

The ‘But’ of John 1:17: Absent but Vital

The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

God gave Israel the law through Moses (John 7:19); and we know why: ‘The law entered that the offence might abound’ (Rom. 5:20). He also gave Israel the law to predict and foreshadow the coming of Christ and the new covenant (Deut. 18:15-18; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 3:5; 8:5; 10:1). Then, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son into the world, born under the law (Mark 1:15; Gal. 4:4), in order to redeem those under the law; that is, to redeem the elect, adopt them as his sons and give them his Spirit as a witness (Gal. 4:5-6). In short: God sent grace into the world by his Son, Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Tit. 2:11-14). And we know why: ‘But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom. 5:20-21).

Paul did not leave it there. He went on to set out the glories of that reigning grace in Christ:

Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. 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... There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit... As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out: ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then

heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:1-4,14-17).

What a contrast, law and grace! What a contrast, Moses and Christ (Heb. 3:1-6)! And how wonderfully John shines the spotlight on the contrast: ‘The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17)! The translators did not use the word *but* for nothing in John 1:17. The apostle points to a very definite, clear, unmistakable contrast between law and grace.

He is not alone:

There is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness... There is the bringing in of a better hope... For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second... In that [God] says: ‘A new covenant’, he has made the first obsolete (Heb. 7:18-19; 8:7,13).

In short:

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory (2 Cor. 3:6-9).¹

Yet, despite all this weight of evidence, Reformed writers seldom give John 1:17 proper consideration in their works on the law. How sad this is! Worse, some have gone so far as to deny the apostle’s contrast between law and grace! There is no contradiction between law and grace, so it is said. Even the *but* in John 1:17 has been dismissed as a delusion – a ‘will o’the wisp’.²

How sad is this. How wrong!

True, there is no ‘but’ in the Greek,³ but this is far from conclusive. It is certainly there in spirit and by implication. In fact, the lack of the stated ‘but’ makes its presence even more felt. Its absence speaks louder than its (obvious) inclusion; the finesse in John’s turn of

¹ For more on all this, see my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law* pp113-115,409-411.

² Are 2 Cor. 3:11; Heb. 7:18; 8:13 more of these ‘will o’the wisps’?

³ The NIV, strictly correct here, left it out.

phrase would have been blunted by the inclusion of the ‘but’. Therefore, although precisely catching the spirit of John’s words, our translators, in trying to help us more readily understand the apostle, by introducing the ‘but’, they have, in fact, taken some of the subtlety out of what he wrote. But whether in print, or in our head, the ‘but’ has to be understood.

Let me prove it. Take: ‘God be thanked that *though* you were the slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered’ (Rom. 6:17). To omit the *though* would be tantamount to making Paul say he was glad his readers had been the slaves of sin, when, in fact, he was thankful that *even though* they had been the slaves of sin, they had nevertheless obeyed the gospel. His argument hinges entirely on the *though*. If anybody dismisses the *though* as an English will o’ the wisp, a mere technicality of the language, he virtually destroys what Paul actually said. Yet there is no ‘though’ in the Greek text! As with the ‘but’ in John 1:17, its absence speaks volumes.

Similarly: ‘Though he was a Son, *yet* he learned obedience by the things which he suffered’ (Heb. 5:8). The *yet* is supplied, it is not in the original Greek, but by no stretch of the imagination can it be dismissed as trivial. In fact, its inclusion emphasises the amazing nature of what is being said. It is the most important word in the verse, even though the writer did not use it. Though Jesus was the Son of God, *even so, staggeringly, even he, yet he – he of all people –* learned obedience by the things which he suffered.

A few more examples must suffice: ‘Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath’ (Rom. 12:19). The *rather* gives the proper emphasis, but it is not in the original. Again, try leaving out the second *must* in John 3:30, *his* in John 6:52 (*his* is vital – any butcher can provide meat, but how could Jesus provide *his* own flesh for them to eat?), *as for* in John 9:29, *that is* in Ephesians 2:15, *rather* in 1 Timothy 4:7 (AV), *and escape* in 2 Timothy 2:26 (the verse becomes nonsense otherwise), *because* in 2 Timothy 4:3; and so on. None of these words are in the Greek!

Returning to John 1:17 – as I said, the *but* being left out, the verse is even more starkly powerful and blunt: ‘The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’. In fact, we could

– maybe, we should – use a full stop: ‘The law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’.

