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The Puzzle of Paul and the Law A Hermeneutical Solution

Brian Rosner

The only thing upon which interpreters of Paul and the law seem to agree is that the subject is complex: “Paul’s views on the law are *complex*” (Ben Witherington III);¹ “Paul and the law – The subject is *complex*” (Donald A. Hagner);² “There is nothing quite so *complex* in Paul’s theology as the role and function which he attributes to the law” (James D.G. Dunn);³ “There is a general agreement that Paul’s view of the law is a very *complex* and intricate matter which confronts the interpreter with a great many puzzles” (Heiki Raisanen).⁴

1 Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 66. Italics added.

2 Donald A. Hagner, “Paul as a Jewish Believer – According to His Letters,” in Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (eds.), *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007, 104. Italics added.

3 James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008, 441. Italics added.

4 Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*. 2nd edn., WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr,



The crux of the problem of Paul and the law is the fact that his letters present both negative critique and positive approval of the law. Paul describes the law as ‘holy, just and good’ (Rom. 7:12), a very positive gift of God (Rom. 9:4). On the other hand, he speaks of the law as an enslaving power, increasing trespass and used by sin to bring about death (Gal. 4:1-10; Rom. 5:20; 7:5).

Ephesians 2:15 is a clear example of negative critique of the law: Christ has “abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.” Yet in Ephesians 6:1-2, we find positive approval of the law. Paul quotes one of the “commandments” that Christ had presumably done away with and uses it as an instruction for Christian living: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother”—this is the first *commandment* with a promise.” And in Romans 3:31 Paul asks whether his teaching about the critical nature of faith abolishes the law: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” Paul answers: “By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” The verb translated “overthrow” is *katargeō*, the same word that appears in Ephesians 2:15. If in Romans Paul insists his teaching about Christ and faith by no means abolishes the law, in Ephesians he affirms that Christ has indeed abolished it.

What makes Paul and the law a puzzle is such seeming contradictions. How are we to explain such tensions in Paul’s thought?

A HERMENEUTICAL SOLUTION

In my view, asking the question of ‘the capacity in which,’ or ‘the force with which,’ the law meets the Christian resolves the tension between the negative and positive material. If Paul’s

1987, xii. Italics added. Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, 211 commenting on the law in Rom. 8:4: “This is complex.”

letters are marked by negative and positive statements about the law, the question to ask is not “which bits” of the law is he referring to in each case, but the hermeneutical question of “in what sense,” or “as what”?

Paul generally deals with the law as a unity, customarily referring to Mosaic “law,” not “laws.” This means that, in the main, his responses to the law are not to its various parts, however we may wish to divide it, but to the law as a whole, which was the standard Jewish view in his day. And he can not only introduce “laws” from the Pentateuch (e.g., “you shall not covet” in Rom. 7:7) as “law,” but also narrative as “law,” as in Galatians 4:21 (Hagar and Sarah).

In the following sections I lay out in brief a hermeneutical solution to the puzzle of Paul and the law: in his letters Paul undertakes a polemical re-reading of the Law of Moses, which involves not only a repudiation and rejection of the law in one capacity and its replacement by other things, but also a re-appropriation of the law in two other ways.⁵

NOT “UNDER THE LAW”
EXPLICIT REPUDIATION OF THE LAW AS LAW-
COVENANT

Paul uses the phrase “under the law,” *hupo nomon*, eleven times (in eight verses) in Galatians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. He employs the phrase: to indicate that Jews are “under the law” six times (1 Cor. 9:20 [3x]; Gal. 3:23; 4:4,5); to affirm that believers are not “under the law” three times (Rom. 6:14,15; Gal. 5:18); to affirm that he himself is not “under the law” once (1 Cor. 9:20);

⁵ This article summarizes and builds upon my book: *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013.



and to address believers who want to be “under the law” once (Gal. 4:21).

