

Law and the Christian Life

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1 The Paradox of Law and Grace

What role does the law play in the life of the believer?

Some people think that the law has no authority over us under the New Covenant, having been replaced by the inner work of the Holy Spirit. This view is common among dispensationalists and many nonconformist groups.

Others see it as the rule of life for the believer. This view is common among the reformed churches, and reaches its apex in reconstruction theology, which teaches that believers should seek to establish civil government that implements the non-ceremonial laws of the OT.

The discussion is not just academic. Here's an example. Deut 24:1-4 teaches that if a man divorces his wife, and if she subsequently remarries and the second marriage ends, the first husband may not take her back. The tragic scenario of divorce and remarriage is all too common today. If this situation should arise, is the first husband free to remarry his wife, or not? If the law is our rule of life, he may not. If the law is done away, perhaps he may.

Both sides can appeal to texts from the New Testament to support their positions.

On one hand, we are told that the law is no longer relevant to us:

Gal 3:24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

In 2 Cor 3:11, Paul describes the law, "the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones" (v. 7) as "that which is done away [καταργεω]."

On the other hand, our Lord warns against those who would deprecate the law.

Mat 5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. 19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Paul insists, using the very same verb as in 2 Cor 3:11,

Rom 3:31 Do we then make void [καταργεω] the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

In his very last epistle, he reminds Timothy,

2Ti 3:16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

The law is part of "all scripture," so it is "profitable for doctrine," and Paul and the other apostles extensively quote it to support their teaching in the epistles.

The picture is confusing. But I suspect that the confusion is misplaced. The problem is not that the na-

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ture of the law is paradoxical and confused. There's something else that's paradoxical and confused, and that's what leads to the very different statements about the law in the NT. The real paradox is the experience of the new believer, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, yet dominated by the flesh.

The Bible often describes salvation as a new birth. An infant is fully alive, but requires care and help that become unnecessary as he matures. Similarly, the new believer has eternal life, but must grow and mature in order to realize the full benefits of salvation. The law (along with the rest of God's word) supports and instructs young believers as they grow. Passages that appear to deprecate the Law are describing the promise of the New Covenant as it is experienced by a mature believer. Those that urge the law upon us are providing necessary support for our immaturity

So the paradox is not fundamentally intellectual and theological, but practical and pastoral. In addition, it explains not only the paradox of law and grace, but other related paradoxes concerning life under the New Covenant.

I'll develop this surprising insight through a series of observations that in themselves are not, I trust, surprising or controversial. Here's a summary of what lies ahead.

- The first three sections of this paper consider God's expectations for our conduct.
 - An overarching principle is that God requires his people to live in a certain way. The means by which he enables them to live godly lives may change, but the requirement does not.
 - The Hebrew prophets promised a New Covenant in which the outward work of the written law would be replaced by the inward work of the Spirit. The New Testament
 - Yet the New Testament is full of appeals to the law, citing or alluding to it in enjoining God's people to godly lives.
- The next two sections discuss the growth of the believer.
 - The real paradox of spiritual life, as in physical life, is that we begin as babies. In principle we have great promise and enjoy great privileges, but we begin life in a condition in which we cannot enjoy those privileges.
 - God has provided means for us to grow from our initial infancy to maturity, and the law is an important part of that provision.
- The final section brings these two lines of thought together to show how the paradox of Christian maturity explains not only the tension between law and grace, but two other paradoxes as well, the paradox of love and fear, and the paradox of teaching.

2 Godliness is Expected in Every Age

In every age, God imposes standards of conduct on his people. Clearly, this is true in the Old Testament. But the New Testament also indicates that God expects his people to live in a certain way. Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount is so full of ethical instruction that it has been compared to the giving of God's law to Israel on a different mount, Mount Sinai. Paul's letters are full of imperative verbs, telling people in the various churches how they should live. Even his most doctrinal epistles, Romans and Ephesians, have very practical sections (Eph 4-6; Rom 10-16) that are full of commands.

It's true that we are saved by God's grace, completely apart from any work or merit on our part. Eph 2:8-9 teaches that:

Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:
9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

But we shouldn't stop at v. 9. The next verse goes on to insist,

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto **good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

God's purpose in saving us is that we would do good works. In fact, he has preordained that result. It's not optional.

Our Savior

gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of **good works** (Tit 2:14).

We are to

cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting **holiness** in the fear of God (2Co 7:1).

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers,

Follow peace with all *men*, and **holiness**, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb 12:14)

Perhaps James states this theme more strongly than other writers:

Jam 2:20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

What shall we say about a faith that produces no works? Like a tree that has no leaves, it is dead. It may look like biblical trust in God, but the work that God does in the lives of his people produces holiness and good works, and any faith that does not yield these results is not the living faith that comes from God alone.

Whatever position we take on the relation of the law and grace, let's not lose sight of this fundamental principle. God intends his people to be holy and righteous, "zealous of good works." To whatever degree the law remains active today, it promotes our righteousness. And to whatever degree it is no longer active, something else must take its place in promoting our righteousness. One way or another, "the righteousness of the law" will be "fulfilled in us" (Rom 8:4).

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This observation immediately cautions us about one approach to the paradox. People sometimes quote Rom 6:14, “ye are not under law, but under grace,” to suggest that no rules apply to the believer’s life, and we are free to do “whatever the Spirit leads us to do,” which usually means whatever we feel like doing. Such an attitude is belied by the many commands that our Lord gives his disciples, and that the apostles give in their letters. We’ll consider those in a moment. First, though, we need to review the nature of the covenant under which we now live.

3 The Nature of the New Covenant

The dilemma that we are exploring wouldn't exist if we still lived under God's covenant with Israel at Sinai. Everyone agrees that the principle of law, embodied in the specific Mosaic law, applies under the Old Covenant. Many things changed with the coming of our Lord. When he commanded believers to remember his sacrifice, he called this new order of things, "the New Covenant" or "New Testament" (different English translations of the same Greek expression, η καινη διαθηκη).

Mat 26:27 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; 28 For this is my blood of the **new testament**, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

The book of Hebrews twice calls our Lord "the mediator of the new testament" (9:15; 12:24). If we are to understand our dilemma, we need to understand this New Covenant, and how it differs from the old. The prophecies that promise this covenant teach that it impacts us in two ways: our *understanding*, and our *conduct*.

