

Post-Pentecost Expansion of the Big Picture

As we have seen, Christ explicitly stated that while he was laying down the main principles of the new covenant, he was leaving it to the post-Pentecost writers,¹ endowed by the Spirit, to set out the full truth. Clearly, he was laying down the principle that believers must build every doctrine supremely on the post-Pentecost Scriptures. In saying this, I intend no denigration of the rest of Scripture – that should be obvious by now!; all I am doing is underlining what Christ himself declared. He stamped the works of the later writers with the final authority in these matters.

In that light, I now turn to those writers. In order to keep this booklet in bounds, I cannot raise all the details, arguments and ramifications of the New Testament on the believer and the law, but having had a stab at that elsewhere,² I now confine myself to the main principles.

I begin with what, in many respects, is the principal letter – Hebrews.

The Big Picture in Hebrews

Hebrews is one of the most important books in all Scripture. Its doctrine must be allowed to play its full role in our understanding of the covenants in general, the new covenant in particular. As we have seen, in opening his letter – which he wrote to urge converted Jews not to leave Christ and go back to the old covenant and its law – the writer immediately set the tone before plunging into

¹ I mean, of course, the New Testament.

² For a detailed examination of such major passages as Rom. 6 – 8; Gal. 1 – 6; Eph. 2; Col. 2; Phil. 3, see my *Christ Is All*.

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his extended argument – his detailed, all-encompassing and invincible argument:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets [supremely, of course, by Moses at Sinai – DG], but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

What an opening! How powerful a stamp on the person and teaching of Christ! Christ, God's Son, came into the world to bring in his kingdom; he came, issuing his own law for his people, God himself speaking in and through him. Indeed, as the writer immediately went on to say, Christ was God himself speaking:

Of the Son [the Father] says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom' (Heb. 1:8).

What an emphasis! How necessary! Christ came as a prophet – the prophet, yes, the prophet promised by Moses, no less (Deut. 18:15-22). But he came as the Son of God, God himself, God incarnate, carrying a sceptre. In other words, Christ came as the King, bringing in his kingdom. Scripture is replete with this vital fact. Christ was God manifest in the flesh:

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us) (Matt. 1:23).

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16).

And his disciples knew and felt it when he was with them and addressing them; they recognised his kingly authority to speak. For instance, having heard Christ's claim:

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63)...

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...Peter, when asked whether the twelve disciples would follow the crowd and desert Christ, declared, in a majestic, typically-Petrine outburst:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God [that is, the promised and long-expected Messiah] (John 6:68-69).

John would later set it all down:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out: ‘This was he of whom I said: ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me’). For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known (John 1:1-18).

As would Paul:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:15-19).

Let us recap. It was God himself speaking in the Sermon on the Mount – not *a* prophet, but *the* prophet, as Moses had promised (Deut. 18:15); indeed, the Messiah, the Son of God, God himself, no less. This is what the writer to the Hebrews was building on. After such an opening, it wasn’t long before he was driving home his point, rightly

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drawing attention to the contrast between (not a mere comparison of) Moses and Christ (Heb. 3:1-6):

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses – as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God). Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Heb. 3:1-6).

The writer to the Hebrews pressed on with his argument, piling on illustration after illustration, to state:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law) [that is, as the context makes clear, the Mosaic, old-covenant], what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well... For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the [Mosaic, old-covenant] law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever"'. This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant (Heb. 7:11-22).

Clearly the old system – the Mosaic covenant and its law – having been fulfilled by Christ, has been set aside to make way for a new and better system and its law. What 'new system' is this? What else can it be but the new

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covenant and the law of Christ? Who accomplished this glorious change? Christ!

Hence:

They [the levitical priests] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying: ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’. But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second... In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:5-7,13).