What does Paul mean when he says that believers in Christ are not under the law? Ephesians 2:15 clarifies the sense in which the law is abolished for Paul. If in Ephesians 2:1-10 Paul reveals how the mercy and grace of God solves the plight of every human being, in 2:11-22 he focuses on the plight of the Gentiles as a people estranged from God because of their alienation from Israel. In the former passage all those who believe are “made alive together with” Christ (v. 5), “raised together with” Christ (v. 6) and “seated together with” him (v. 6). In the latter passage Gentile believers are “citizens together with” the saints (v. 19), “joined together” into a holy temple (v. 21), and “built together” into a dwelling place for God (v. 22).⁶ God in Christ has achieved both peace between Jews and Gentiles and peace with himself. As Thielman puts it, Ephesians 2:14-18 “explores precisely how Christ’s death brought ‘peace’ (vv. 14,15,17) to a divided humanity and to a humanity divided from God.”⁷ It is in this context that Paul’s comments about the abolition of the law appear.

The clause of most interest for our purposes is v. 15a, which affirms that Christ has abolished the law. Although translated as a full sentence in most English versions, in the Greek “abolished” is a participle that modifies the breaking down (*lusas*) of the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles in the previous verse: Christ tore down the dividing wall *by abolishing the law.*” He did this in order to (*hina*) “create in himself one new humanity” (v. 15b), achieving peace and reconciliation (vv. 16-17).

The verb “to abolish,” *katargeō*, is in fact a favourite word for Paul to describe what Christ does to the law. Its strength in this

6 Each of the six verbs in question has a *sun-* prefix in Greek underscoring the corporate focus of the whole chapter.

7 Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*. BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010, 149.

context can hardly be missed, as it sits in company with “tearing down” and “putting to death.” In 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul uses it in the passive voice to say that the Law of Moses has been “set aside” (NRSV), with its “ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets.” Similarly in Romans 7:6 believers have been “discharged from the law,” just as a wife is “discharged from the law concerning the husband” when her husband dies (7:2). In each of these uses someone is released from the obligations to obey certain laws and free from the sanctions of disobedience to those laws.

But is it only certain elements of the Law of Moses that Christ has abolished in Ephesians 2:15? John Calvin held that Paul intends only certain ceremonies in the law are abolished.⁸ Some proponents of the New Perspective hold to a similar position in taking the phrase “commandments and ordinances” to refer only to those Mosaic laws that marked off Jews from Gentiles, thereby excluding them. While this position does fit with Paul’s main idea in the second half of Ephesians 2, the usage of *entolē* and *dogma* does not support a reference to such specific laws, and the categorizing of the law in such a manner is anachronistic. “Commandments and ordinances” is better understood as a reference to the content and promulgation of the Law of Moses; “Paul clearly intends the phrase to refer to the entire Mosaic law.”⁹ As Meyer put it, “the dictatorial character of the legal institute (as a whole, not merely partially) is exhibited.”¹⁰

In what sense then is the law abolished? Paul’s positive reference to the law in Ephesians 6:1-2 suggests that it is not in every sense. F.F. Bruce writes that what has been done away with

8 Cited in Thielman 2010, 169.

9 Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999, 197; cf. Thielman 2010, 169.

10 H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Ephesians and the Epistle to Philemon*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1880, 130.



in Christ is not the law “as a revelation of the character and will of God” but the law “as a written code, threatening death instead of imparting life.”¹¹ Schreiner draws a similar conclusion, arguing that the abolition of the law concerns “the commanding focus of the law . . . the law in terms of its requirements.”¹² Christians are not under the law as law-covenant.

Filling out the picture from Romans and Galatians, according to Paul Christians are not imprisoned and guarded under the law, nor are they subject to the law as a disciplinarian. Those who are under the law are under a curse and under sin. Even though the law promises life to those who keep it, it is evident that no one keeps the law. Consequently, no one receives life through the law. Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.

