Abraham, and with the coming of Christ that wonderful promise is being realised. This means that God's international family is characterised by trust in God, not by keeping the law of Moses.

3:10-14. The previous conclusion is reinforced by the statement that there is no entry into God's family by obedience to the law of Moses, since any who seek to do so come under God's curse (Deut. 27:26) for failure to give the total obedience required. In the context this appears to mean

that Israel, to whom the law of Moses was given, is now under God's curse for her disobedience, so that any who seek to observe the law of Moses as necessary for salvation likewise come under that curse lying against the nation.

Indeed as God's disobedient people were about to experience the might of Babylon in conquest and exile, when she would not have temple or sacrifice, the prophet Habakkuk had stressed circa 620 BC that *"the righteous by faith would live"*. Law obedience had never been the basis of getting right with God. The law demanded total obedience for one to have life, but could not enable such obedience. The Jews were therefore under its curse, but Christ had died bearing the curse of the law that was due. He had been treated as a covenant breaker and crucified, dying as both representative and substitute, so that believing Jew *and* Gentile might receive what Abraham had known, the Spirit received through faith — the heart of the promised blessing.

3:15-25. To further reinforce the case: Abraham received God's promises centuries before the law was instituted on Mount Sinai, so they cannot be set aside by the law of Moses or depend on obedience to that law. Further, God's promise was to Abraham and his seed/offspring. It was not a promise of more than one family, each with different requirements, but of one family collectively represented by Christ. Therefore the law of Moses, which established distinctions between Jew and Gentile had to go for God's promise to be fulfilled.

What, then, was the purpose of the law of Moses? It was a temporary supplement to the promise with a view to keeping Israel within bounds until the promised offspring came. Compared to what Christ the Son of God has brought, it is relatively inferior, being given merely by angels (Heb. 2:2) and through a mediator (Moses) and therefore was a covenant between two with conditions which Israel had not met. But God stood alone in giving his unconditional promise, so it is guaranteed. The law of Moses is therefore not opposed to the promises of God. The law could never give what faith in God's promises can. The law was only a guardian (*pedagogos*) to restrain sin and teach spiritual lessons until the time of Israel's minority was complete and she could enter into her inheritance free from the supervision of the law.

3:26-4:7. It follows that every believer is a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ. There is only one family of God and ethnicity or social position has nothing to do with it: *"you are all one in Christ Jesus."* Rounding off the section, Paul returns to the points made in 3:1-5. Believers have entered into their inheritance because Christ has come, redeemed his people and given them the Spirit.

What must be stressed is that, as far as Paul is concerned, the old Mosaic covenant is finished. We are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). We live in the time of the crucified and risen Lord and of the outpoured Spirit. So where does that leave the Ten Commandments which formed part of the law of Moses?

It is clear that Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17). The Mosaic covenant is superseded. The shadows of the Mosaic administration give way to the reality of Christ's saving work, for *"the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth were realised through Jesus Christ"* (Jn. 1:17). Christ was *"born under law to redeem those under law"* (Gal. 4:5).

Yet we do not find the Ten Commandments being ignored in the New Testament church. Paul exhorts the children at Ephesus in terms of the fifth commandment (Eph. 6:3), and even notes (1 Cor. 11:30) that some believers at Corinth had died prematurely because they did not rightly honour fellow believers.

More generally, Paul stresses that *"the righteous requirements of the law are fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit"* (Rom. 8:4). He insists that *"the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love"* (Gal. 5:7), and that the entire law is summed up in the command of love (5:14).

These points can be reconciled when we recognise that the Ten Commandments were always special among the laws God gave to Israel. They were expressions of the law of love — what we sometimes call the moral law — that had existed from humanity's creation but were given to Israel

in a form suited to her situation. Though the old Mosaic covenant is superseded, these ten words in their essence remain because they existed before Moses. They state what was and is always humanity's obligation. While they can function to restrain sin, they cannot give power to obey. For sinners the way of law-keeping of any kind to attain salvation is hopeless, completely wrong-headed.

Salvation is possible for sinners only because of God's gift through Christ by the Spirit. It brings about a new creation, and freedom from the law's curse. The believer now is God's child and desires to express her/his faith through love. Believers do not receive the Ten Commandments from the hands of Moses, the mediator of a superseded covenant, but from the hands of Jesus, the mediator of the new and better covenant.

Their appreciation of them is deepened through the positive exposition of them by Christ's obedience and in his own teaching and example (Mt. 5:17ff). Since they live by the Spirit they keep in step with the Spirit, showing the fruit of "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Gal. 5:22-23, 25).

Appendix: Moral, ceremonial, civil? It is quite frequently suggested that the distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil laws of Israel made by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 19 is artificial since the law of Moses was a unified whole. However, the distinctions are perfectly appropriate if the analysis already given is maintained. Our *Shorter Catechism* rightly states that the moral law is summed up briefly in the Ten Commandments (#41) and recognises that the sum of the summary is the law of love (#42). The unique position of the moral law is also seen in the fact that:

- only the Ten Commandments were spoken by God's voice;
- they alone were accompanied by the shaking of Mount Sinai;
- they alone were written by His finger;
- they alone were written on enduring stone tablets rather than merely being written in a book (Deut. 4:10-14; Ex. 24:4); and
- they alone of the various laws were placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:5).

They formed the introduction to the Mosaic covenant, which expounds them in a manner appropriate for the people at that time (Deut. 6-26).

Of course they were also fully complete, the tablets being written on the front and the back, so that there was no room for other commandments of the same unique kind for there were none (Ex. 32:15); and

They were regarded as superior to the ceremonial law (eg. Ps. 51:16-19; Jer. 7; Amos 5).

It should also be remembered that the greatest commandment, on which depends everything else, is total love for the Lord (Matt. 22:37 quoting the exposition of the first commandment in Deut. 6) and also love for one's neighbour — a command which, while explicit in a context of laws of different character, is a necessary corollary to the other given that humans bear the divine likeness (Lev. 19:18 cf. Matt. 7:12).

Hence, it follows that the Decalogue is a reflection, in a form suited to the historical situation of Israel, of the moral law, the law of love, written on Adam's heart at his creation.

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