Do not misunderstand ‘is ready to vanish away’. The writer was not saying that although Christ rendered the old covenant ‘obsolete’, it would stay securely in place and would only lose its status and power when Christ comes again. Far from it! God always intended that the old covenant and its law would last only until Christ came and fulfilled it:

The law... was added because of transgressions, until the seed [that is, Christ] should come to whom the promise had been made... Before [the] faith came [that is, before Christ had set up the new covenant], we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until [the] faith should be revealed. So the law was [put in charge until Christ came] that we might be justified by faith. Now that [the] faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law... (Gal. 3:19-29).³

³ For the complete argument, and justification of this translation, see my *Three*. The massive import of Gal. 3:19 – 4:7 has suffered grievously from the very poor – frankly, incorrect – translation. Calvin got it wrong, The AV (KJV) has proved a disastrous guide at this vital point.

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And as for taking the words ‘is ready to vanish away’ to mean that a certain part of the law that God intended to be temporary remains in position as firmly as ever it did (indeed, as Roberts, even more firmly) – words fail! When Christ issued his triumphant *tetelestai* on the cross: ‘It is finished, it is accomplished’ (John 19:30), of all the many things he included in that jubilant cry, he certainly included the end of the old covenant and its replacement, supersession, by the new. And Matthew 5 – 7 plays a vital part in that massive discontinuity. With his discourse and prayer in John 13 – 17, it marks in Christ’s ministry that glorious transition from one covenant to the other, the transition which would reach its climax in his death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

As for ‘vanish away’, the same root-word is used in: ‘What is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away’ (Jas. 4:14). This opens up an interesting parallel between the temporary nature of the law and the limited, temporary life-span of man: ‘The days of our lives are seventy years’ (Ps. 90:10). As soon as we are born, we begin to die. ‘As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more’ (Ps. 103:15-16). ‘Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow’ (Ps. 144:4; see Job 8:9-10; 14:1-2,5-6; Ps. 39:5-6,11-12; 78:39; 89:47; 90:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:24; *etc.*). Our days are ‘numbered’ (Job 14:5; Ps. 90:12). Similarly, the law of Moses came with a ‘sell-by’ date stamped on it; it was a temporary passing shadow which, when its God-appointed task was done, at God’s predestined time it would vanish away (2 Cor. 3:11,13; Gal. 3:19 – 4:7).⁴ And with the coming of Christ and his accomplishment of his Father’s purpose, the law’s work was over, completed and fulfilled. The age of the law had passed; the new covenant had come. It was

⁴ As before, see my *Three*.

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the time of the ‘but now’ (Rom. 3:21; 5:20-21, and so on), the eschatological moment, the watershed of the ages.⁵

Take:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things... He takes away the first that he may establish the second... The Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after he had said before: ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD... then he adds: ‘Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more’... (Heb. 10:1-17).

In all this, of course, the writer of Hebrews was talking about ‘the law’, not some artificial, man-made portion of it. He was writing long before the clever ploy of dividing the law into three had been dreamed of.

None of this, it surely does not need to be said, means that the believer can learn nothing from the Old Testament, whether law or prophets. For a start, look what the writer to the Hebrews made of it! And as with the writer to the Hebrews, the New Testament – the new covenant – in general repeatedly draws on the Old. Take Paul.

The Big Picture in Paul

While Paul does not make the Mosaic law the rule under which believers live, and by which their lives are governed, and on which their eternal hopes (whether justification or rewards) depend, he does not go to the other extreme and ignore the law or say it is of no use whatsoever.⁶ From the rich treasury of the entire Old

⁵ As before, I am using ‘eschatological’ to speak of the way God deals with men through changing history; supremely, the end of the old covenant, the inauguration of the new leading to the eternal kingdom. See my *Redemption*.

⁶ Those who do are echoing Marcion of Sinope (c85-c160).

