What is Paul’s ‘Christian’ view of the law and is it consistent?

The gospel that Paul preached after his conversion was of salvation freely available to all, Jew or Gentile alike. As Romans 5:1 plainly states, salvation comes through belief in Jesus Christ and the redemptive power of his death on the cross: “Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Of course, the principle issue raised was what was to become of Mosaic law, the law God had given to his people, Israel. Both Jews and Gentile converts were concerned about the law’s function in light of this new revelation in Christ. Did it call for complete abandonment of the Torah? Or conversely, did it mean that Gentiles converts ought first to become Jews? If so, to what extent would Gentile converts be expected to follow Jewish law?

Paul was well aware of all of these concerns. As a Jew himself, and a former persecutor of the church no less, he was well versed in Jewish Scripture and would have understood the arguments and issues at stake.

Paul’s view of the Law and judgements as to its coherency are still the subject of hot debate. A cursory glance of Paul’s letters would seem to throw up inconsistencies in regard to his views on law, its purpose and relative importance in the Christian life. At times his comments on the law are positively glowing whilst at other times his tone is critical and severe, as when he likens the law to a curse.

This apparent abundance of contradictions has led some scholars to go as far as to say that Paul himself was unsure of what he truly believed. Prior to his conversion Paul described himself as a zealous Jew – some of his statements seem to recall his legalistic fervour and these do not sit well with statements that are far more negative in nature. Finnish theologian Heikki Raisanen has suggested that it is impossible to reconcile the conflicting statements and has concluded that Paul was perhaps unknowingly inconsistent in his views. Another way of accounting for perceived changes in Pauline theology is to propose that as Paul’s Christian beliefs developed so did his ideas on the law.

It is perhaps unreasonable to simply overcome the apparent difficulty by claiming Paul changed his mind. Whilst it is plausible in theory, this explanation superficially skims over a theological minefield of issues. It certainly does not offer any answers to the questions outlined above. The accusation levelled at Paul here is one of obvious contradiction in his writings, and this premise offers no way out.

E.P. Sanders has contested these views, reasoning that whilst Paul’s ideas may not be translated into a single theology of law with ease, everything he believes is consistent with one or more of his basic principles.

It is fair to say that there are grounds to support the view that Paul’s writings are somewhat inconsistent or merely incomplete. Combining his ideas into a single system has proven to be a complex undertaking and discrepancies have arisen due to failed attempts to supply such a scheme.
It is also fair to say that Paul attempted to argue his theology through extensively. I think that if we begin by saying Paul was inconsistent, or that his views underwent significant change, we risk devaluing his capacity to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. For me his beliefs about salvation in Jesus Christ go hand-in-hand with his altered perspective on Jewish law. We also fail to credit Paul’s ability to systematically analyse a subject, which if we doubt seems to render the whole enterprise worthless.

It is better to presuppose that Paul was consistent in his views and pursue that line of thought. At first sight we can well understand why Paul might have trouble integrating the convictions that stemmed from his Jewish heritage with his newfound faith. Before his conversion, Paul had regarded himself as faultless with regard to Jewish legalism. He followed God’s commandments meticulously, so the suggestion that the law had no function whatsoever would have probably been inconceivable to him.

From his writings we can tell that Paul believed God had a consistent purpose. He clearly believed that God had offered salvation to all that believe in Jesus Christ, but this seemed at odds with God’s original dispensation through Moses. To say that salvation was not part of God’s initial plan would imply God were imperfect and perhaps for Paul this would make for a God unworthy of worship. Thus, in the main passages that Paul talks of the law and salvation, he seems to want to incorporate the law of Moses with the message of Jesus Christ.

There have been various attempts to summarise Paul’s position on the law in regard to Gentile converts. A traditionalist reading is rooted in Lutheran theology – this is the idea that Judaism advocated the quest for righteousness through religious works. When Paul converted he replaced salvation through works with salvation through God’s grace. His writings can thus be seen as a denunciation of his former religion. Rather he puts his trust in God’s grace. God’s action through Christ had always been part of the divine scheme of things – the law was sent to highlight the incidence of sin in people’s lives and the impossibility of fulfilling all of God’s law – yet God graciously sent Jesus so that people who believed in Him would be saved from the consequences of their sin.

Bultmann has reiterated this notion adding that the Law emphasizes people’s sinfulness and the pharisaic self-satisfaction that may accompany it. This classical view paints quite a harsh and somewhat distorted view of Judaism. It is this unfair caricature of a Judaism characterised by hypocrisy and self-righteousness that contemporary scholars have sought to confront. It is also this sort of view of Paul’s writings that many claim responsible for the cultivation of anti-Semitism.