Jeremiah: The New Covenant and the Believer's Understanding

The New Covenant is the fulfillment of a promise made six hundred years before Christ by Jeremiah, who emphasizes its impact on our *understanding*.

Jer 31:31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, **I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts**; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And **they shall teach no more every man his neighbour**, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

At the heart of this promise is a reference to the law:

I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts;

In this solidly OT context, there is no confusion about the particular law in view. A single law underlies the two covenants. But Jeremiah emphasizes a change. Under the New Covenant, the law is no longer an external document, but something internal to the believer. God's people will know and understand his will internally, rather than having it imposed from outside.

Ezekiel: The New Covenant and the Believer's Conduct

Ezekiel describes this same New Covenant, though he does not use the term, when he writes,

Eze 36:25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 26 A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give

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you an heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my spirit within you, and **cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.**

Ezekiel extends our understanding of this covenant in two ways.

First, Jeremiah spoke of God's law being within the believer. Ezekiel emphasizes the mechanism by which this internalization of the law takes place. Under the new covenant, God's Spirit resides within the believer. Our Lord highlighted this change when he promised his disciples in the upper room,

Joh 14:17 the Spirit of truth ... dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

Note two contrasts in this verse. First, the contrast between "with you" and "in you" is the contrast between the Old and New Covenant. Second, "dwelleth with you" is in the present tense, and describes the Spirit's activity at the time the Lord spoke, while the Old Covenant was still active. "Shall be in you" is future tense, describing the state of affairs after the day of Pentecost.

The second additional insight that Ezekiel gives is the impact of the indwelling Spirit and the internal law on our *conduct*. God causes his people "to walk in my statutes," ensuring that they "keep my judgments, and do them." Along with deeper understanding of God's law comes a new and deeper obedience to it.

We saw in the previous section that God expects godliness in every age. The New Covenant is not intended to set God's people free from obeying him. On the contrary, it enhances their obedience, by writing God's law on their hearts so that they truly understand it, and providing the power of the indwelling Spirit to cause them to walk in his statutes and keep his judgments.

4 Persistence of the Law under the New Covenant

The New Covenant does not obliterate the law. It internalizes it (so that God's people know it intuitively), and empowers it (so that they obey it outwardly). This background helps us understand our Lord's teaching in Matthew 5.

Mat 5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. 19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Our Lord is not introducing a new law, but insisting on the old one. He actually enjoins the law of Moses on his hearers (Matt 19:17-19; Luke 10:25-28). In fact, the Sermon on the Mount is built around the two great commandments with which he summarizes the law (Matt 22:35-40). A careful study of his teaching about divorce (5:31-32) bears this out: he insists on enforcing the requirements of Deut 22 and Deut 24. At the same time, he goes beyond the outward requirements of the law. The law against adultery includes lascivious thoughts (5:27-28). The prohibition of murder also precludes anger (5:21-22).

When our Lord sends out the apostles, he charges them to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). He describes two parts to this process. The first is baptizing them, which represents the process of evangelism, confronting people with their sin and God's offer of salvation. The second is "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." This second part of the charge describes what happens in the church after people have received the Lord. It is phrased in the language of law. The charge is not to teach them to worship God, or teach them to love one another, or teach them to study the Bible. It is to teach them to obey the Lord's commandments (which of course include all these duties, and many others).

Paul frequently presents specific lists of behaviors that are forbidden to the believer:

Gal 5:19 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, 21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told *you* in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

1Co 6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Eph 5:3 But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; 4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean per-

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son, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

At the very end of the Bible, God warns,

Rev 21:8 But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

These constraints, and the commands that our Lord mentions in the Great Commission, certainly are a “law” that is incumbent on the believer. Some people believe that they are a fundamentally new law, the “law of Christ,” different from the OT. But how different are they? In point after point, these constraints echo the prohibitions of the OT law.

And if they are really different, why does Paul often quote the OT law in support of his injunctions?

Eph 5:28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. 29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: 30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. 31 For this cause [now he quotes Gen 2:24] shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

Eph 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2 Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) 3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.

1Co 9:8 Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? 10 Or saith he *it* altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, *this* is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. 11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, *is it* a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?

Paul follows his Lord’s example in presenting many commands for believers to follow. He summarizes the ten commandments to Timothy in urging the continuing value of the law:

1Ti 1:8 But we know that the law *is* good, if a man use it lawfully; 9 Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, 10 For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; 11 According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.

More generally, he insists,

2Ti 3:16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

“All scripture” includes the law. The change of covenant does not change the content of the law, but its

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location. It is no longer external, but now internal. It is administered no longer by a civil institution, but by the Holy Spirit. Certain provisions of the law concerned the function of Israel as a physical nation, and are no longer relevant to the church, whose Lord has said that his kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36). But the moral standards taught by the law of Moses are the same ones that believers are expected to follow today.

5 The Paradox of Spiritual Immaturity

Not every participant in the New Covenant experiences its impact on understanding and conduct to the same degree. The NT expresses these differences using the metaphor of maturity and growth.

In 1 Cor 2:14-3:4, Paul distinguishes three kinds of people, one unsaved and two at different levels of spiritual growth. He distinguishes these stages by degree of spiritual understanding and conduct. These are the same two dimensions in which the New Covenant enhances the old.

The Extremes: Natural and Spiritual People

The first stage is the natural person, the unbeliever.

1Co 2:14 But the **natural man** receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.

The natural man has no spiritual understanding. Paul doesn't need to comment on his conduct. The natural man is an unbeliever, and lives as one might expect.

Next, Paul goes to the other extreme, the spiritual man.

1Co 2:15 But **he that is spiritual** judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. 16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Two things are true of the spiritual man.

1. He "judgeth all things." He has complete understanding of spiritual things.
2. "He himself is judged of no man." His conduct is beyond criticism.

These correspond to the two provisions of the New Covenant.

1. His complete *understanding* shows the fulfillment of Jer 31:33-34. God's law is in his heart. No one needs to teach him, for he knows the Lord intimately.
2. His unimpeachable *conduct* shows the fulfillment of Ezek 36:27. He is walking in God's statutes and doing his judgments.