However, a caveat needs to be added: Paul does seem to distinguish how Jewish and Gentile Christians relate to the law. There is a sense in which all believers, both Jewish and Gentile, are not under the law, and a more limited sense in which Jewish believers may choose to live under the law. This more limited sense is clearly demonstrated in Romans 14:1-15:6, a passage in which Paul addresses the observance or non-observance of certain laws from the Law of Moses in the Roman churches. Two topics are mentioned directly, namely the restriction of diet (see 14:2, 21) and observing certain days in preference to others (14:5). Barclay summarizes the consensus of commentators: “In common with many others, I take these verses to refer to Jewish scruples concerning the consumption of meat considered unclean and the observance of the sabbath and other Jewish

11 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 298.

12 Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of the Law*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, 39.

feasts or fasts.”¹³ Whereas “the weak” keep Jewish kosher laws and observe the sabbath, “the strong” do not.¹⁴

Paul counts himself among the strong (see 15:1) and is convinced that the Christian believer may “eat anything” (14:2); Christians are not under the law (6:14-15; 7:1-6). But while holding his own convictions, “Paul accepts an element of subjectivity in the definition of proper conduct relating to diet and calendar.”¹⁵ On such matters, each individual is to act in accordance with their own convictions (14:5-6). As he states in 14:22: “the faith that you have, keep to yourself before God.” In effect, Paul allows for the expression of Jewish cultural tradition, living under the law’s direction, but not its dominion.

NOT “WALKING ACCORDING TO THE LAW”
IMPLICIT REPUDIATION OF THE LAW
AS LAW-COVENANT

What an author does not say, especially when they are expected to say it, can be just as significant as what they do say. On this score Paul’s Jewish roots invite a comparison of his teaching with contemporary Jewish teaching on matters to do with the law. It is telling that Paul the Jew refrains from saying what we might expect him to say in connection with the law. Two case

13 John M. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*. WUNT 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, 39. See his full treatment, 37-59, for an illuminating study that arrives at similar conclusions to my own.

14 The two groups probably did not divide neatly into Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; “the weak” may have included some Gentile Christians and “the strong” may have included some of Paul’s Jewish Christian friends in Rome, such as Prisca and Aquila.

15 Barclay 2011, 51. Barclay 2011, 54 notes that Paul’s response to the issue is echoed by Justin, in *Dialogue with Trypho* 46-47, who accepts that Jewish Christians may practice circumcision, keep the sabbath and observe other Jewish laws, but strongly opposes attempts to persuade Gentile Christians to follow suit.



studies are enlightening: the metaphor of walking; and Jewish identity vis-à-vis the law in Romans 2.

“How to walk and please God” (1 Thess. 4:1) was a question asked and debated in every quarter of Judaism in the first century. The standard Jewish answer, based firmly on Scripture, was to walk “according to the law.” The Old Testament regularly calls Israel to “walk in God’s law / statutes / ordinances” (Exod. 16:4; Lev. 18:4; 26:3; 1 Kings 6:12; 2 Kings 10:31; 2 Chron. 6:16; Neh. 10:29-30; Jer. 44:23; Ezek. 5:6-7; 11:12; Pss. 77:10; 89:30; 119:1). Leviticus 26:3 is typical: “*Walk* in my statutes and keep my commandments and do them.”¹⁶

In agreement with this Jewish idiom, “teaching Christians how to walk” is a good description of Paul’s pastoral work. He uses the metaphor no less than thirty-two times in his letters. Banks notes that it “is present in every one of the letters ascribed to him [Paul] except Philemon, the briefest, and the Pastorals, the most disputed.”¹⁷ Holloway’s comprehensive study of Paul’s use of the metaphor of walking as a metaphor concludes correctly that “themes introduced by the verb [to walk] in Paul’s letters are fundamental ... *peripateō* acts as a thematic marker for Pauline ethics.”¹⁸ The striking thing about Paul’s use of the walking theme is that he never once says that believers should walk according to the law. Given his capacious knowledge and prodigious use of Scripture, this can hardly be accidental. Every one of his letters offers moral teaching, and yet Paul avoids the standard Jewish answer to the question of how to walk and please God.

16 The words “keep” and “do” in this verse translate *phulassō* and *poieō* respectively in the LXX. As we will note below, Paul uses both these verbs to describe how Jews are meant to respond to the law, but does not do so in relation to believers in Christ.