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Testament, Paul draws various lessons, types, illustrations, analogies and examples. In particular, referring to Israel's sins, he expressly states that 'these things took place as examples for us... these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:6-11). The old covenant, therefore, serves the new covenant by giving the believer examples – but not prescriptions! Unless we grasp this vital scriptural point we shall make dreadful mistakes. Many do. The prosperity gossellers, for instance;⁷ the Reformed do; Roberts did.

Paul repeatedly cites the Mosaic law, quotes it, alludes to it, illustrates and supports his doctrine with it, and gives examples from it. Of course he does – the New Testament quite rightly treats the Old Testament as Scripture, pointing to Christ, foreshadowing him (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). In Hebrews 8:5, two words are used, 'copy' and 'shadow'. A copy, though it is not the real or original, nevertheless shows what the real thing is like; inadequately, yes, but nevertheless usefully. A shadow bespeaks the existence of the real, solid thing. True, a shadow is colourless, blurred and flat, but this does not detract from the glory of the original. In fact, it adds to it. Shadows are vital to an artist in conveying a sense of reality and solidity. In 'pure' water-colours, the lights are formed by painting in the darks, and deepening the darks enhances the lights. The old covenant may be shadow, but how greatly it highlights the new! Paul, therefore, used the entire old covenant, including the law, to enforce his doctrine: 'Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us' (1 Cor. 5:7), for instance. But this is not to say he preached Moses, or that he imposed Moses on

⁷ They take old-covenant promises to Israel – health, prosperity and the like – (why not the warnings?), and apply them *carte blanche* to believers in the new covenant.

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believers. He preached Christ, making use of Moses to preach Christ.⁸

John Owen:

There is a great difference between the shadow of good things to come, and the good things themselves actually exhibited and granted unto the church. This is the fundamental difference between the two testaments [better, covenants – DG], the law and the gospel, from whence all others do arise, and (into which) they are resolved.⁹

Paul, of course, did not confine his use of the Mosaic law to illustrate the new covenant, but, as was his way, he set out massive arguments in detail to delineate the law of Christ, the gospel, the marrow of the new covenant.¹⁰

Let me start with this:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you [me, hence, believers – DG] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in

⁸ But he never adopted what would become standard procedure for the Reformed on insisting on the preaching of Moses in order to prepare sinners for Christ. In addition, Paul was prepared to use pagan writers – naturally, without ever suggesting that their views are binding on believers (Acts 17:28; Tit. 1:12, for instance). Likewise, when the New Testament, addressing believers, uses the Mosaic law, it does not imply that believers are under that law.

⁹ John Owen: *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 7 Volumes in 4, Vol.3, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Evansville 13, Indiana, 1960, Vol.4 Part 1 p429.

¹⁰ As I have already noted, my detailed arguments for what follows can be found in my *Christ Is All*.

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us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).¹¹

Note that! ‘The righteous requirement of the law [is] fulfilled in’ saints, believers, those who ‘walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’, saints, children of God in the days of the new covenant. Who cannot see the link with Christ’s statement in Matthew 5:17-20? I remind you of it:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

In Romans 8:1-4. note the emphatic, eschatological, ‘therefore now’. Paul, seizing the reader’s (listener’s) attention, picks up his argument¹² from chapter 6 and 7:1-6, which stemmed from Romans 3:21 and 5:12-21, and stresses once again the ‘now’, the new age in the history

¹¹ As I have noted, the entire passage Rom. 6 – 8 needs to be read.

¹² And it is an argument! Take, for instance, the word *gar*, ‘therefore’, a word used by a man engaged in reasoning out an argument. In Rom. 8, it appears in verses 2,3,5,6 and 7 (twice). And that in addition to *dioti*, ‘because’ (verse 7) and *de*, or *ei de*, ‘so’, ‘but’ or ‘and’ in verses 8,9 (twice), 10 (twice) and 11, besides other arguing words (*ara*, *dia*, *alla*, and so on) (‘then’, ‘on account of’, ‘but’, and so on). We are not dealing with isolated ‘proof-texts’! Paul did not write his letters in Confession (Westminster or 1689) mode!