We can understand why Paul calls such a person "spiritual," referring to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent of the New Covenant. His indwelling presence produces the full understanding and complete obedience of the mature believer. Such a person is under the constant control of the Spirit, and can thus be called spiritual.

Paul gives us a good yardstick for spirituality in Gal 5:22-23,

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance:

These characteristics are the result of the Spirit's work in our lives. The more consistently we manifest them, the more spiritual we are.

Spiritual = Christlike

The NT uses another expression to describe the spiritual person. The Lord Jesus, during his earthly life, demonstrated what it means to be fully spiritual. “, and the NT often reminds us that our objective is to be like him. God’s original purpose for saving us is to make us like his son:

Rom 8:29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* **conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

But the NT reminds us that we have not yet attained that objective. Paul expresses his desire for the Galatians,

Gal 4:19 My little children, of whom I travail in birth again **until Christ be formed in you**,
Believers are commanded,

Rom 13:14 But **put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

The verb “put ye one” means literally, “clothe yourselves with.” Our outward appearance, reflected in our conduct, is to resemble him, and so are our inward thoughts:

Phi 2:5 Let this mind be in you, **which was also in Christ Jesus**:

Paul writes to the Ephesians (4:13) that the ministry of the gifts in the church must continue

Till we all come unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, **unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ**:

Paul must exhort those who are already believers to imitate the Lord. Being saved does not automatically make us like our Lord. It gives us the capacity to become like him, but that capacity must develop over time, and will reach its culmination when the Lord returns:

1Jo 3:2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, **we shall be like him**; for we shall see him as he is.

The spiritual believer is Christlike. These are not different characteristics, but different ways of looking at the same thing. We can see this relation in 2 Cor 3, where Paul is discussing the effect of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6). There, he says that the mechanism by which we are conformed to the image of Christ is by the work of the Spirit, the agent of the New Covenant:

2Co 3:18 But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, **are changed into the same image** from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The Carnal Person

Not all believers can be characterized as “spiritual.” Paul describes a third class of people, who are in a stage of growth intermediate between the natural man and the spiritual man.

1Co 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto **carnal**, *even as unto babes in Christ*. 2 I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able. 3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is* among

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you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? 4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I *am* of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Paul tells us that the carnal person is a “babe in Christ,” a new believer. Once again, understanding and conduct are the two categories by which we can calibrate the level of maturity of carnal Christians.

- Their understanding is partial. They can digest simple teaching (“milk”), but not more complex teaching.
- Their conduct is governed by the flesh (“carnal”) rather than the Spirit. In fact, they “walk as men.” That is, their conduct still looks a lot like that of an unbeliever.

Carnal believers are a paradox—not a theological paradox like the question of law and grace, but a practical paradox. They are saved, but they often behave as though they are lost. They have the Spirit, for they are in Christ, and “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom 8:9). But their understanding and their lives show little of the work of the Spirit promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

“Carnal” is the adjective that corresponds to the noun “flesh,” and could also be translated “fleshly.” When we are born again, we receive something new, the presence of the Spirit of God, but this Spirit enters a body of flesh that was born in sin and has served sin for years. And that leads to the paradox. In his very first epistle, Paul wrote to the Galatians,

Gal 5:17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

Paul’s reference in 1 Cor 3:1 to “babes in Christ” reminds us of our Lord’s teaching on being “born again.” A human baby, like a spiritual baby, is a paradox. It’s every bit a human, but it doesn’t behave like one. It has the mental machinery to use language, but it can’t talk. It has balancing mechanisms in its ears that will allow it to walk and ride a bicycle, but it can’t even crawl. Similarly, a carnal believer is every bit a believer, but doesn’t behave like one.

Some time after writing Corinthians, Paul composed Romans, and elaborated further on the relation between the carnal and the spiritual Christian. In Romans 7, he classifies himself along this spectrum:

Rom 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but **I am carnal**, sold under sin.

Note the contrast between what is spiritual and what is fleshly, between the Holy Spirit and the sinful human flesh. Like oil and water, flesh and spirit do not mix, and when they try to coexist, there is conflict. Paul goes on to confess,

Rom 7:15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.

Rom 7:18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. 19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.

Paul writes in the present tense, as a believer. He is frustrated with the control that sin has over him. His internal desires run counter to his outward behavior. This is not the frame of mind of the ungodly. They “rejoice to do evil, *and* delight in the frowardness of the wicked” (Prov 2:14). “The heart of the

sons of men is fully set in them to do evil,” Eccl 8:10. But when a believer like Paul sins, it grieves the Holy Spirit within, who is prompting him to righteousness, and he cries out in frustration,

Rom 7:24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

From Carnal to Spiritual

The answer to the anguished question of Rom 7:24 comes in the following chapter.

Rom 8:1 *There is* therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, **who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.**¹

In Romans 8, Paul distinguishes being “in the Spirit” (v. 9) from walking “after the Spirit” (vv. 1, 4, 5). To be “in the Spirit” is to be saved:

Rom 8:9 But ye are not in the flesh, but **in the Spirit**, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

Every believer is “in the Spirit.” But not every believer is following the Spirit’s inward direction.

To emphasize this difference, Paul describes the believer with two different titles. The first title is unconditional:

Rom 8:16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the **children of God** [τεκνα θεου]:

The word “children” emphasizes our origin. Every believer has new life from God.

The second title is conditional:

Rom 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the **sons of God** [υιοι θεου].

The word “sons” emphasizes our relationship. The sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit, who walk in the Spirit, whose lives are conformed to the life of the unique Son of God, the Lord Jesus.

Paul exhorts his readers,

Rom 8:12 Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. 13 For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

The statement, “Brethren, we are debtors,” emphasizes the paradoxical nature of their spiritual condition. By addressing them as “brethren,” he acknowledges their salvation. The statement “we are debtors” recognizes that they are not yet what they should be. In slightly different words, he said the same thing a few years earlier when he wrote to the Galatians,

Gal 5:25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Every believer is a child of God, but not every believer demonstrates full sonship. Every believer lives in the Spirit, but not every believer walks in the Spirit.