17 Robert Banks, “Walking as a Metaphor of the Christian Life,” in E.W. Conrad and E.G. Newing (eds), *Perspectives on Language and Text*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987, 304.

18 Joseph O. Holloway, *Peripateō as a Thematic Marker for Pauline Ethics*. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992, vi.

What do we learn about Jews and the law in Romans 2? Paul says that Jews: rely on the law (v. 17a); boast about the law (v. 23; cf. v. 17b); know God’s will through the law (v. 18); are educated in the law (v. 18); have light, knowledge, and truth because of the law (vv. 19-20); do the law (v. 25); observe the righteous requirements of the law (v. 26); transgress the law (vv. 23, 25 and v. 27); and possess the (law as) written code (v. 27). Significantly, every one of these ways in which Paul says Jews relate to the law (which are often reflected in writings by other Jews) is conspicuously absent when he describes how Christians relate to the law. Such absences provide implicit evidence that Paul taught that Christians are not under the law.

“UNDER THE LAW OF CHRIST”
REPLACEMENT OF THE LAW

If not according to the law, how are Christians to walk? The Christian walk “in newness of life” / “in the light” / “in the Spirit” / “according to the truth of the gospel” replaces life under the law.

Instead of walking according to the law, Paul recommends walking according to a different set of norms: not as the Gentiles do (1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 10:2; Eph 4:17), nor in idleness (1 Thess. 4:12), or as enemies of the gospel (Phil. 3:18); but according to or by the Spirit (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16), apostolic example (Phil. 3:17), apostolic teaching (2 Thess. 3:6), and the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14); in Christ (Col. 2:6), in love (Rom. 14:15; Eph. 5:2), in newness of resurrection life (Rom. 6:4), and in good works (Eph. 2:10); as in the day (Rom. 13:13), as children of light (Eph. 5:15); by faith (2 Cor. 5:7); and wisely (Eph. 5:15; Col 4:5).¹⁹

19 The walking motif is obscured in many English Bible translations, which



However, many of the positive norms which Paul employs in the context of his use of the walking metaphor suggest that he presents the Christian walk as a replacement for the Jewish walk of obedience to the law. In particular, the language of “newness,” “light,” and the “Spirit” associate the Christian walk with the new age of the Spirit, a time when the Mosaic dispensation has come to an end.

Walking “in newness (*kainotēs*) of life” in Romans 6:4 is Paul’s description of life under grace, not under the law (see 6:15). The polemical edge to this new life is clear from the context in Romans. At the end of Romans 5 Paul states that “the law was brought in so that the trespass might increase” (5:20) and then feels obliged to explain how life under grace does not do likewise. That the noun “newness” points not only to resurrection life but can also point to life not under the law is evident from its other use in Romans 7:6: “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the *new way* of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (TNIV). Paul’s use of the adjective *kainos* offers further confirmation that a walk in “newness of life” is the attractive alternative to life under the law: Paul writes of a “new covenant” (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6), the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15) and a “new humanity” in Christ (Eph. 2:15; 4:24).

The other part of the phrase, “newness of *life*,” namely, “life,” also suggests that the Christian walk under grace is set in contrast to and substitute for living under the law. “Life” consistently connotes “eternal life” in Romans. When Paul speaks of “life” in Romans, especially in Romans 5-8, the implicit contrast with “death” is never far from view. In Romans 5 Adam’s trespass leads to death for all. And in Romans 7:5,10 and 13 it is the law that leads to death. The fact that the new life in Christ is the

prefer to speak of more literal “conduct.”

solution to life under the law is made explicit in 8:2: “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” Paul’s walk “in newness of life” is the happy substitute for a walk “in oldness of death” under the law.

