

Law-less or Lawless?

There are two very important passages of Scripture which speak of the believer being under the law of Christ – though neither of them use the actual phrase *hupo nomon* – ‘under law’ – to Christ. In this article I want to look at one of those passages; namely, 1 John 3:4.¹ I quote the entire paragraph to give the context, highlighting the critical words:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. ***Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness (anomial); sin is lawlessness (anomia).*** You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:1-10).

The relevant Greek is *ho poiōn tēn hamartian, kai tēn anomian poiei; kai hē hamartia estin anomia*; literally, ‘practices sin also

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited the relevant section from my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*. All my books and kindles can be found on my Amazon and Kindle pages, and all my articles can be found either in my series: *New-Covenant Articles* or under eDocs on my sermonaudio page.

lawlessness practises; and sin is lawlessness'. Here we reach the crux of the text for our purposes. Now *anomia* can mean 'the condition of one without law – either because he is ignorant of it, or because he has a certain law and is violating it and showing contempt for it'.² The word bears these alternative meanings in Scripture. How can we decide? By the context, as always; always by the context.

In certain contexts, the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* speak of being destitute of the law in question, whatever that law may be. Let me give three examples.³

Take Acts 2:23. Peter, preaching Christ, told the Jewish crowd on the day of Pentecost: 'You have taken [him] by lawless hands, have crucified [him], and put [him] to death' (NKJV; see also ESV). The Jews were responsible for crucifying Christ but, to do the dirty work, they used Roman hands, Gentile hands, 'lawless hands'. The NASB, translating the phrase, 'by the hands of godless men', has a marginal note: 'Lawless hands, or, men without the law; that is, heathen'. The NIV correctly notes: 'Of those not having the law (that is, Gentiles)'. Peter, steeped in Jewish thought, was using the phrase, 'lawless men', in the Jewish sense. The men he was talking about were 'men without the law'. That is to say, they were law-less, outside the law of God, the law of Moses; they were Gentiles. The Jews boasted that they had the law of Moses. They were the only people to have it (Deut. 4:7-8,32-34; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:14; 3:1-2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). All the rest were 'law-less'. So, as Peter said, Christ was crucified by the Jews (who had the law of Moses) making use of the Gentiles (who did not have the law of Moses, the without-the-law people) to do the work. See also Matthew 20:18-19; and Galatians 2:15, where 'Jews by nature' are contrasted with 'sinners of the Gentiles' or 'Gentile sinners' (NIV). 'Sinners' and 'Gentiles', in such a context, means those who are law-less, outside the law of Moses, beyond the pale.

² See Thayer.

³ In these cases, it would be better to describe those involved as law-less and not lawless; that is (Moses') law-less.

As Leonard Verduin put it: The ‘lawless’ men of Acts 2:23 were not:

...lawless in the sense of ‘wicked’, but ‘lawless’ in the Jewish sense – ‘without the law’.⁴ In other words, they were law-less... The Jews prided themselves on being law-havers, the only people to whom God had given his law; this put all the rest in the ‘lawless’ category... [Christ was crucified by the Jews who used] the Gentiles, the without-the-law people... [as] their tool.⁵

Now for the second text, 1 Corinthians 9:21. I have already looked at it. Here are the relevant words: ‘To those outside the law (*anomois*) I became as one outside the law (*anomos*) (not being outside the law (*anomos*) of God but under the law of Christ’; literally, ‘to those without law (*anomois*) as without law (*anomos*) (not being without law (*anomos*) to God...)...’. The Gentiles did not have the law of Moses; they were, in that sense, law-less. They were outside the Jewish pale.

And then Romans 2:12: ‘For all who have sinned without the law (*anomōs*) will also perish without the law (*anomōs*)’. Clearly, the apostle is referring to the Gentiles who, though they were sinners, did not have the law of Moses. In that sense, they were law-less. They were outside the Jewish pale.

So much for the first meaning of the words in question: law-less.

But, of course, in other contexts, the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* speak of having a certain law, but showing contempt for it, and violating, breaking or transgressing it, whatever that law may be. Here are some examples:

Then will I declare to them: ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness (*anomial*)’ (Matt. 7:23).

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers (*anomial*) (Matt. 13:41).

⁴ Note Verduin’s proper use of ‘the’ law.