¹ Most modern translations follow a small minority of manuscripts in omitting the highlighted clause, which they think was later inserted from v. 4. The vast majority of manuscripts include the clause.

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- If you neither live in the Spirit nor walk in the Spirit, you are a natural person. You have not yet been born again.
- If you live in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, you are a spiritual person, a mature Christian.
- If you live in the Spirit but do not yet walk in the Spirit, you are a carnal person, a babe in Christ.

It's not wrong for a believer to be carnal, any more than it's wrong for a human to be an infant. Both conditions are a natural, inescapable stage in a process of birth and growth. But both conditions are meant to be transient, not permanent. In both cases, the resolution of the paradox requires growth. In the next section, we'll learn how the believer grows. In the process, we'll find the answer to the tension between law and gospel that set us on this quest.

6 How do Believers Grow?

We enter the new life as babes in Christ, carnal Christians, caught in a paradox. As new believers, we are partakers of the New Covenant, indwelt by the Spirit of God, but we do not fully experience the depth of understanding and the purity of conduct that this covenant promises. At the other extreme, the NT describes the “spiritual” person (1 Cor 2:15), who “judgeth all things” (complete understanding), but “is judged of no man” (victorious conduct). Just as it uses the language of birth to describe the carnal Christian, it uses the language of growth and maturity to describe the spiritual believer. We’ll discuss first the language of maturity, then the means that God has provided to bring us to maturity. The metaphor of birth and growth also invites us to consider the counterpart of parents in spiritual growth.

The Language of Maturity

The most common term indicating maturity in the New Testament is the adjective *τελειος*, which the AV most often translates “perfect.” The perfection or completeness to which it refers is the result of a process of growth, as the AV translation makes clear in two places. In the same letter in which Paul contrasts babes in Christ with spiritual people, he writes,

1Co 14:20 Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be **men [τελειος]**.

The author to the Hebrews writes,

Heb 5:13 For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. 14 But strong meat belongeth to **them that are of full age [τελειος]**, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

In both cases, those who are *τελειος* (“mature”) are contrasted with youth (“children” in 1 Cor 14:20; “babe” in Heb 5:13). This maturity is the goal to which Paul strives to bring his converts:

Col 1:27 Christ in you, the hope of glory: 28 Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man **perfect [mature, τελειος]** in Christ Jesus:

The NT uses the language of growth (commonly, the verb *αυξανω*) to describe the process that leads from youth to maturity, from carnality to spirituality. Here are a few examples:

Those to whom Peter writes are immature in both understanding and conduct. As remedies to both challenges, he urges growth. In his first epistle he addresses shortcomings in conduct:

1Pe 2:1 Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, 2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may **grow [αυξανω]** thereby:

In his second epistle, he warns of the false teachers who twist the scriptures. As immature believers, whose understanding is complete, his readers are at risk of being led away with these errors. As a defense, he urges them to grow:

2Pe 3:17 Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know *these things* before, beware lest ye also, being

led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. 18 But **grow** [αὐξάνω] in grace, and *in* the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Paul prayed for those converted under his ministry, that they might grow:

Col 1:9 For this cause we also, since the day we heard *it*, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and **increasing** [αὐξάνω] in the knowledge of God;

He describes the maturing of the believers as the object of the work of leaders in the church:

Eph 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **unto a perfect** [τέλειος] **man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:** 14 That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; 15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ:

The Means of Maturity

We are born again as babes, carnal Christians. We have the Spirit, but we do not yet walk according to the Spirit. Our understanding and our conduct are imperfect. God desires us to grow toward spiritual maturity, a condition in which both understanding and conduct are fully governed by the Spirit. How does that growth take place?

A growing child needs nourishment to furnish the raw materials that build up the body, and exercise to work them into place. In just the same way, spiritual growth requires nourishment and exercise.

The Christian's exercise takes the form of suffering and trials. God allows difficulty into our lives to provide us with opportunities for growth. James urges his readers,

Jam 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. 4 But let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be **perfect** [mature, τέλειος] and entire, wanting nothing.

The writer to the Hebrews discusses at length how God chastises his children. He describes the objective this way:

Heb 12:11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Even our Savior is described as learning from suffering, and thus becoming "perfect" or mature:

Heb 5:7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; 8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; 9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;

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If “the things which he suffered” were essential to our Savior’s spiritual development, how much more important are they for us! Suffering provides us with spiritual exercise. Difficult situations are like the workout stations on an exercise course, carefully planned by our heavenly Father to exercise our spiritual muscles and get them into tone.

In addition to exercise, growth requires nourishment. Just as suffering provides the exercise in the Christian’s growth, the scriptures are the food.

The idea of scripture as food is rooted in the Old Testament. Amos described the lack of the Lord’s words as a famine:

Amo 8:11 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send **a famine** in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but **of hearing the words** of the LORD:

God’s word is pleasant to the taste, and brings joy to those who partake of it.

Psa 19:7 **the law of the Lord** ... the testimony of the Lord ... the statutes of the Lord ... the commandment of the Lord ... the fear of the Lord ... the judgments of the Lord ... [are] sweeter also than **honey and the honeycomb**.

Psa 119:103 How **sweet are thy words** unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Jer 15:16 **Thy words were found, and I did eat them**; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.

The New Testament emphasizes the role of scripture in growth.

1 Pet 1:2 As newborn babes, desire **the sincere milk of the word**, that ye may grow thereby:

Scripture as food comes in different forms, appropriate to different levels of maturity:

1Co 3:1 And I, brethren, could not **speak** unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even* as unto babes in Christ. 2 I have fed you with **milk**, and not with **meat**: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able.