Walking in the *light* or in the daytime in Ephesians 5:15 and Romans 13:13 respectively is not only an apt figure for appropriate conduct, it too points to life in the age of eschatological fulfillment. According to Conzelmann, Jewish apocalyptic theology regularly employed “light” language in a “generally eschatological” manner . . . the new thing is that for Paul it [the eschaton] is already present.”²⁰ Specifically, the visions of Isaiah 59-60 may have influenced Paul’s language of walking in the light.²¹ In Isaiah 59:9-11 sinful Israel is depicted as blind men walking in darkness but hoping for light and in Isaiah 60:19-20 the glory of God is an “everlasting light.” Then in Isaiah 60:1-3 the bright light of salvation dawns when the Lord returns to his people and “nations shall walk to your light.”²²

Walking in the *Spirit* is in Galatians 5 and Romans 8 in the contexts of both letters is set in opposition and as an alternative to walking according to the law. Furthermore, Beale argues convincingly that the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, which fleshes out what walking in the Spirit involves, is a general allusion to Isaiah’s promise that the Spirit would bring about abundant fertility in the coming new age.²³ Isaiah 32 and 57 prophesy that in the new creation the Spirit would be the bearer of plentiful fruitfulness, which Isaiah often interprets to be godly

20 Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975, 345-46.

21 A suggestion made to me by Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary student Jesse Peterson.

22 The Hebrew has *halak*, but in this context it is not usually translated literally. On the contrast of walking in newness of life as the superior eschatological alternative to the OT walk in the law, see Dunn 1988a: 315-16.

23 See G. K. Beale, “The Old Testament Background of Paul’s Reference to “the Fruit of the Spirit”,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 15 (1) (2005), 1-38.



attributes such as righteousness, patience, peace, joy, holiness, and trust in the Lord, traits either identical or quite similar to those in Galatians 5:22-23. To walk in the Spirit is thus to experience the ethical blessings of the new age of the Spirit, an age in which the dispensation of the law has passed away.

Another example of Paul replacing the Law of Moses appears in Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill *the law of Christ* (*ton nomon tou christou*; Gal. 6:2).” The context of Galatians favours taking “the law of Christ” to mean behaviour in keeping with the Christ’s example. “Law” then has the meaning of “normative pattern” which all who are in Christ are called to fulfill in their relationships with others. The idea of Christ’s self-giving sacrifice appears throughout the letter: 1:3-4; 2:20; 3:13-14; 4:4-5. In this following of Christ’s example of self-sacrifice on behalf of others Paul leads the way, as 2:19-20 attest (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9-16). In this sense, “fulfilling the law of Christ” is the equivalent of Paul’s hope for the Galatian believers that “Christ be formed in you” (4:19).

“WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL”
RE-APPROPRIATION OF THE LAW
AS PROPHECY

To this point in our investigation of Paul and the law we have emphasized Paul’s negative stance towards the law, both his explicit and implicit rejection and replacement of the law. But these two moves are not the whole story. A third more positive take on the law is also evident across the Pauline corpus; the law has ongoing value and validity in two ways: as prophecy of the gospel and as wisdom for Christian living.

Romans is an ideal test case for the notion of the law as

prophecy. Five statements in Romans affirm the belief that the law points to salvation in Christ:

1. The gospel of God was promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, which includes the law (1:2);
1. The disclosure of the righteousness of God is attested by the law and the prophets (3:21);
1. We uphold the law as prophecy, in stressing the critical role of faith in justifying both Jews and Gentiles (3:31);
1. The account of Abraham's faith being credited to him as righteousness was written for believers in Christ (4:23-24);
1. The revelation of the mystery, which is the gospel about Jesus Christ, is disclosed through the prophetic scriptures, which includes the law (16:25-26).

Consistent with this, Paul then cites the law and the prophets together in Romans as a witness to his gospel:

1. In Romans 4 the law and the prophets testify to righteousness by faith apart from the law: in connection with Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6, 22 (Rom. 4:1-4,9ff); and David's forgiveness in Psalm 32:1-2 (Rom. 4:6-8).
1. In Romans 9 the law and the prophets testify to the partial hardening of Israel that has accompanied the gospel: in Genesis 21:12; 18:10, 14; 25:23 and Exodus 33:19; 9:16 (Rom. 9:6-18); and in Malachi 1:2-3, Isaiah 29:16; 45:9, 10:22-23; 1:9 and Hosea 2:23; 1:10 (Rom. 9:25-29).
1. In Romans 10 the law and the prophets testify to righteousness by faith: in Deuteronomy 9:4 and 30:11-14 (Rom. 10:6-9); and in Isaiah 28:16; 53:1 and Joel 2:32 (Rom. 10:11-15).