⁵ Leonard Verduin: *The Anatomy of a Hybrid: A Study in Church-State Relationships*, The Christian Harmony Publishers, Sarasota, 1992, p71.

You are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (*anomias*) (Matt. 23:28).

He was numbered with the transgressors (*anomōn*) (Luke 22:37).

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds (*anomia*) are forgiven, and whose sins are covered (Rom. 4:7).

Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness (*anomia*) leading to more lawlessness (*anomia*), so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:19).⁶

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness (*anomia*)? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

That day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness [some mss, *hamartias*, ‘of sin’; others, *anomias*, ‘of lawlessness’] is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness (*anomias*) is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one (*anomos*) will be revealed (2 Thess. 2:3-8).

The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless (*anomois*) and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with

⁶ How can anybody be *more* without law than without it? *more* lawless than law-less? They can, of course, be *more* lawless; that is, *more* sinful, showing *more* contempt for, and violation of, the law they are under. Omitting the ‘more’ (literally not in the Greek, but obviously the apostle’s meaning), does not alter the case. To be law-less is to be law-less. Take a line; it is either straight or it is not. It cannot be *more* straight.

the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:9-11).

Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness (*anomias*) and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Tit. 2:13-14).⁷

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness (*anomian*) (Heb. 1:9).⁸

I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins [and their lawlessnesses (*anomiōn*)] no more (Heb. 8:12).

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds [*anomiōn*] no more (Heb. 10:17).⁹

Righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless (*anomois*) deeds that he saw and heard)... (2 Pet. 2:7-8).

In all the above, the issue is not which law is being referred to in any particular passage. That, at this stage, is immaterial. Rather, the issue is that the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs*, in these passages, mean breaking the law which the people in question are under; any law. Law-breaking in this context is sin, and *vice-versa*. That is what the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* are referring to: men violating, showing contempt for, the law that they are under.

Richard Chenevix Trench:

While *anomos* is once at least in the New Testament used negatively of a person without law, or to whom a law has not been given (1 Cor. 9:21)... [and] of the greatest enemy of all law, the Man of Sin, the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:8), [nevertheless] *anomia* is never... the condition of one living without law, but always the condition or deed of one who acts contrary to law... Thus the Gentiles, not having a law (Rom. 2:14) might be charged with sin, but they, sinning without law

⁷ Christ did not need to die to redeem us from any lack of law. All he had to do was issue that law, give it to us! It was our law-breaking, our sin, that made redemption essential.

⁸ If the word ought to be *adikian*, this verse plays no part in this debate.

⁹ Note the same Greek word in Heb. 8:12 and 10:17, where it is translated 'sins' and 'lawless deeds', respectively.

(Rom. 2:12; 3:21), could not be charged with *anomia*. It is true, indeed, that, behind that law of Moses which they never had, there is another law, the original law and revelation of the righteousness of God, written on the hearts of all (Rom. 2:14-15).¹⁰

William Edwy Vine:

anomos ‘without law’, also denotes ‘lawless’ [see] Acts 2:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:4,8; [see] 2 Peter 2:8 where the thought is not simply that of doing what is unlawful, but of flagrant defiance of the known will of God.

anomia, akin to *anomos* is most frequently translated ‘iniquity’ (2 Thess. 2:7)... In 1 John 3:4... the real meaning of the word [is] ‘everyone that does sin (a practice, not the committal of an act) does also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness’. This definition of sin sets forth its essential character as the rejection of the law, or will, of God and the substitution of the will of self.¹¹

As I say, the context must determine which of the two meanings is correct in any particular passage.

So what about 1 John 3:4? The context could not be plainer; that is why I quoted it from verse 1 to verse 10. Here are the relevant words: ‘Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (*anomia*)... sins... sin... sinning... practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous... sinning... sinning... the works of the devil... sinning... sinning... practice righteousness’. John is not talking about mere *possession* of a law, or lack of it, but the *practice* of actual sinning and actual righteousness, the doing of works, obedience or disobedience to the law in question. These people are not law-less, but lawless; they are kicking over the traces, showing contempt for the law in question, the law which they are under. They have a law, they are under that law, they are

¹⁰ Richard Chenevix Trench: *Synonyms Of The New Testament*, section 66.

¹¹ W.E.Vine: *Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*. Vine, ‘an English biblical scholar, theologian, and writer... traces the words of the Bible... back to their ancient *koinē* Greek root words and to the meanings of the words for that day’ (Wikipedia).

obliged to obey it, but they break it, they do not keep it. We are talking about contempt of law, violation of law, transgression of law.

