

Law and the Gospel of Salvation

by

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Sometime ago, a friend sent me a list of affirmations concerning giving the gospel of salvation, to which he asked me to respond. Following each you will find my answer to each affirmation.

Affirmation One

The gospel message in its entirety cannot be given in three minutes; it can't be done.

My response: Yes, it can be given in less than three minutes.

Paul gave the gospel in the following words:

1 Corinthians 15:1-5

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

I just read it twice, and I averaged 22 seconds per reading. So I'd say that the gospel can be given repeatedly in three minutes.

Perhaps someone might have some questions as to the meaning of the words or expressions in the above passage. It may take a few minutes to explain some of the ideas, which would vary with the person and based on the questions the person asks.

I wrote a short article entitled "Are you a Christian?" in which I explain some of the salient facts of the Gospel. It is a brief presentation, but a person can read it, even read it slowly, in four minutes, or less. It could take longer to explain the gospel to a complete novice, someone who had never heard of the death and resurrection of Christ. And there are groups out there that change the meaning of both the words "death" and "resurrection." So one might need to refute those errors when giving the gospel to an unbeliever.

But I would not define such discussions as "giving the gospel." As noted, the length of time may vary from person to person. I've given the gospel in my classes in Bible College and Seminary, and have had people get saved through a simple reading without explanation. In fact, I've had pastors saved in my classes, men who were in "full time Christian service," but who never had the gospel actually presented to them. Oh, they were religious, but they didn't believe that the work of Christ saved them. But they got saved by a simple reading of the text.

Affirmation Two

If you only present the gospel message without explaining the need for Jesus through the explanation of the law, then you get people falling into easy believeism.

If you do not preach law and judgment, then you cannot understand the gospel message.

You need to present the law first and the gospel second.

The gospel message without preaching the law is not sufficient.

If you don't understand where you stand with God (preaching the law), then the gospel message, including the resurrection too, is not sufficient.

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My response: The five above statements are actually all part of one idea. Stated in the form of a question, it is, “Where does the law fit in giving the gospel of salvation?”

Many sincere and well-known Bible teachers have presented many or all of the above ideas in their teaching. Several passages are used to support the concept that the law must be presented before a person can understand or apply the gospel presentation. I’ll discuss just three of them.

Two passages are used to explain the meaning of sin. Unbelievers are often confused about what sin is, except to know that it is wrong. So, it is thought, that someone must explain further what the statement means that “*Christ died for our sins.*”

However, my experience is that many sincere people do not actually know what sin is. They assume that anything a person does that is wrong is sin. Often they include thoughts, and even dreams, as being sin. For a refutation of that false idea, see my work on the Epistle of James, which can be found in the website garlandshinn.com under the heading New Testament/James.

Romans 7:7

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."

The first passage that is often used to relate the idea of sin to the law is Romans 7:7. The question before the reader in the present context is this: Does Romans 7:7 teach that an unbeliever must have the law given to him in order to know what sin is? To answer this question, one must look carefully at the context, and the wording of the statement. First, we must ask ourselves, To whom is the passage written, to believers to or unbelievers?

Those who desire to use the law in presenting the gospel often believe that this passage is referring to Paul before he became a Christian. I disagree, because the context is not dealing with giving the gospel to unbelievers, but the relationship of a believer in the present household of God. Paul’s purpose here is to deliver the believer from the law, not place the unbeliever under law. This is shown by verse 6:

But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.

The *we* clearly refers to believers, with whom Paul is identifying himself. In order for a believer to be delivered from a false view of dealing with sin, he must be delivered from the law, because the law condemns, and puts to death. It has no power in dealing with the question of sin in Christian service.

Paul says, “For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, You shall not covet.” This is greatly misunderstood. Paul does not mean that he would not have understood what *covet* means because of what the law said. He means that he would not have known sin as an experience. The word *know* is from *ginosko*, which refers to knowledge gained by experience. All the law can do is cause a person to experience sin, because all it can do is point out that which is evil.

Since Romans 7 is presented by a believer to believers concerning aspects of Christian living, I do not believe that this passage means that the unbeliever should be presented with law in order to make clear the gospel. But there is another passage which is sometimes used to relate sin to the law.

1 John 3:4

Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.

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In some ways, this verse is more compelling than the Romans 7:7 statement. It gives a direct definition of sin. Unfortunately, a problem exists with the traditional translation of this sentence, especially as found in the King James Version.