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of salvation, the new era inaugurated by Christ in his death and resurrection, and gift of the Spirit.¹³

Note, also, the intimate connection between justification – ‘no condemnation’ – and progressive sanctification – those ‘who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit’, and ‘the righteous requirement of the law... fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’.¹⁴ The word ‘walk’ shows we are firmly located in the realm of practical godliness, and not (merely) justification or positional sanctification. Believers are not only freed from the guilt of their sin, the condemnation of the law, but they have received the Spirit (Rom. 8:9) to live a life to the glory of God. We are dealing, therefore, with the believer’s life in the Spirit, the life of one who is no longer condemned; in a word, progressive sanctification.

The word ‘law’ appears four times in this passage; ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’, ‘the law of sin and death’, ‘the law’, and ‘the righteous requirement of the law’. There is no question about the third and fourth; both refer to the Mosaic law.

But what of the first law, ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’? This law, ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ is said to be a liberating law – it ‘has made me free’ (Rom. 8:2). Therefore it cannot be the Mosaic law. That law was a law of bondage, condemnation and death (Acts 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:7-11). This law ‘has made me free from the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2)! It cannot

¹³ Not only is Paul’s opening in Rom. 8 emphatic, it is ungrammatical – for the same reason as his opening of Gal. 5. There is widespread disagreement about the precise import of the ‘therefore’. My view is as above. It does *not* refer to Rom. 7:25.

¹⁴ It makes no difference if, as is most likely, ‘who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit’ is not in Rom. 8:1; it is in Rom. 8:4. See NASB, NIV, NKJV footnote.

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be the very same law! It must be ‘the law of liberty’ (Jas. 1:25; 2:12). It must be the gospel. It can only be the gospel.

And that leads to consideration of the second law, ‘the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2), ‘the law of sin’ (Rom. 7:25). What law is that? Is it the dominion of sin, sin likened to, or personified as, a slave-master, the enslaving power which leads to death? Or is it ‘the law of God’ (that is, the law of Moses) as it stimulates sin and condemns the sinner? I think the latter. After all, as the apostle said in the context, when the law of God struck home in his own heart, this is how it appeared to him, this is how it was – it aroused sin in him, deceived him, made him captive, and killed him (Rom. 7:5,7-11,13,23); it made him wretched (Rom. 7:24). The law of God is ‘the law of sin and death’, which fails utterly to bring peace (Rom. 8:1-8; see also Rom. 3:19; 4:15; 5:20-21; 7:7-25; 1 Cor. 15:56; 2 Cor. 3:7,9).¹⁵

Putting this together, ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ – that which liberates from the law of Moses – is clearly the antithesis of that law. The believer is now ‘in Christ Jesus’, whereas he was before ‘under the law’, under its rule and power. But no longer. His condition is the very opposite of being under the law; he is under grace. ‘The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). The believer is under the principle of grace, the reign of grace, ‘the law

¹⁵ Rom. 7:5,7-11 does not refer to the regenerate. Paul was speaking of his pre-regenerate days. The law did not *produce* sin in him, since it is good and spiritual (Rom. 7:7-16), but sin (in Satan’s hand) used the law to *arouse* sinful desire in him. It was sin – not the law – his own sinful heart which was the cause of the trouble, producing death through the law. Note, Reformed teachers, following Calvin, wrongly argue that the law *restrains* the unregenerate from sin. Paul said he found it aroused sin in him! Rom. 7:13-24 does not describe the believer in the highest possible spiritual state!