Heb 5:11 Of whom [Melchizedek, mentioned in Gen 14:18] we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. 12 For ... ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of **milk**, and not of strong **meat**. 13 For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. 14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Our central concern is the place of law in the believer’s life. It’s worth comparing the law with the idea of spiritual milk. Gaining nourishment from meat is a task for a mature person. One must capture and slay an animal, butcher it, cook the flesh, and carve it, and then assimilate it using well-developed teeth and digestive organs. Only through this complex process can meat support a person’s daily actions. A baby finds milk at her mother’s breast, and this simple food is easily digested and turned into action. By invoking this metaphor, the Bible writers imply that the milk of the word consists of direct injunctions that tell us how to live, in other words, law. The meat of the Word of God consists of narrative and expository passages that require more analysis to yield principles for daily life. As an example, consider the issue of personal purity. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” leads us directly to pure conduct. It

doesn't require a lot of digestion to guide our actions. The history of David's life before and after his adultery with Bathsheba yields many valuable insights and warnings about personal purity, but requires more maturity to digest. Specific commandments—law—are just where young believers need to begin.

These two lines of exercise and nourishment, of suffering and scripture, come together in Paul's instruction to Timothy.

2Ti 3:16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

Note three things in this text:

1. The objective is the perfection of the man of God. Perfection in this case isn't expressed by *τελειος*, but a rarer word (*αρετιος*, only here in the entire Greek Bible) that indicates someone who is prepared and fit for a purpose. Like *τελειος*, it recognizes the need for a process of preparation to reach the desired level of maturity.
2. The scriptures are key to this process. At the time Paul wrote, very little of the NT existed in written form. "All scripture" refers primarily to what we call the Old Testament. Paul doesn't exclude any of it from the function of nourishing spiritual growth. All of it, including the law of Moses, is profitable for this process.
3. There is a close interplay between the nourishment and the exercise. "All scripture" is presented first as "doctrine," but we quickly hear of "reproof" and "correction." "Reproof" is what happens when a parent points out a mistake to a child, and "correction" is the ongoing instruction about how to correct that mistake. Correctly applied, "all scripture" shows us our sin ("reproof") and then tells us how to avoid it in the future ("correction"), as well as giving us positive guidelines for righteous living ("instruction in righteousness"). The right way to face the sufferings and trials that provide us with exercise is to align them with the Word of God, drawn from "all scripture."

The Scriptures and Christlikeness

When we first learned of the contrast between the carnal and the spiritual believer, we saw that the spiritual person is sometimes described as being like the Lord Jesus. Each of these metaphors invites a perspective on how we reach the goal. One moves from being a carnal or baby Christian to becoming spiritual or mature by a process of growth, which is fueled by spiritual food, the Word of God. How does one move toward being like the Lord Jesus? Paul tells us:

2Co 3:18 But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, **are changed into the same image** from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.²

We become like someone by looking at him intently. Children learn their most basic actions by mimicking their parents, and their speech and mannerisms often resemble those of their parents. Many of us

² NIV translates *κατοπτριζομαι* as "reflect" rather than "behold in a mirror," as though Paul were setting himself forth as a reflection of Christ for the Corinthians' imitation. However, his emphasis on "we all" suggests that the verb describes something that all believers are to do, and Kittel (*TDNT* on *εσοπτρον*) points out that there are no examples of the middle voice of the verb in the active sense "to reflect."

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can recall some favorite teacher or popular hero who captivated our attention so much that we unconsciously imitated them. Our friends would sometimes say to us, “Do you know that you are walking like ____, or talking like ____?” So Paul says that one way that the Spirit makes us like the Lord is to facilitate our imitation of him as we behold him.

Where do we look to see the Lord Jesus, so that we can imitate him? Paul indicates that our view of him is not direct, but indirect, “as in a glass,” that is, a mirror. Mirrors in the ancient world were made, not of glass, but of metal, typically polished bronze (cf. Exod 38:8). The image was not bright and clear as in a modern mirror, but dark and sometimes hard to see clearly. The apostles had the incredible privilege of seeing him directly. John could write (1 John 1:1) of

That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.

Paul tells us that our experience is indirect, “as in a mirror.” He uses the same metaphor in 1 Cor 13:12.

For now we see through a glass [mirror], darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Another NT writer gives us a clue to the identity of the spiritual mirror. James writes (1:23-24),

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: 24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

James tells us that reading the Word of God is like looking in a mirror. It shows us our faults, and invites us to correct them. The proper use of Scripture, like the proper use of a mirror, is to enable us to correct the faults that it reveals to us.

For James, the mirror is the Word of God. His focus is on its ethical commands, embodied in the law, which he describes as “the perfect law of liberty” (1:25). The same metaphor fits Paul’s use of the image as well. How do we know the Lord Jesus? We do not know him face to face as the apostles did, but the Scriptures give us a picture of him. This picture is not restricted to the gospel histories. On the road to Emmaus, the risen Lord encountered two of his disciples who were discouraged about the crucifixion. He encouraged them by reminding them what the Old Testament revealed about the Messiah.

Luk 24:25 Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: 26 Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? 27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in **all the scriptures** the things concerning himself.

In the Scriptures, we do not yet see him “face to face,” but “through a mirror, darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). But even this partial look, in the hands of the Spirit, is powerful. Consider again 2 Cor 3:18,

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, **are changed into the same image** from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The Scriptures are the mirror that the Spirit holds up to us. They show us our shortcomings, both directly (through the law) and indirectly (as we contrast ourselves with the perfect law-keeper, the Messiah). The more we contemplate him in the mirror of the Word, the more like him we become.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13 that one day we will no longer need the mirror, and we shall see our Lord face to face. If even the reflection in the mirror can mold us into his likeness, think of what the effect will be of seeing him directly. We don't have to speculate. John spells it out for us in detail:

1Jo 3:2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, **we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.**

John's promise confirms our conclusions so far in two ways. First, we are not yet like Christ; that climax awaits his return. Second, gazing upon him is an important means of becoming like him.

Scripture as food helps us grow to maturity. Scripture as mirror shows us the Lord we love, so that we can become more like him. The word of God—all of the word of God (Luke 24:27; 2 Tim 3:16-17)—is a central resource in fully appropriating the promise of the New Covenant.

Spiritual Parenting

The metaphor of growth invites the use of a related metaphor, that of parenting, in understanding the Christian life. For example:

- The scriptures enable the believer to grow, just as food enables a baby to grow. A baby isn't able to find her own food, but relies on her parents to guide her to the appropriate nourishment and prepare it for her.
- The scriptures show us Christ, but the world presents many competing examples. Young children often choose the wrong heroes, and need their parents to direct their attention to the one they should emulate.
- Children don't always get their behavior right the first time. They make mistakes, and need their parents' correction.