The traditional King James Version translation of 1 John 3:4 is, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.” This statement has colored the presentation of the definition of sin, but the translation is misleading. Virtually all modern translations say, “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” This is a correct translation, taken from the New King James Version.

But the misconception remains, because the word *lawlessness* is taken to refer to the law of Moses. Those who desire to use the law to explain sin return to the idea of “transgression of the law” as the basic meaning. But *transgression* is a word not found here.

Simply stated, sin is not a transgression of a law, but is an act of lawlessness. The word *lawlessness* (*anomia*) refers to acting as though there is no requirement even though one knows what the requirement is. John’s purpose in 3:4 is *not* to present law as a precursor to the Gospel, but to show that there are various kinds of unrighteous acts, and one is sin, a concept vital to Christian living.

Paul proves that there must be a requirement from God before a person can sin (Romans 5), but that requirement does not need to be forensic law,¹ such as the Old Testament Mosaic code. Indeed, any requirement, once ignored and violated, will do. What John means is that any willful violation of a known requirement is sin, something that believers today can, and do, commit, without being under the Mosaic code. Today we have requirement as believers, but they are non-forensic. We are not under law.

So I do not believe that it is correct to attempt to use 1 John 3:4 to say that we need an explanation of law to precede the giving of the gospel. But there is a passage that seems to teach that, and we find it in Galatians.

Galatians 3:23-24

23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (NKJV)

This is the passage that many well-known Bible teachers have used to teach that the law needs to be presented to the unbeliever. After all, does not Paul say that “the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith?” Should we not, then, use the law in that manner? Should we not place the law before the unbeliever so as to bring him to Christ?

As a young man in Bible Institute, I was taught that the law was needed to bring a sinner to salvation, and this was the passage that was used. I believed that idea, and practiced it for some years. However, I no longer do so. I believe that sincere believers have misinterpreted this passage because of a lack of careful analysis. Do not get me wrong. I’m not condemning them, for I, too, misused this passage for some years. But some gracious and godly Bible teachers presented this passage in a way that I’d not heard before, and I changed my approach. Or rather, instigated by their presentation, I re-

1 Forensic law is a requirement with penalty for violation attached. Grace requirements in the New Testament are non-forensic law, because there is no penalty attached. Whatever penalty that might have been applied was paid by Christ on the cross. Romans 8:1-2 states, “Therefore, *there is* not now any condemnation to the ones in Christ Jesus who are not walking according to *the* flesh, but according to *the* Spirit.”² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus freed me from the law of sin and death.”

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studied the passage using correct, accepted principles of interpretation that allowed me to change my mind.

Again, the first issue is one of context. The over-all context of Galatians is not dealing with salvation, but with *daily* justification. It is important to realize that the word *justification* has two uses in Paul's terminology. One has to do with the initial faith of the unbeliever. The other has to do with the faith program for the believer. It is that second use that we find in Galatians. Many fine men have missed this distinction, but it is clearly there. My professors at San Francisco Conservative Baptist Seminary, where I studied for my Master's degree, all held that this passage did not deal with initial justification, but with daily justification. Why? Because of the context!

I'd like, at this place, to provide you with my translation of this passage in its entirety. It will help when I explain the interpretation I'm about to give.

Galatians 3:21-4:7

21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given which was able to produce life, truly righteousness would be by the law. ²² But the Scripture confined all things under sin, in order that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to the ones who believe.

23-24 And before the coming of the faith, we were kept under guard under law, having been confined for the faith about to be revealed, so that the law was our pedagogue to bring us to Christ, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But since the faith came, we are no longer under a pedagogue.

26 For you are all sons of God through your faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ Neither Jew nor Greek is in Him, neither slave nor free person is in Him, neither male nor female is in Him. For you are all one man in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are of Christ, then you are the seed of Abraham, and heirs according to the promise.

1-2 Now I say that as long as the heir is a minor child, he differs not at all from a slave, though he is lord of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time set by the father. ³ Even so we, when we were minor children, were enslaved under the elements of the world.

4-5 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, coming out of a woman, coming under the law, in order that he might deliver the ones under the law, in order that we might receive son placement. ⁶⁻⁷ And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, who cries out Abba, Father; with the result that you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, also an heir of God through Christ.

The Historical Context

Galatians was written to refute the legalistic teaching of unbelieving Jews who were contradicting Paul's presentation of grace for daily living. These men did not believe in initial justification by law, but they did believe in daily justification by law. Furthermore, they believed that once a person became a believer, that person, if a Gentile, must be circumcised in order to please God (Galatians 5:2-3). Why? For two reasons.