I say this not because all the major translations agree – but they do! – but because the context absolutely demands it. John is not concerned with possession of the law in question. He takes that for granted, as a given. All men are under one law or another.¹² Rather, he is concerned with a man's attitude to the law in question; in particular, his doing (or otherwise) of that law. Unrighteousness, sin, wickedness, in this connection is not a man's lack of law; it is failure to keep the law, whatever that law may be.

And as for the 'law' in question, just read the entire letter: it is full of commands and instructions and imperatives concerning Christ and his gospel. The very word 'commandment' comes seven times in the letter. It is impossible to miss the overtones of John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33. John's words in 1 John 3:1-10 could almost be coming directly from the mouth of Christ himself. In the context, it is patent that John means the law of Christ – he can only mean the law of Christ. He never mentions the law of Moses once in his entire letter. And in the context of 1 John, it is clear that John is telling believers that they have to keep the law that they are under. He is urging them to obey that law, he is commanding them to keep it. I cannot read his words in any other way. As the apostle says elsewhere in his letter:

By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, 'I know him', but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:3-6).

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this

¹² See my 'All Men Under Law'.

is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:1-3).

He certainly raises his doctrine to the highest possible pitch:

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God (1 John 3:8-10).

Now, although the phrase is not mentioned, this can only be the law of Christ. No other law will fit the bill. As I hinted, John had remembered Christ's discourse in John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33 (brought in any case to his memory by the Holy Spirit in accordance with Christ's promises – John 14:26; 16:12-15). Christ's commands, his law, are synonymous in this context, and obedience to the law of Christ (the commands of Scripture) is proof positive of the inward work of the Spirit. To claim to be led by the Spirit and yet not obey Scripture is a contradiction in terms.

In short, although the believer is not under the law of Moses, he is not law-less; he is under the law of Christ. And he is obligated to keep it. The believer really is free – in particular, set free from sin (Rom. 6:22), and free from the law of Moses (Gal. 5:1). But liberty is not licence. There is a rule for believers to live by. They are 'under law towards Christ', that 'perfect law of liberty'. They are ruled by 'the law of Christ', following 'this rule', 'walk[ing] by the same rule', having taken Christ's 'easy yoke', being taught by the Spirit 'to observe all things' which Christ commanded (Matt. 11:28-30; 28:20; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2,16; Phil. 3:16; Jas. 1:25; 2:12). Obedience to that law is essential.

If we cite the entire context of 1 John 3:4, the position could not be more explicit:

You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the

truth... I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him... See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (1 John 2:20-27; 3:1-4).¹³

The law of Christ, once again, virtually in a nutshell! In short, the believer *is* under the law of Christ, and this comprises the inward work of the Spirit *and* the external, written Scriptures.

And this passage is not unique. Consider Paul's letter to Titus. Note his opening emphasis upon his apostolic authority for issuing binding instruction, rule and command for Titus, in the first instance, then, through him, the believers in Crete, and then for all believers through this age:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour (Tit. 1:1-3).

Having laid the foundation, the apostle proceeds to set out detailed instruction. Titus has to appoint elders in every church, every one of whom 'must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it' (Tit. 1:10). Titus himself has to 'teach what accords with sound doctrine'

¹³ The theme continues in 2 and 3 John. Notice how many times John speaks of 'truth'. 'Truth' is inward (2 John 2), but clearly, by his use of 'command', 'walk in obedience to commands', 'teaching of Christ', it is also objective.

(Tit. 2:1), he has to ‘urge’ (Tit. 2:6), to ‘declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you’ (Tit. 2:15), ‘remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient...’ (Tit. 3:1), ‘to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works’ (Tit. 3:8). ‘Older women... are to teach what is good, and so train the young women’ (Tit. 2:3-4). In short: ‘Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works’ (Tit. 3:14).

And yet, with all that, the apostle, in the same letter, can declare:

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Tit. 2:11-14).

Once again, we have the combination of the inward work of God’s grace, this grace teaching believers from within, coupled with the outward apostolic command which has to be enforced by local elders in the *ekklēsia*, with believers mutually instructing and edifying one another, all the while taking responsibility for their own personal obedience, and all of it set out in the compass of the Scriptures.