In all three examples, spiritual babies profit from the guidance of older, more mature believers, and it is the duty of those more mature believers to look out for the younger ones:

Gal 6:1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, **ye which are spiritual**, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Consider again Paul's words to the Ephesians:

Eph 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, **pastors and teachers**; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect τελειος man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:

The word "pastors" is a Greek word (ποιμην) that means, literally, "shepherds." The corresponding verb ποιμανω is used twice to describe the responsibility of elders in the church:

Act 20:17 And from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus, and called the **elders** of the church. 18 And when they were come to him, he said unto them, ... 28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to **feed [ποιμανω]** the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

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1Pe 5:1 The **elders** which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 **Feed [ποιμανω]** the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

The KJV translates the verb ποιμανω in both these places as “feed.” A central responsibility of the pastor is feeding the flock, which Paul emphasizes in Eph 4:11 by amplifying the title with the term “teacher.” Pastors are to feed the flock. The food that produces spiritual growth is the Word of God. A central responsibility of pastors is to instruct their flock in the word of God.

Both of the passages that speak of feeding the church call the pastors “elders.” This title emphasizes that those responsible for feeding the flock are to be older, more mature believers. Many people would define a pastor in terms of academic credentials or a professional position in an institution, but the main qualification is spiritual maturity. Biblical pastors are those whose understanding and conduct show the effect of suffering and scripture in conforming them to the likeness of the Lord Jesus. They are commanded (1 Pet 5:2) to feed and watch over the flock of God, while younger believers (1 Pet 5:5) are to “submit yourselves unto the elder.”

The term “elder” indicates physical maturity, as the contrasts in 1 Tim 5:1, 2 indicate. Of course, physical age and spiritual maturity are not necessarily correlated. But in general, one would expect that the longer a person has been a believer, the more spiritual growth has taken place, and the requirements for recognized elders in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1 highlight both understanding and conduct, the two results of the New Covenant.

In the physical world, a baby cannot raise itself, but relies on the loving care of more mature people, who were once babies themselves. Similarly, the growth of younger believers depends on their recognition of and interaction with older believers. The NT even goes so far as to use terms of parenting to describe these people:

Gal 4:19 **My little children**, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, 20 I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.

1Th 2:7 But we were gentle among you, even as a **nurse** cherisheth **her children**:

1Th 2:11 As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a **father** *doth* his children, 12 That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

1Co 4:14 I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved **sons** I warn *you*. 15 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *have ye* not many **fathers**: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.

A word of caution is appropriate. Our Lord warned his disciples,

Mat 23:9 And call no *man* your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

Yet Paul repeatedly describes himself as a father to his converts. Similarly, in the next verse, our Lord said,

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Mat 23:10 Neither be ye called masters [teachers]: for one is your Master, *even* Christ.

Yet the NT often speaks of the importance of teaching, and recognizes that it is a gift given to some people, not a general function of all believers (1 Cor 12:29). Our Lord is not saying that there are to be no teachers or spiritual parents in the church. He is warning of the danger of turning those functions into titles by which we “call” one another. Such titles tempt us to think that elders in the church are qualitatively different from the younger believers. These titles lead to the rigid barrier between clergy and laity that pervades the institutional church. All believers in the church are brethren. All were born as babes in Christ, and all are in the process of growing into the likeness of Christ. No distinctive titles should block our recognition of that continuity. At the same time, it is the responsibility of more mature believers to watch out for and instruct the younger believers, and the younger believers are responsible to recognize their need for such shepherding, and to be receptive to it.

John, like Paul, discerns multiple levels of maturity among believers. Paul describes the two extremes, the carnal Christian or babe in Christ, and the spiritual or mature Christian. John inserts a third level between these two.

1Jo 2:12 I write unto you, **little children**, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. 13 I write unto you, **fathers**, because ye have known him *that is* from the beginning. I write unto you, **young men**, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, **little children**, because ye have known the Father. 14 I have written unto you, **fathers**, because ye have known him *that is* from the beginning. I have written unto you, **young men**, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.

John's “little children” correspond to Paul's “babes in Christ.” These are new believers. John says that their sins are forgiven and as a result they know the Father. At the other extreme, the “fathers ... have known him that is from the beginning.” For John, “him that is from the beginning” describes the Lord Jesus (cf. John 1:1; 1 John 1:1). The youngest believer can know the Father, but full knowledge of the Son is a goal to which even Paul, in one of his later epistles, still aspires:

Phi 3:10 **That I may know him**, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

It seems clear that John's “fathers” correspond to Paul's “spiritual” believer. Why does John distinguish them from the “young men”?

As we read over the book of 1 John, we are struck by the threat of false teaching in the church. John wants his readers to recognize that personal spiritual victory does not mean that the growth process is finished. The young men who have their own spiritual lives in order are not necessarily ready to guide the growth of others, particularly in the face of encroaching spiritual error. That task belongs to the fathers, the ones Paul calls “elders.”

Let's review. God wants his people to be godly, with deep understanding and righteous conduct. The objective of the New Covenant is to provide the indwelling Spirit, through whom we can attain both understanding and conduct. These results are not immediate. They result from a process of growth that is fueled by exercise (suffering) and nourishment (the Word of God).

With this background, we can now return to the puzzle that led us on this study, the apparently contradictory statements of the New Testament concerning the role of the law in the believer's life.

7 The Place of Law in the New Covenant

We began our study with a theological paradox. The NT teaches that the law has been “done away” (2 Cor 3:11), yet insists that it establishes the law and does not “do away” with it (Rom 3:31). It teaches that we are not under law, but under grace (Rom 6:14), yet our Lord condemns anyone who would break Moses’ least commandment (Mat 5:17-19), and the apostles repeatedly quote the law to substantiate the exhortations they give to their readers. Is the law still in effect, or isn’t it? Should we seek to observe it, or are we free to ignore it? No wonder believers are confused.

