

Stop Press! No Law for Believers! Really?

In a Facebook Group devoted to the promulgation of new-covenant theology, one which takes the view that the believer is not under the law of Christ, a recent (September 2017) thread had an opening post which included the following statement:

No Law! ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law’. Galatians 5:22-23 ESV. This verse is indisputable. It cannot be implied that Paul only intends to say that the law of Moses alone is not in play – he plainly says ‘NO LAW OF ANY KIND’. And this indicates that when he says, so many times, elsewhere, that the believer is not ‘under law’, he also means ‘not under any law’. Not merely ‘no longer under the law of Moses’, as some would like to have it, although the Gentile never was anyway.

I profoundly disagree with the major claim in the above. However, in this article I will not repeat the arguments I have set out in several of my works, showing that the believer is under the law of Christ. My present purpose is simply to ask some questions and point out, once more,¹ how some, reading such a categorical statement, might run with it and end up in a very bad place. Of course, if the original premise is scriptural, then those consequences have to be faced, but I hope we can all agree that when we publish we should do everything we can to prevent our readers drawing the wrong conclusion from our words.

The categorical statement

The categorical statement I want to highlight is this:

¹ See my ‘Words Have Power’.

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Another member of the group later added this comment:

We [that is, believers] are not under law, so there are no laws to obey. We are under grace not law.

As I say, I strongly disagree with both statements, but I have no intention here of arguing that the believer is under the law of Christ, and that that law is written in all Scripture in the hands of Christ and his apostles, having already tackled the leading points in published works.² Even so, I must confess that how anybody can argue that the believer is not under the law of Christ when faced with Matthew 5 – 7, John 12:47 – 16:66 and 1 John, utterly baffles me. I freely admit that the phrase ‘the law of Christ’ is not used in any of those passages, but what else can they be referring to? Nevertheless, all I want to do here is point out that if these two believers are right, then certain consequences follow.

1. If these two believers are right, this can only mean that believers, not being under any law, are not under the law of the land in which they live, and they do not have to obey it.

And yet the apostle is explicit:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are

² See, in particular, my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed (Rom. 13:1-7).

Do not misread the opening ‘Let’. The apostolic ‘let’ is a command. Every believer must be subject to – that is, he must obey – the governing authorities. Surely that means that every believer has to obey the law of the land. If that paragraph does not mean that the believer is subject to the law of the land and must obey it, I should like to know what it does mean.

Moreover, it was not the last time the apostle said such thing. As he told Titus:

Remind them [that is, believers] to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient (Tit. 3:1).

And Peter had something to say about it:

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

On my reading of this passage, I am forced to one conclusion only. The believer is under the law of the State, and it is a vital part of his testimony to the world to obey that law. Of course, if the authorities demand something contrary to Scripture and conscience, something contrary to the law of Christ, then the believer’s reply must be the same as Peter and John when the authorities tried to stop them preaching gospel:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

We must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Nevertheless, the basic principle is clear: believers are under the law of the land in which they live, and they must obey it.

So I ask: How can it be right to tell believers that they are under no law?

2. *If these two believers are right, why do the Scriptures stress that believers are bondservants of Christ?*

Let me begin by continuing the extract from 1 Peter:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust (1 Pet. 2:18).

And Paul had something to say on it too:

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters (Eph 6:5).

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters (Col. 3:22).

Incidentally, do not miss the way Paul describes the relationship between bondservants and masters: ‘Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants...’ (1 Tim. 6:1). Note the word ‘yoke’. A bondservant is under a yoke. Now the concept of the ‘yoke’ plays a large part in the life of the believer. Christ made the position explicit:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my *yoke* upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my *yoke* is easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

Clearly, the believer is a bondservant of Christ; he is under his yoke. Do not miss the ‘upon you’. Yoke? We know the Jews were under the yoke of Moses. When the Jerusalem church met to deal with certain law-men who were insisting that Gentiles had to come under Moses’ law, Peter confronted them:

Why are you putting God to the test by placing a *yoke* on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? (Acts 15:10).

‘Why are you making believers come under Moses’ law?’ That is what Peter was challenging.

