

## Dead to the Law

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H. J. Schoeps observed, “The non-eschatological Paul is simply unintelligible.” Yet, he felt that the eschatological Paul had a mistaken eschatology—which means that (according to Schoeps) we can understand Paul only to be wrong. He further wrote, “We should misunderstand the apostle’s letters as a whole, and the governing consciousness from which they sprang, if we fail to recognize that Paul only lives, writes and preaches, in the unshakable conviction that his generation represents the last generation of mankind.”



Notice, he says the “last generation of mankind.” Contrary to Schoeps, Paul did not believe that his was the final generation of humanity. Paul understood that he was living in the waning days of the Old Covenant, anxiously waiting for and working towards the full arrival of the New Covenant. Therefore, his historical setting made him a man of “two covenants.” Paul believed that his was the final generation under the bondage of the Law, and he anticipated the consummation of “the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers,” which he linked to God’s raising of the dead.

He wrote about covenantal transition and resurrection in Romans 7. “In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Romans 7:4)

Paul explicitly connected ‘death to the Law’ with the ‘death of Christ.’ Furthermore, he tied this in with receiving the promise, which means receiving resurrection life. In Galatians 3:21, Paul showed that the Law, while given by God, was incapable to bring about resurrection life. “Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law.” For Paul, the reception of resurrection life came through dying with Christ to the Law. From this perspective, Paul wrote, “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:19). Paul recognized that the Law led him all the way to Christ (Gal. 3:24), which includes Christ’s death by which Paul became dead to the Law.

Why did he need to become dead to the Law? Paul explains, “I died to the Law so that I might live to God.” In this sense, Paul could say that the Law was not contrary to the promise of God since the Law actually led to Christ’s death to the Law. Living to God equals the Promise of life obtained and fulfilled in Christ (Gal 3:16-22).

The need for freedom from the Law is not because the Law is sin. Paul described the Law as holy, and the commandment (that tied Israel to the Law) as holy, just and good (Romans 7:12). Sin is the culprit. For Paul, the Law was “the strength of sin” (1Corinthians 15:56) because sin utilized the Law to produce death. But in so doing, the Law exposed sin “in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure” (Romans 7:13). This set the stage for the defeat of sin by the power of God’s comprehensive

grace through the faith of Christ. Paul wrote, “But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21).

There would be no power in freedom if there had been no agony in bondage. “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19). The Law’s purpose, then, was to “imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). From this viewpoint, Ernst Kasemann expressed, “Freedom from the powers of sin and death takes concrete shape in freedom from the law.”<sup>[i]</sup>

But what does death to the Law mean? Is death absolute, or was Paul talking about dying to a misunderstanding and misapplication of the Law? Since the Law does not die, is there ground for correlating Law and Gospel?

In Romans 7, Paul showed that the Law—not merely a misunderstanding of the Law—has dominion over a man as long as he lives (Rom. 7:1). Then, he illustrates this point with marriage as prescribed by the Law. “Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.” (Rom. 7:2). Without departing from or altering the structure of his premise, Paul made this application: “In the same way, my brothers, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Rom. 7:4).

Who is the husband that dies, and what role does the body of Christ have in the husband’s death that provides release from the Law? What is meant by “the body” of Christ? Certainly, it is in some way connected with the husband who dies—unless we adopt C. H. Dodd’s conclusion that is one of Paul’s “blundering allegories.”<sup>[ii]</sup> But Dodd’s suggestion is probably not the best route to take.

In Romans 7:6, we read, “and now we have ceased from the law, *that being dead* in which we were held, so that we may serve in newness of spirit, and not in oldness of letter” (Young’s Literal Translation, emphasis added). Here we see the “*that*” is the husband, whose death grants release from the Law. This is integrally connected to “the flesh” Paul speaks of in verse 5, “we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” Here Paul emphasized that “we *were* in the flesh,” meaning that they were *no longer* fleshly. In Romans 8:9, Paul elaborated on this idea, “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit.” The flesh had been put to death through the body of Christ. Christ was put to death “in the flesh” (1Peter 4:18).

Therefore, “death in the flesh” defines the death that is in the likeness of Christ’s death, the death that gives release from the Law. This was Paul’s point in writing that Christ “abolished in his flesh the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in himself one new man” (Ephesians 2:15).

In this manner, Christ “condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-

4). The weakness of the Law was not revelatory; it was anthropological. It could not give life “in that it was weak through the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

As seen in Galatians 4:21-31, “according to the flesh” denotes that which is within human power, whereas “according to the Spirit” denotes God’s unlimited power. In a real sense, humanity became wedded to “the flesh” in departing from God. Since God alone gives life, Adam lost life (the life that the promise and the gospel are about) “in the day” that he chose to live “in the flesh”—not some 930 years later. Subsequently, the plight of humanity was wedded to “the flesh.” Not a very blissful union.

Shall we, then, take the Law of the first husband and integrate it with the second husband answering to “the Spirit” (2Corinthians 3:17)? To Gentiles who were being urged by Judaizers to seek righteousness through the Law, which (if possible), would mean “Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21). Paul’s question in Galatians 3:3 is direct and instructive, “Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?”

Moreover, Paul had the Gentiles in mind when he wrote Romans 7:4, “You have died to the law through the body of Christ.” The folly of their seeking eschatological perfection by embracing the Law that bound Israel to the flesh could never bring them into the fullness of the promise, just as it could not bring all Israel to fullness apart from Christ.

The eschatological tension peculiar to Paul’s time is present in his statement of concern to the Galatians, “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). He followed this with the penetrating question in verse 21, “Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?” From there, we find the symbolic application of Hagar (the bondwoman) and Sarah (the free woman) to the “two covenants.” This illustrates the enslaving power of the old and the freedom of the new. Ishmael (who was born according to the flesh) does not symbolize Israelites who made the wrong use of the Law. Some surely did, but no use of the Law could have made all Israel anything other than children of a bondwoman—the seed of the Law (Romans 4:13-16). The Law tied Israel to “the flesh” and *nothing could change that except the death of that to which they were bound by the Law*. Jesus Christ was the one to accomplish that death, and thus deliver the captives and “set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

Paul concluded his “two covenants” symbolism with the exhortation, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Therefore, coming under a “yoke of slavery” is equated with their desire to be “under the Law” (Gal 4:21). The Jerusalem Conference addressed this very issue by agreeing that the Gentiles were free from the Law (see Acts 15:10, 23-29.) So, in understanding Paul on the Law and other related matters, it is important to see the Covenantal Eschatological setting as experienced in his day, which brought death to the Law and life to and by God through Christ.

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[i] Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, p.191.

[ii] C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 103. Dodd felt that Paul “lacks the gift for sustained illustration of the ideas through concrete images.” Perhaps it is more likely the “lack of gift” lies in the field of interpretation.