Along the way, we have encountered another paradox, the practical paradox of the baby, or carnal, believer. The New Covenant promises that the Holy Spirit, dwelling within believers, will grant them understanding and conform their conduct to God’s law in a way that external ordinances never could. A new believer has the indwelling Spirit, yet his understanding is limited, and his conduct looks like an unbeliever. The NT teaches that a process of growth transforms the carnal believer into a spiritual one, turning the babe in Christ into a mature Christian. This process is overseen by more mature believers, fueled by scripture, and exercised by the trials that God allows in the lives of his children.

Perhaps these two paradoxes are different sides of the same coin. The New Covenant promises an internal work of the Spirit that completely replaces the external work of the law. But while every believer has the Spirit, the full realization of the Spirit’s promise requires a process of growth, and that process is driven by “all scripture” (2 Tim 3:16; Luke 24:27), which includes the law. Until the Lord returns, all of us are somewhere in the growth process. All of us need the nourishment of the Word of God to strengthen us, and the picture of our Lord that it gives us to imitate. Those to whom the NT was originally written are also in this condition, so it is not surprising that the apostles present them with specific commands to follow, and even quote the OT law to back up their instruction. In principle, the law is abolished, for those in whom the promise of the New Covenant is fully realized. But that realization requires growth, and for those in the midst of that process, the law is not only not abolished, but absolutely essential. What the church has discussed as a theological paradox is actually the reflection of the NT’s persistent concern with a practical and pastoral paradox, the carnal believer, the Christian who is not yet like Christ.

Let’s consider this resolution of the paradox in more detail, then see how the same principle applies to other paradoxes in the NT.

Resolving the Paradox of Law and Grace

No book in the NT is more often cited in dismissing the law than Galatians. Jewish teachers were suggesting that Gentiles needed to keep the law in order to be saved, and Paul wrote the book to insist that this is not the case. Yet he does not discard the law outright. Toward the end of his letter, he writes,

Gal 5:18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

“Led of the Spirit” is the expression that Paul will later write to the Romans (Rom 8:14) to describe those children of God who have attained to full sonship.

In the language of Romans 8, those who are led of the Spirit are walking according to the Spirit. They have achieved the deep understanding and righteous conduct promised by the New Covenant. For such

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people, the external law has indeed been done away, replaced completely by the internal work of the Spirit. For the rest of us, the law (like the rest of “all scripture”) works in the same way that training wheels work on a two-wheeled bicycle. It nudges us in the right direction, teaching us to maintain our balance as we live out the life that the Lord Jesus has placed within us.

Every believer has the Spirit within, giving us signals concerning what is right and wrong. At first, we don't know how to interpret and act on those signals, just as a young child can't translate the sensations in her balance organs to the actions of keeping a bicycle upright. Paul describes those signals when he writes,

Eph 4:30 grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.

When we sin, we grieve the Spirit, and we sense that something is wrong. But understanding just what is wrong requires instruction from the Word of God, starting with the milk, which is the law. As Paul writes to Timothy,

1Ti 1:9 ... the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, 10 For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.

To the degree that we are still unrighteous, to the degree that we fall short of any element of the law, the law speaks to us.

A central verse in the paradox of law and grace is Rom 6:14,

Rom 6:14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under law, but under grace.

The Greek text says “law,” not “the law.” “The law” would refer to a specific law, the law of Moses. “Law” without the article is broader, indicating the general principle of an external standard. The latter half of the verse does not just say that the law of Moses is done away. It claims that the believer is free from any law.

Yet the context shows that the believer is not free from moral constraints. Paul has just written,

Rom 6:12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. 13 Neither yield ye your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness unto God.

And he goes on to insist,

Rom 6:19 as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.

Paul writes Rom 6:14, not to relieve his readers of moral constraints, but to reassure them that “sin shall not have dominion over you.” As Israel's experience shows, an external law cannot set people free from the dominion of sin. But we also can't escape this dominion by obliterating God's standards. True deliverance from sin requires us to embrace the promise of the New Covenant that the indwelling Spirit can cause us to walk in God's statutes.

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Rom. 6:14, like other verses speaking of the abolition of the law, has in view the full realization of the New Covenant in the life of the spiritual believer. Such a person has no need for an outward law—neither the law of Moses, nor the law of Christ. He understands the Spirit's promptings and obeys them instantly. Sin no longer has dominion over him. He has achieved the level of understanding and conduct manifested by the Lord Jesus. One who is led of the Spirit is indeed "not under the law" (Gal 5:18). Rom 6:14 reminds us of this promise, to which we aspire. But to reach it, we must grow up, and that growth requires us to give attention to "all scripture," including the law.

The paradox of law and grace is thus, really, the paradox of the carnal believer. If new Christians were spiritual, there would be no paradox. For the spiritual believer, the person in whose life the promises of the New Covenant are fully realized, external law is obsolete—not just the law of Moses, but law as a principle. We often forget that when people are born again, those promises are largely in the future. Babies in Christ immediately enjoy new life, forgiveness of sin, and fellowship with God. But both scripture and experience show that the complete understanding and unimpeachable conduct promised by the New Covenant depend on a process of growth, a process that is nurtured by all scripture, including the law of Moses and the various lists of injunctions given by our Lord and his apostles.

Let's pause to understand the broader principle. Some of the benefits of the New Covenant are immediate, but others depend on a process of growth that most Christians (including Paul when he wrote Romans) haven't yet completed. The paradox of law and grace arises because some statements in the New Testament concern the overall promise of the New Covenant, while others have in view the needs of people in the process of growth. To understand those statements, we must recognize whether they are describing the ideal toward which we are growing, or the current condition in which we find ourselves.

The principle applies to other paradoxes as well. Two examples are love and fear, and the role of teaching.

Resolving the Paradox of Love and Fear

The New Testament presents a tension between love and fear that is similar to that between the law and grace. The paradox of law and grace is that some passages in the NT say that law, a prominent feature of the Old Covenant, is done away under the New Covenant. Yet other passages in the NT invoke the law and urge God's people not to ignore it. In just the same way, the fear of God is a prominent feature of the Old Covenant. Some passages of the NT suggest that believers under the New Covenant need not fear God, but others attest that they do. Should we, or should we not, fear God today?

Clearly, the early church feared God:

Act 9:31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking **in the fear of the Lord**, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

The writers of the NT exhort their readers to fear God:

2Co 7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness **in the fear of God**.