First, circumcision was the method by which an individual male entered into the household of Israel (Exodus 12:44-48; Leviticus 12:3). Indeed, circumcision was initially given to Abraham for this very reason (Genesis 17:10-27). Circumcision was the sign of entering into God's household. These

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unbelieving Jews knew this truth. They understood that if Gentiles were able to have a right standing before God by faith alone, the household of Israel was invalid, and was being replaced by a new household, one that consisted of both circumcised and uncircumcised individuals. They could not abide this, because it meant that the Old Testament program for Israel was being set aside.

Second, circumcision obligated the individual to keep the entire law (Galatians 5:2-3). This entailed not just the moral obligations, but the ceremonial ones as well. Never mind that these dispersion Jews were not keeping the ceremonial law, at least not regularly. They understood the danger before them, that they would no longer be God's special people, obligated to keep the law.

The Literary Context

It is necessary to analyze the immediate context to understand it correctly. Several things are easy to overlook. We will examine individual statements within the passage in some detail.

Galatians 3:21-22

21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given which was able to produce life, truly righteousness would be by the law. ²² But the Scripture confined all things under sin, in order that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to the ones who believe.

Paul had just presented the truth that the Christian has a non-physical rather than genetic relationship to Abraham. He did so by explaining the nature of the promise to Abraham, and that the believer today is an heir of the promise in a spiritual sense. But then, the law came. Between Adam and Moses, there was no forensic law (Romans 5:12-13). But did the law invalidate the promises of God? Paul says certainly not! Why?

The law was not able to produce life. This does not mean that the law was not able to get someone saved, which was certainly true. But salvation is not the context here. The statement actually means that law could not produce life in the daily living sense. This is confirmed by the statement that if it could, daily righteousness would be by the law. All that it could do is produce sin.

Therefore, "the Scripture confined all things under sin." Note the past tense of "confined." Paul is referring to the period of time during which the Mosaic law was in force. The law pointed out daily sin, and therefore, the Scripture (here, the legal writings of Moses) confined all things under sin. There was no way out. Everywhere the Old Testament Israelite looked in the law, there was a forensic requirement. Do it, or die!

Historically speaking, what was the purpose of the period of law? It was put in place in order that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to the ones who believe (vs. 22). Note that "the ones who believe" is not the same as "those who get saved." He means believe in the daily faith sense. This is the only way the following verses make any sense. Those who believe for daily living, rather than practice the law, both preceded the law and followed the law. But the faith program was not in evidence under the law.

Galatians 3:23-25

23-24 And before the coming of the faith, we were kept under guard under law, having been confined for the faith about to be revealed, so that the law was our pedagogue to bring us to Christ, in order that we might be justified by faith.

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25 But since the faith came, we are no longer under a pedagogue. "Before the coming of the faith" is not a reference to the personal faith of an individual, but to the program of faith. Under the law, faith had not come in the program sense. Yet there were individuals who believed for initial justification under the law. But the law itself was not a faith program, but a works program.

"We were kept under guard under the law" is of specific interest. First, the pronoun *we* is misconstrued to mean "we in our state of unbelief." It is then sometimes applied to unbelievers in general, as being still under law today. However, this is simply an inaccurate analysis. The word *we* in vs. 23 is in contrast to the word *you* in vs. 26. Two distinct groups of people are being referred to.

The *we* of vs. 23-24 refers to the Israelites under the law. The entire passage has an historical cast to it. Paul was one of the Israelites at the time that the "under the law" statement was true, and hence Paul means the "we," in the sense of "we Israelites." However, the *you* of verse 26 is referring to the Gentile believers in Galatia who were not under law (Galatians 5:18), rather than to the Israelites under the law before the establishment of the grace program. It was the Israelites who were *kept under guard under the law*. It was the Israelites who had been confined for the faith about to be revealed. It was the Israelites for whom the law was their pedagogue to bring them to Christ, which cannot be applied today.

Make no mistake, here. This is not referring to unbelievers in general, but to the household of Israel under the law. The phrase "bring us to Christ," refers to the Israelites being brought to the *time* of Christ's first coming, not to the individual unbeliever being kept under law so as to produce some sort of guilt feelings so that he can get saved! Such a programmed guilt contradicts Scripture. It hearkens back to the old "hell-fire and brimstone" preaching of the legalists of an earlier time. The Scriptures know nothing of frightening a sinner into coming to Christ.

As noted, the passage before us is a *time* passage. During the time of law, Israel was confined, and there was no solution to the daily sin problem. But a specific time came, referred to in 4:4-5.