Clearly, however, a word or phrase is implied in the text, and has to be supplied. Reader, you may use *but*, or *whereas*, or *on the other hand*, or *in contrast*. You choose!

In addition, the context of John 1:17 demands the contrast. Read John 1:8,11-13,20. Above all, read John 1:18. There is no *but*, literally, in between the two sentences: ‘No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him’. Notwithstanding the lack of ‘but’, who would not agree that John here draws a remarkable contrast? In the past age – the age of law – God did not show his glory as now he has in the age of the gospel. Do not miss the eschatological ‘but now’ of Romans 3:21 once again.⁴

Let me take another passage of Scripture to underline the point. I refer to Hebrews 9. The inspired writer, opening the chapter with an exposition of the first or old covenant, soon sounds the note of its uselessness to cleanse the conscience (Heb. 9:1-10). ‘It was symbolic... imposed until the time of reformation’ (Heb. 9:9-10), ‘an illustration... applying until the time of the new order’ (NIV). What was this new order, this ‘reformation’? It was the coming of Christ, the gospel. How does the writer to the Hebrews state this fact? ‘But Christ came’, he said (Heb. 9:11), ‘when Christ came’ (NIV). These words should not be mumbled. They should be thundered: **‘But Christ came!’** ‘When Christ came!’ And the NIV caught the dramatic, stupendous sense of change at this watershed of the ages, exquisitely grasping the point of the ‘now’ in Hebrews 9:15: ‘Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – *now* that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant’. Once again, it is the eschatological ‘but now’, the great turning point of the ages. The shadow has gone, the reality has come. The external is finished, the inward is established. The weak is displaced by the mighty. The useless has been abolished by the effectual. It is John 1:17.

⁴ See my *Christ* pp76-79.378-379.

It is wrong to say that the gospel is a *clearer* way of salvation than the law. It is a *different* way, chalk and cheese! It will not do to say that John 1:17 *seems* to speak of the inferiority of the law when compared to the gospel. It does no such thing. The verse teaches that law and grace are very different things, two ages which are strongly contrasted. There is a distinction – more, an antithesis, an opposition, a contradiction – between the two, even as some Reformed writers admit, on occasion at great length.

Many Reformed commentators, however, are weak on the verse, or use their escape routes to say John was speaking about justification only, or about the ceremonial law. Furthermore, they are not averse to trying to uphold their system – that is, an excessive emphasis upon the continuity of the Testaments – by qualifying John, adding the proviso that, while, of course, the law *was* given through Moses, and grace and truth on the other hand *did come* by Jesus Christ, nevertheless, Moses brought some grace, and, in any case, believers are still under the moral law as a perfect rule of life.

John, of course, said nothing of the sort. What he said was: ‘The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’. And the verse says what it means, and means what it says to the reader of plain English. And it is full of contrast.

As I have said, by leaving out the ‘but’ John makes his point even stronger: ‘The law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’. Leaving out the ‘but’ actually lays more stress on the *grace*, and emphasises the contrast between that and *law*. It lays more stress on the *came*, and emphasises the contrast between that and the *given*. It lays more stress on *Jesus Christ*, and emphasises the contrast between him and *Moses*:

The law was given through Moses
Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ

What is more, from John 1:17 we learn that whereas the law *was given through* Moses, Christ *brought* grace. Note the passive/active contrast. Note the contrast between *given* and *brought*. Above all, it is not simply that Moses *received* one thing, and Christ *brought* something else. Both Moses and Christ are associated with covenants, but the difference between their covenants is vast. Moses was given *the law*; Christ brought *grace*. Moses was given *God’s* law; Christ

brought *his own* grace. Moses was given the old covenant; Christ brought the new. Moses' covenant was written on stone; Christ's is written in the heart. It is not just that Christ gives his people the gospel, and Moses gave the Jews the law. Christ gives his people *grace*, he gives his people a *heart* to love his gospel, but Moses could offer no power to keep the law. This contrast of covenants is a major aspect of the debate on the believer, the law and sanctification.

Small as John 1:17 may appear to be, it plays a vital role in the question of the believer and the law. Any work which fails to take proper account of what it teaches, can hardly be considered a serious attempt to get to grips with the biblical evidence on the subject.

David H.J.Gay
September 2014
davidhjgay@googlemail.com