1. In Romans 10 the law and the prophets testify to not all Israelites accepting the gospel: in Deuteronomy 32:21 (Rom. 10:19); and in Psalm 19:4 and Isaiah 65:1-2 (Rom. 10:18, 20-21).
1. In Romans 11 the law and prophets testify to the hardening of Israel; “As it is written” in Deuteronomy 29:4 / Isaiah 29:10; “And David says” in Psalm 69:22-23 (Rom. 11:8-10).
1. In Romans 15 the law and the prophets testify to Gentiles glorifying God; in Deuteronomy 32:43; and in 2 Samuel 22:50 / Psalm 18:49, Psalm 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10.

The six examples illustrate Paul’s conviction that the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ for all who believe does not overthrow the law, but rather upholds the law as prophecy (3:31).

“WRITTEN FOR OUR INSTRUCTION”

Both Paul’s moral teaching and the Law of Moses have a wisdom character. According to 2 Peter 3:15, “our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him.” Paul calls the Corinthians to “become wise”(1 Cor. 3:18); deplores the fact that none of the Corinthians is wise enough to settle the dispute between brothers (1 Cor. 6:5); calls the Roman Christians to “be wise about what is good” (Rom. 16:19); prays that believers will be filled with the perception of God’s will in all wisdom (Col. 1:9-10); admonishes and teaches “in all wisdom” (Col. 1:28), and expects believers to do the same (Col. 3:16); and tells the Colossian Christians to be “wise in the way you walk” (Col. 4:5) and the Ephesian Christians to “be careful how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise” (Eph. 5:15). Note not only how widespread

is this material, but also how Paul uses language expected of Jewish Torah observance, transferring it to Christian wisdom.

There is also evidence that Jews read the law as wisdom. The seed of the notion of the law as wisdom is in fact planted in Moses' description of the purpose of the law in Deuteronomy 4:6: "You must observe them diligently, for this will show *your wisdom and discernment* to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and *discerning* people!'"

Putting these two together, we find that Paul on occasion refers to the law as wisdom and reads it accordingly. In 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul describes the law as "instruction," *nouthesia*, in Romans 15:4 as a source of moral "teaching," *didaskalia*; both terms are associated with wisdom in other parts of Scripture and in Jewish writings.

What does reading the law as wisdom look like? In practice, for Paul, reading the law as wisdom involves internalizing the law, and undertaking reflective and expansive applications, based in part on the moral order of creation and the character of God that stand behind the law.

The example of the laws of tithing is instructive. The practice of giving ten percent of your income is legislated in the Law of Moses (e.g., Lev. 27:30-33) and is taken by many Christians to be part of God's law that must be obeyed. Does Paul enforce or even recommend tithing? Despite having numerous opportunities to do so in his many discussions of giving, Paul nowhere endorses tithing; Paul is consistent with his often-repeated insistence that Christians are not under the law. But does that mean that the laws of tithing are irrelevant to believers in Christ? Paul's discussions of giving range widely, covering contentment, greed, the futility of riches, being rich towards God, and so on. What advice does Paul give when it



comes to how much believers should give? Three passages in particular address this subject.

First, in 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul talks against any form of compulsion when it comes to giving: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” His instructions on giving do not come with the force of law. There is no appeal to the moral law of the Law of Moses or any other law for that matter.