There is a new wave of thinking that does away with the old perspective on Judaism, proponents of which include James Dunn and E.P. Sanders. This view calls into question the longstanding idea that Judaism was a religion through which an adherent could win favour with God by commendable works. Sanders challenge places covenant i.e. God’s promise to his people, back at the heart of the Jewish faith. Jews’ fulfilment of the law was a display of gratitude to God for having given them the covenant. Regular compliance with the law also meant Jews could ask God’s forgiveness if they sinned.
There may have been some who believed they could earn God’s grace by merit, but what Sanders emphasises is that this attitude was by no means characteristic of the whole Jewish population. Obedience to the Torah as Sanders has it signified a Jew’s desire to remain under God’s covenant. In the light of Sanders reinterpretation Paul is not accusing the Jews of what Sanders terms ‘legalistic-works-righteousness’. This alternative pattern for Judaism he terms ‘covenantal nomism’.

It is difficult to tell what Paul is getting at sometimes, but if we remove the assumption that he heavily criticises his native faith we may find answers. As a practising Jew, Paul believed that he was righteous before God. It didn’t mean he was sinless, but he considered himself a good Jew as he was obedient enough of the time. Perhaps Paul had not considered covenant to be central to his faith. Instead of keeping the law in response to God’s free gift of the covenant he had begun to boast in his own works.

After his conversion his view changed and he asserted that if grace were to be found through obedience it would have to be perfect and not impartial obedience, and since this is impossible we must turn to Christ. Paul’s views I believe are based on his own experiences of his ancestral religion (Rom 7:9-11) and cannot be used to make generalisations about the whole Jewish faith as self-righteous and legalistic.

Sanders offers a way forward in our new understanding of Paul. He does not believe that increasing problems with Judaism had led Paul to Christ. In contrast, he suggests that Paul’s conversion experience of Jesus convinced him that Christ was the true way, and it led him in turn to reassess his perspective on Judaism, rationalising from ‘solution to plight’. As Paul grew more confident in his Christianity, he found mounting arguments to oppose Judaism. Sanders attacks merit theology, defending the assumptions made of Judaism in Reformation theology though perhaps at the expense of forming his own assumptions – some have argued that the suppositions that underpin Sanders theory of covenantal nomism are fundamentally flawed: Sanders is guilty of painting too uniform a picture of the Jewish faith. In this respect his evaluation may be just as inaccurate as that of merit theology. However, from an outsider’s point of view, particularly Paul’s opinion as a Christian, Judaism was perceived as one religion. Another criticism of Sanders assessment is his failure to properly account for Paul’s change of heart. Why, we ask ourselves did Paul seemingly jump suddenly from Judaism – religious beliefs he had spent years defending – to Christianity?

James Dunn has attempted to provide a more satisfactory response to this important question. Dunn singles out certain laws as a means of explaining the apparent differences in Paul’s opinions. He suggests that Paul rejected some laws because they force a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In Galatians 3 Paul writes that we are all “One in Christ”. Dunn believes that Paul discounts the importance of circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath and food laws. Traditionally it was held that these laws were held in order to please God, a way of earning salvation through ritualistic works. Dunn proposes that Paul disagreed with some laws, not because they were cultic, or because they governed relationships between God and humanity but rather because they separated Jew from Gentile. Jews in Paul’s time through fulfilling such requirements were able to demarcate themselves as God’s chosen people. Moreover, Paul believes that in Christians (who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them) the full...
requirement of the law is met in the commandment to love their neighbour. Thus Paul is adamant that Gentiles need not demonstrate these signs of ‘Jewishness’ in order to proceed to becoming a Christian.

The New Perspective propounded by Dunn and Sanders whilst it has greatly influenced modern interpretations of Paul has by no means displaced classical Protestant theology. Stephen Westerholm’s analysis is distinctly Lutheran, though the crucial difference is that he believes Paul to be communicating his Christian theology and not parodying his Jewish heritage as has sometimes been assumed. Paul believes that originally, law was life-giving, but humans’ inability to perfectly comply with the law demonstrated their need for atonement. Since righteousness could not be achieved through meritorious works, God provided salvation through Jesus dying in place of the sinful. The law then was always in Paul’s view, part of the divine plan. It brought about knowledge of sin and the need for God’s grace.

Having considered various scholarly opinions on the Pauline texts it is not difficult to see why Paul has been criticised as contradictory. A cursory glance at his letters seems to reveal a whole host of inconsistencies.

However, we may yet be able to salvage Paul’s beliefs. Paul spoke at length about the law’s correlation with sin and the requirement of grace. Originally the law was set down to give life. Considering the notion of shalom, it would have provided guidelines for people to live in community. No doubt law-abiders who habitually followed its prescriptions would have learnt increasing holiness as they tended towards God’s ‘ideal’ for living. The law served the common good, and it pointed out that which was sinful. In this way Paul says that mankind became conscious of his transgressions. He even suggests that it increased sin, perhaps because knowledge of sin made that which was forbidden all the more appealing. He dismisses the idea that law IS sin by saying that law allowed sin to be recognised as sin. What seems contradictory is Paul’s assertion that believers in Christ do not need to follow the law.

The Judaisers believed that Paul had compromised his native beliefs and had watered down the gospel message for the Gentiles. Furthermore it was thought that it was a licence to sin. However, Paul does not dismiss the law altogether. From his Christian perspective, he simply puts it in its right place, which is to point people towards Christ.