Galatians 4:4-5

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, coming out of a woman, coming under the law, in order that he might deliver the ones under the law, in order that we might receive son placement.

The time period of being "under the law" began to decay with the birth of Christ. Oh, it was not until the final departure of Christ and the dispensing of grace by Paul that the forensic Mosaic law was abolished for daily living. But the inevitable consequence of Christ's birth, rejection, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the resident Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 began with the incarnation of Christ; *born of a woman, coming under the law, in order that He might deliver the ones under the law, in order that we (Israelites) might receive son placement.*

Therefore, the purpose clause "*in order that we might be justified by faith*" has nothing to do with initial justification, but with daily justification, justification by faith in the grace program for New Testament living. This is confirmed by the following statements.

Galatians 3:26-29

26 For you are all sons of God through your faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ Neither Jew nor Greek is in Him, neither slave nor free person is in Him, neither male nor female is in Him. For you are all one man in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are of Christ, then you are the seed of Abraham, and heirs according to the promise.

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New Testament sonship of the individual believer is a doctrine of maturity. The Old Testament Israelites were considered immature. Paul uses the “you” in vs. 26 to distinguish his readers, Gentiles in Galatia, with the Israelites of the Old Testament. Sonship, that is spiritual maturity, is *through faith in Christ Jesus*, not through works of law.

As a result of the change of program from the old household of Israel to the new household of the body of Christ, it is possible for believers today to claim to be the seed of Abraham. Not simply the genetic seed of the Old Testament Israelite, but the spiritual seed of living a faith life, a life of non-condemnation. There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). This is the direct result of being baptized into Christ, and therefore being identified with Him in His death, resurrection, and ascension. Hence, we are to set our minds on things above, not on things on the earth (Colossians 3:1).

Galatians 4:1-7

1-2 Now I say that as long as the heir is a minor child, he differs not at all from a slave, though he is lord of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time set by the father.

3 Even so we, when we were minor children, were enslaved under the elements of the world. ⁴⁻⁵ But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, coming out of a woman, coming under the law, in order that he might deliver the ones under the law, in order that we might receive son placement. ⁶⁻⁷ And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, who cries out, Abba, Father, with the result that you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, also an heir of God through Christ.

In Galatians 4:1-7 Paul continues his historical contrast between Israel and the body of Christ, as two distinct households. He represents Israelites as heirs, but as minor children. The Greek word child is *nepios*, a word which emphasizes immaturity. He is identical to a slave, even though he is lord of all. He is under guardians and tutors until the time set by the father. This is the cultural illustration that Paul uses to identify Israel’s condition under the law. The law was its guardian, its pedagogue, its steward, and therefore there was an element of control that stopped short of mature expression.

Verse 3 indicates that Paul believed “we,” that is, Israelites, were minor children. They were enslaved. They could not break free from the elements of the world.

Verses 4-5, as explained above, indicate that Israel is no longer under the law. The time came, and the program changed. Some think that the law, that is, the Mosaic law, is still in force, that it has a legitimate purpose today. This is simply not true. It was abolished for today, not for only one group of people, but for all people subsequent to the time of Christ’s coming.

Again the contrast is seen in vs. 6-7. “You” Galatians are mature sons, and because you are God the Father sent forth the Holy Spirit. Now the relationship to God is distinct. The Old Testament Israelite had no indwelling Spirit. He could not control the heart (that is, the mind), since the law precluded that. But the believer today is a different kind of heir. He is an heir who is not a slave, like Israel, but an adult, mature son. And since that is true, he is an heir of God through Christ, with all the abilities of the indwelling Spirit to draw from.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I find no basis in the New Testament for using the law to precede the gospel presentation. Indeed, it is not law that needs to be presented, but God’s grace and mercy (Ephesians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5), for no passage dealing with salvation in the New Testament ever uses law as a lever to

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bring someone to salvation. The gospel, and the gospel alone, carefully presented, and explained when necessary, is sufficient to bring an unbeliever to faith.

The phrase “easy believeism” in these affirmations. That phrase does not refer to the simple giving of the gospel, but to the misrepresentation of means to *apply the gospel*. Such phrases as “ask Jesus into your heart,” or “receive Christ as your personal savior,” or “pray to receive Christ,” are examples of easy believeism, as they present false means of applying the gospel. Scripture presents only one way to apply the gospel of salvation. That is by faith, or belief, but not asking, receiving, or praying. And certainly not presenting the Old Testament Law system as a hammer to produce feelings of guilt in the unbeliever!