Now believers are not yoke-less; they most definitely are under a yoke – Christ’s yoke. They are not under Moses’ yoke, of course, and they must not strap that yoke on again, or allow anybody else to strap it on them. As Paul declared:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a *yoke* of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

And he clearly meant the law of Moses.³

Putting all this together, it is beyond dispute that just as a bondservant is under the yoke of his master, under his master’s law, so the believer is under Christ’s yoke, under his law. And this of course is borne out by Paul’s illustration in Romans 6:

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law [that is, Moses’ law] but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law [that is, Moses’ law] but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from

³ Yes, ‘yoke’ is used in more than one way in Scripture. Two oxen would be ‘yoked’ (Luke 14:19), a believer and an unbeliever can be wrongly ‘yoked’ (2 Cor. 6:14), two fellow-workers are ‘yoked’ (Phil. 4:3) – that is they can be in tandem. But when ‘yoke’ is used of a bondservant, it means he is under his master’s law. Israel was under Moses’ ‘yoke’. Israel was not in tandem with Moses, but under his law. The believer is under Christ’s ‘yoke’; that is, he is not in tandem with Christ as an equal, but under his law.

the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:14-23).

As the context makes clear, the believer is not under the law of Moses, but is now a slave or bondservant of Christ. As such, he is under his yoke or law. And he has to obey it.

So I ask: How can it be right to tell believers that they are under no law?

3. If these two believers are right, why do the Scriptures stress that believers are married to Christ?

As they do:

A married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, my brothers, you also 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. 7:2-4).

The context, as in Romans 6 (there should be no chapter division), makes it clear that Paul is talking about the law of Moses when he says that the believer has died to the law of Moses to be married to Christ. Clearly, then, the believer is under the law of the new husband. This principle of being under the husband's rule, authority – yes, law – is borne out by such passages as these:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24).

Older women... are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled (Tit. 2:3-5).

Wives, be subject to your own husbands (1 Pet. 3:1).⁴

The believer is subject to Christ as the new husband. He has to submit to his Redeemer. And this means that the believer has to obey Christ's law.

So I ask: How can it be right to tell believers that they are under no law?

4. If these two believers are right, this can only mean that believers never sin.

Which, needless to say, is nonsense. Why do I say that this is the consequence of the claims in the thread? Because of these apostolic statements:

Through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20).

Where there is no law there is no transgression (Rom. 4:15).

I am, of course, familiar with the arguments about the meaning of 'sin' and 'transgression', and I know the way the first of these verses has been misused to teach the preparation of sinners for Christ by the law, but putting all that to one side, surely these verses tell us that where there is no law there can be no sin – transgression being sin more precisely defined. At the very least, there can be no sin that can be objectively defined. Adam sinned because he broke God's command – God's law to him (Gen. 3). Israel sinned by breaking God's law – the Mosaic law given to Israel. Pagans sin when they break the law of conscience (Rom. 2:12-15) and, supremely, when they refuse to obey God's command to repent and trust Christ (John 3:18-19,36; Acts 17:30). Why, even before Sinai, pagans died because of sin, their sin in Adam and their actual sin. And yet, as Paul declared:

⁴ See also 1 Cor. 14:34.

To be sure, sin was in the world before the law [of Moses] was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law (Rom. 5:13).

Clearly, then, pagans at that time were under law. They still are. And so are believers. Believers sin when they break a law; when they break a law, they sin. Believers must be under a law, because sin is the breaking of that law they are under – and no believer is perfect in this life. And that law can only be the law of Christ.

So I ask: How can it be right to tell believers that they are under no law?

5. If these two believers are right, why did the apostle say what he did in 1 Corinthians 9:21?

No, I am not referring to the almost-universal translation of the Greek which has Paul saying that he is under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21), though, as I have argued, that is an excellent rendering.⁵ I refer to the fact that when Paul spoke of himself, he said he was one:

...not being outside the law of God (1 Cor. 9:21).

Paul was not outside the law of God. The Greek word he used was *anomos*. He was not *anomos*. This means he was not destitute of law. That is what the Greek means. Paul described the Gentiles as being *anomos* (destitute of) the Mosaic law, calling them 'those outside the law' (1 Cor. 9:21), outside the law of Moses, as the context makes clear; that is, those not having the law of Moses, not being under the law of Moses. In contrast, he himself was not *anomos*; that is, he was under law. He was not now under the law of Moses, of course, as he clearly stated, but he was under the law of God. I am convinced this means he was under the law of Christ, but let us leave it more general. Paul was under the law of God.

⁵ Once again, see my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

So I ask: How can it be right to tell believers that they are under no law?

Finally, as I said, what might be the consequences if believers pick up the assertions on that Facebook thread, and run with them? Is there any danger that the idea of being law-less might morph into being lawless? How serious that would be!