In Paul’s view, the law of Moses became obsolete after the death and resurrection of Christ for all who believe. In Galatians 7:6 he states that the believer is released from the Law "with the result that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the letter". It is as though he talks of two separate eras: law and the covenant, and then God’s fulfilment of his promise in Christ. Essentially the law was a preliminary to the Christ event. Many charge Paul with warranting sin, but it is important to note that for Paul, following Christ means becoming indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Thus, whilst the physical law ceases to be a moral standard, God’s Spirit represents his will in their life. Paul summarises this by quoting the commandment to love one’s neighbour. It is interesting to remark that this law is written on the hearts of the Gentiles. Paul here could be getting at what we would call natural law, or our conscience, and he may be implicitly discounting food laws, circumcision and festival days which neither relate to the Gentiles nor represent a moral aspect of law.
For believers the law is not binding. They are slaves to the Spirit whose guidance is characterised by the internal impulse to treat one another as they would have themselves treated. The end result is effectively following the law for the law’s sake out of love for God. Very much apart from earning righteousness Paul suggests that subsequent good deeds that result from our receipt of the Holy Spirit are a grateful response to what God has done through Christ.

To summarise Paul’s Christian perspective, the law convicts us of our sinfulness and drives us to realise the sufficiency of Christ and put our trust in his faithfulness. Christ’s arrival freed believers from the power and hold of sin, and freedom from the domination of law in daily life. In Paul’s words we are crucified with Christ and dead to the law. The physical law of Moses is superseded by the new law of Christ. From a Christian retrospection the old law was characterised by failure and disobedience whilst God’s gift of Jesus Christ is an act of mercy and redemption. For believers Paul believes the law will never be a channel through which we can earn God’s grace. Rather, the Spirit provides direction and counsel in the lives of Christians. Through life in the Spirit Christians are able to study the law for its own sake.

Our enquiry may lead us to question, did God fail? Did sin appropriate God’s law? Ultimately if it is impossible for humans to completely obey the law, is God the source of sinfulness? Paul believed that God had a constant purpose and will for humanity, which incorporated the law of Moses and Christ. The focus was on faith over works. To prove that this had always been the case, he appealed to Abraham to whom was credited righteousness because of his faith in God. Some evaluations suggest that when God promised Abraham an inheritance he was talking about life in Christ. As Gal 3:18 explains, eternal life was unconditional and this did not change when God gave the law hundreds of years later.

Another question that emerges is what then is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity? Is Judaism simply the ‘warm up’ before the ‘main act’ of Christ? What has become of God’s original chosen people?

Paul is insistent that salvation is available to Jew and Gentile alike, but that ultimately those who remain under God’s original covenant are simply those whom God wills. He believes Israel was rejected for a time in response to their rejection of the gospel, and to allow Gentiles to accept the gift of God’s grace. Some scholars hold that God’s covenant still exists and that Jews may be judged apart from belief in Jesus Christ. In time the ‘full number of Gentiles’ and all of Israel will be vindicated. The meaning here is ambiguous and doesn’t necessarily refer to EVERY Jew and Gentile. Paul does not want to second-guess God’s motives. It is as though he believes everyone will have a chance to be saved, although in the end he accepts that it will be at God’s discretion. He struggles to provide a reason for why God’s plan is thus but concludes by noting the unfathomable and mysterious ways of his great God.

Some people believe Paul’s gospel to be partially responsible for the propagation of anti-Semitism, but in the light of modern scholarship, it is fair to say that Paul’s handling of the law in his letters was a response to fellow Christian Jews and not unbelieving Jews. Thus any malevolent influence cannot directly be attributed to Paul or his motives but rather a misrepresentation of Paul’s treatments in subsequent exegesis of his writings.
We may ask ourselves what becomes of adherents of other religions, and although there is no definitive answer we can certainly speculate. It is unfair to say that people who have never heard of Christ will be judged having led a ‘good’ life (correlative to God’s standards of living that bring life). The Bible advises that we have knowledge of the Creator through that which has been created around us but it also tells us that each individual will be judged on what they know.

There is a lot to be garnered from studying Paul’s letters. Notably they alone are not sufficient enough for us to derive a definitive understanding of first century Jewish approaches to the law. Both Sanders and Westerholm, whilst proponents of very different readings, would agree that Lutheran theology misrepresents Judaism as a sort of ladder-climbing religion entirely based on good works. Yet, contemporary theology in some ways is as much to blame as established Protestant theology for this. New Testament documents should not be exclusively read against a backdrop of presuppositions whether they be justification by works, or covenantal nomism or anything else for that matter. The wealth of New Testament research and hypothesis highlights the importance of affirming scriptural authority and relevance in contemporary Christian circles. With specific reference to Paul’s dissection of the law, we must evaluate early Judaism on its own terms and not just as the problem to which Christianity provided a convenient solution.
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