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of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'. Paul is once again contrasting these two realms or reigns – the reign of law and sin with the reign of grace. The apostle never tired of the theme! The believer is in the new covenant; a new principle or power reigns in him. The gospel, 'the law of liberty' (Jas. 1:25; 2:12), has, by the Holy Spirit, freed him from the old regime of law, sin and death. By using the phrase, 'the law of the Spirit', Paul is engaging in word play – a favoured technique of his.¹⁶ Here, he plays with the word *law*, contrasting the *law* of Moses – 'the *law* of sin and death' – with 'the *law* of the Spirit of life'. Paul does this to highlight yet again that the Spirit, on the basis of Christ's work, liberates the believer from the old age or realm of the law – both in its condemnation, and in its grip, its enslaving power.

The believer dare not go back under the old law (Rom. 3:19 – 8:17; Gal. 3:10; 4:21-31). Its rule, its dominion has gone for him (2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:25; 4:28 – 5:1; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14), lock, stock and barrel. The law is not made for a righteous man (1 Tim. 1:9). Just as he dare not go under it for justification, so he must not go under it for progressive sanctification. The old law is obsolete (Heb. 8:13). Its time is over. The age of that law has passed. And, as for the age, so for the individual. Though the law is good in itself, of course – being the law of God – nevertheless it cannot handle the flesh, it cannot cope with the flesh, it cannot conquer the flesh. To put it bluntly, the flesh is too strong for it. The truth is, the flesh has so weakened the law, that flesh is master, and thus law cannot conquer sin (Rom. 8:4).¹⁷ And this is true not only for justification, but also for progressive

¹⁶ See Gal. 3:24 with 5:18, Rom. 8:2-4; 9:6; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; 11:3-16; Gal. 6:2,16, and so on.

¹⁷ As we have seen, the 'former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the [Mosaic, old-covenant] law made nothing perfect)' (Heb. 7:18-19).

sanctification; especially, in this context, progressive sanctification.¹⁸

The point is made every day. Governments are for ever passing new laws to try to improve moral behaviour – but man immediately seeks a way round the law, finding the law stimulates him to break it, and so on. Take a child. Forbid him to look in a certain cupboard. What will he inevitably do? Take tax laws. Some accountants sit up all night after the Budget preparing new strategies for their clients to avoid tax in line with the laws just announced. Examples are legion. Governments can pass laws to reform society, for the good of man, but fallen man will always press on regardless with a sinful way of life.¹⁹ Indeed, a good law can actually encourage bad behaviour. Take the speed limit. That which was intended to be the maximum becomes the minimum, thereby actually stimulating the speeding it is designed to curb. C.S.Lewis drew attention to the obvious but largely ignored maxim: ‘You cannot make men good by law’.²⁰

And what is this ‘righteous requirement of the law’ (Rom. 8:4) which is fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit? It is not ‘the law’ of Moses itself, but ‘the righteous requirement of the law’, which Paul speaks of. The law, it seems, is not so important as that which it

¹⁸ It has been suggested that Paul was here saying the opposite; namely, that through the Spirit, the law holds a new power which produces the believer’s sanctification. The verses cannot bear such an interpretation – except by drastically altering the translation of the text of Rom. 8:3; which is precisely what has been done. See Jonathan F.Bayes: *The Weakness of the Law: God’s Law and the Christian in New Testament Perspective*, Paternoster Press, Cumbria, 2000. For my reply, see my *Christ Is All*.

¹⁹ This is why Lloyd-Jones gave up medicine to preach the gospel.

²⁰ C.S.Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, in *Selected Books*, HarperCollins, London, 1999, p367.

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intends, its purpose, its end, its ‘righteous requirement’, which is ‘love’ (Gal. 5:13-16; 1 Tim. 1:5). Note also the singular, ‘requirement’, not ‘requirements’; ‘the righteous requirement of the law’ is its *one* great end or purpose. And it is, said Paul, this ‘righteous requirement of the law’ which is fulfilled in believers. The end of the law – ‘the commandment which was to bring life’ (Rom. 7:10) – the purpose of the law, its majestic goal, all that the law wants, all this is produced in those who live by the Spirit. ‘Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them’ (Rom. 10:5). Christ lived by that law – perfectly, not merely without sin, but in positive obedience – and so earned a perfect righteousness for his people. And the Spirit in them enables them (falteringly, it is true, in this life) to live out that justification and positional sanctification in personal, progressive sanctification.