Eph 5:21 Submitting yourselves one to another **in the fear of God**.

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Heb 12:28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly **fear**:

Yet we also read that the Spirit, the agent of the New Covenant, has removed the need for fear.

Rom 8:15 For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to **fear**; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

2Ti 1:7 For God hath not given us the Spirit³ of **fear**; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

John makes a similar statement, but in a way that suggests the answer to the paradox:

1Jo 4:18 There is no fear in love; but **perfect** love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made **perfect** in love.

The two instances of the English word “perfect” in this verse are forms of the adjective τελειος “mature” that commonly describes spiritual maturity in the NT. Love is the first element of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22, the hallmark of spiritual maturity. The mature believer, the spiritual Christian, need not fear God. Such a person has reached maturity with respect to love. When we are mature, we no longer need the fear of God to warn us away from sin. If our love is not yet made perfect, the fear of God is a very appropriate aid to “perfecting holiness” (2 Cor 7:1), that is, making it complete or mature.

Resolving the Paradox of Teaching

Another example of the importance of understanding the different stages of spiritual growth is the place of teaching in the church.

Teaching was a central practice under the Old Covenant. Part of the Lord’s original charge to Aaron and his sons was “that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses” (Lev 10:11). In Moses’ final blessing on the tribes, he said of Levi’s descendants, “Deu 33:10 They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law” (Deut 33:10). Jehoshaphat’s reformation included sending priests and levites throughout the land to teach the people the law (2 Chr 7:18-19). After the Babylonian captivity, Ezra the priest “had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments” (Ezra 7:10). This responsibility was vested in a particular class of people, the descendants of Levi.

Teaching is a consistent part of New Testament practice, where it becomes the responsibility of older, more experienced believers, not of a special priestly family. “The apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42) is first in the list of the four activities of the new church in Acts. In Ephesus, Paul separated the disciples from the synagogue so that he could give them daily instruction without interruption (Acts 19:9). His teaching was not limited to short, light devotions: he spoke so long to the church in Troas that one member of the congregation fell asleep (Acts 20:7-9). He tells the elders of Ephesus to “feed the church of God” (Acts 20:28). The ability to teach is a special gift given by the Spirit to some, not all, believers (1 Cor 12:7-8, 28-29). Paul exhorts Timothy to “give attention to reading, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim

3 Given the role of the New Covenant in bring us from fear to love, it’s likely that Paul intends us to understand “spirit” in this verse as the Holy Spirit.

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4:13), and Peter exhorts elders to “feed the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet 5:2). Leaders in the church are described as “pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11), those “who have spoken unto you the word of God” (Heb 13:7), and James recognizes the special responsibility of teaching in the church when he warns his readers, “Be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment” (James 3:1).

In the light of this persistent pattern, it’s surprising to read,

1Jo 2:27 But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and **ye need not that any man teach you**: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

Here is a paradox. Teaching is a central activity in the early church, yet John says, “Ye need not that any man teach you.” Which is it? Should the church organize itself to provide teaching, or should we discard it as inconsistent with John’s instruction?

John isn’t the first to claim that the need for teachers will be done away. He’s echoing the New Covenant promise of Jeremiah 31,

Jer 31:34 And **they shall teach no more every man his neighbour**, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD.

His focus on the New Covenant also appears in his repeated emphasis on “the anointing which you have received of him,” that is, the gift of the Spirit.

As in our previous two paradoxes, this paradox is really the paradox of the carnal believer. The New Covenant promises a state of affairs in which “ye need not that any man teach you.” When the anointing of God’s Spirit has its full effect in our lives, when we are “led of the Spirit,” we indeed no longer need anyone to teach us. Carnal believers do need teaching. That includes the believers in the churches to whom Paul wrote, whom he instructed about the importance of teaching. It includes the churches in the book of Acts. It also includes John’s readers. He tells them of their ultimate independence from human teaching, but they clearly have not attained that condition yet. They certainly needed him to teach them, otherwise he would not have needed to write the letter in which this statement appears!

8 The Moral of our Tale

We began this study with a theological paradox, the apparently contradictory statements about law and grace in the New Testament. Our conclusion is not only theological, but profoundly practical as well. The contradictions that we thought were among statements about the law, are actual contradictions in our own daily experience. We are all, to some degree, carnal believers, babes in Christ, with imperfect understanding and worldly conduct. We should never be satisfied with our current level of attainment, but follow Paul's ambitious example:

Phi 3:13 forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, 14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

That high calling is nothing less than becoming like Christ, becoming "mature in Christ" (Col 1:28), realizing the objective to which God has predestinated us (Rom 8:29).

The great priority for the church of God is the spiritual growth of individual believers. Paul stated this as his central objective in ministry (Col 1:28), and it should be the central concern of more mature believers as they watch over younger Christians who are still traversing the ground they have already covered. Let's summarize with four very practical implications.

- New believers, like physical children, sometimes have an exalted view of their own level of development. They need to recognize their youth, and seek out the teaching and counsel of more mature Christians.
- Those who have walked longer in the Christian life are sometimes content to enjoy their relation with the Lord. They need to step up to their responsibility to lead, "taking the oversight" of the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2), reaching out to younger sheep who have wandered away (Gal 6:1) and nurturing them in spiritual growth.
- Believers of every level of maturity need to recognize the centrality and authority of the Word of God—all of the Word of God—in the process. Informal fellowship and sharing, Spirit-led worship, and practical support for one another are all important in the life of the church, but the growth of individuals depends on deep, persistent engagement with the scriptures under the direction of those whom God has gifted to teach.
- Those with the responsibility of teaching need to recognize the process that their teaching supports, and exercise their ministry toward that end. The purpose of teaching is not to resolve abstract theological arguments, but to bring believers to maturity, that is, Christlikeness. To achieve this end, it should have two characteristics. First, it should be practical, providing "doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16), emphasizing at each point how we should live in response to what is revealed. Second, it should follow our Lord's example of focusing our attention on Christ. The church is to be gathered unto Christ (Matt 18:20), and our teaching should, "in all the scriptures," emphasize "the things concerning" him (Luke 24:27).