Secondly, in 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul recommends giving that is deliberate and proportional to your income: “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.” Paul’s emphasis falls on the value of advanced planning and preparation rather than last-minute scrambling and pressure. The key word in the phrase, *in keeping with your income*, *euodoō*, has the sense “have things turn out well, prosper, succeed” (BDAG).²⁴ Paul recommends giving that is proportionate, a principle shared with the laws of tithing in Torah. It would seem that Paul has been instructed by the notion of a tithe, even if he does not enforce it as a law. Or as Keener points out,²⁵ Paul’s instruction that each one should give as they have prospered may be an application of Deuteronomy 15:14, the advice of which also seems to be indebted to the notion of tithing combined with the principle that those with more are expected to give generously: “Provide liberally out of your flock,

24 The translation *in keeping with your income* may be read in a very modern way, as though each one’s income would be consistent each week, while in Paul’s world most people would be more likely to have good and bad weeks, weeks in which things turned out well financially and weeks in which they did not (weeks in which they were regularly employed and weeks in which they were not or weeks in which they experienced greater or less benevolence on the part of others). The point is that those who made a lot of money in a given week would be expected to give more than those who did not.

25 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 489.

your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you” (Deut. 15:14; NRSV).

Thirdly, in 1 Timothy 6:17 Paul appeals to the generous character of God in creation as a motivation to give liberally: “Command those who are rich in this world to be generous and willing to share, not to put their hope in wealth, but in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” The person who “puts their hope in wealth” experiences the world as a problem of scarcity. Money’s function is to identify numerically what goods we most want, according to how scarce they are. Therefore “hope in wealth” is an agreement with that system of evaluation: whatever is scarce is valuable, and whatever valueless must be worthless. But the person who “hopes in God” experiences the world as an expression of his abundance. On this view, we are so awash with good things that we generally have no reason to worry. For such a person, it follows that monetary wealth is simply a tool for orderly sharing of this great, God-given abundance that surrounds us. Of course, such sharing is transacted amongst others who experience their world as a problem of scarcity, a system that sustains the monetary value of things. But the Christian is not hoodwinked by that system, and simply uses that system to bless others with God’s abundance. Such a person has “seen into the matrix,” and knows that abundance, and the possibility of sharing it, remains with or without any monetary system.

When it comes to giving and sharing possessions, it is indeed striking that Paul does not enforce the law of tithing. He does give commands (see 1 Tim. 6:17a), but not without exposing their foundations in the order of creation and character of God. And he has evidently been instructed by the law, as his appeal for proportionate giving suggests, a principle enshrined in the



tithes and offerings, and as the echo of Deuteronomy 15:14 in 1 Corinthians 16:2 demonstrates.

CONCLUSION

The subject of Paul and the law is rightly regarded as one of the knottiest puzzles in the study of the New Testament. Paul affirms that, “the law is holy, just and good,” insists that, “we uphold the law,” and asks rhetorically, “does the law not speak entirely for our sake?” Yet the same Paul also holds that believers in Christ “are not under the law,” believes that “the law brings death and works wrath,” and maintains that “Christ is the end of the law.”

It is possible to disagree with my understanding of some of the details and still see the three signature steps as characteristic of Paul’s dance with the law. Along with engaging in careful exegesis, the biggest task for students of Paul is to clarify the sense in which, and the extent to which, the apostle *repudiates*, *replaces*, and *re-appropriates* the Law of Moses.

With respect to the law, Paul is like the restaurant proprietor who fires a waitress, replaces her, and then hires her as the maitre de’ and as the sommelier. Her function of serving tables would end and someone else would perform that role. But she would then carry out two different functions in the restaurant, as hostess and as manager of the wine service. To get the full picture of the status of this particular woman you need to take all three moves into account, namely her termination, substitution, and re-hiring.

A hermeneutical solution to Paul and the law reads Paul as undertaking a polemical re-reading of the Law of Moses, which involves not only a repudiation and rejection of the law as “law-covenant” and its replacement by other things, but also a re-appropriation of the law “as prophecy” (with reference to the

gospel) and “as wisdom” (for Christian living). This construal finds support not only in what Paul says about the law, but also in what he does not say and in what he does with the law. And it highlights the value of the law for preaching the gospel and for Christian ethics.