‘What the law [of Moses, including the ten commandments] could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son... that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us’ (Rom. 8:3-4); that is, believers. Echoes here of Paul’s earlier statement in Galatians 4:4-5. By Christ’s work, ‘the righteous requirement of the law’ is ‘fulfilled in us’. ‘Fulfilled’, ‘fulfilled in us’! Clearly, this is something which God in Christ has done *for* and *in* believers, not something to be done *by* believers trying to keep the law. Paul here *describes* believers; he does not tell them to fulfil the law. God, by his Son, Christ Jesus, accomplished the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law, and it is this perfect obedience of Christ, his righteousness, which is imputed and imparted to believers. Thus Christ fulfilled the law, and believers have fulfilled it in him. Christ’s work imputed to them by the Spirit accomplishes their justification, that glorious, surpassing righteousness, that Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount, said was essential: ‘Unless your righteousness

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exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:20). Christ's work being imputed to them by the Spirit accomplishes their positional sanctification, their justification. And it is the believer's progressive sanctification which is the evidence and fruit of the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in believers in and by Christ. Do not miss the trinitarian emphasis. Paul has taken us up onto the highest ground here.

This is the point. Christ is the only one who has power to deal with sin. What the law cannot do, he has done. This is the contrast the apostle is making. He spells out what Christ did (and does), and what the law was (and is) too weak to do. It is the Spirit, not the outward Mosaic law, in the life of the believer, who thus enables the believer to 'fulfil' it. Christ did not abolish the law in the sense of ignoring or getting rid of its purpose. Quite the reverse! Christ, by the Spirit, accomplishes that very purpose in his people. Note how Paul does not say the law is now 'obeyed' or 'kept' or 'done' by believers – the usual way of talking about keeping the law – but he says that what the law requires is now 'fulfilled' in believers. Note the passive. Note the word itself: 'fulfilled'! – as we have seen, a word of immense significance in New Testament terms, not least the Sermon on the Mount. Christ had set the tone right at the start: 'Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled' (Matt. 5:17-18).

As Paul said in Galatians 5:14, the Spirit is the 'fulfilment' of the law, its goal, end or aim – which is, to bring about righteousness. The law, though holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:12), being weak, could not bring about the righteousness that God required. It is the Spirit who has been given to believers in order to effect, to 'fulfil', the law in them, and so establish that

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righteousness which the law demanded but was unable to produce. Paul was not talking about ‘law-works’, law-observance, but conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29), renewal of mind so that the believer can live to God’s pleasure (Rom. 12:1-2). This is why Paul, when spelling out the details of the believer’s obedience (Rom. 12:1 – 15:13), declares that ‘the righteous requirement’ of the law is love of neighbour – which ‘fulfils’ the law. Not how he hammered out the point of ‘fulfilling’ and ‘summing up’:

The one who loves another has *fulfilled* the law. For the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet’, and any other commandment, are *summed up* in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’”. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the *fulfilling* of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

Even though the occasion was ripe for the apostle to make the point if he wished, Paul does not speak of keeping dietary laws, for example – expressly ruling them out – but of ‘righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:17). ‘Fulfilling’. Yes, ‘fulfilled’ is a massive New Testament word. This is what Christ was speaking of in Matthew 5:17-20. This what Paul expanded in Romans.

The believer is no longer guilty for his sins, no longer under condemnation. Yes, but far more is also true of him. The believer is now able to live a life pleasing to God; that is, a righteous life. Long before reaching Romans 8, Paul has taught that the law of Moses could never justify, that it could never take away guilt and condemnation, but now he is stressing something more. He is, once again, taking us ever higher – developing and enforcing what he has been setting out from Romans 6. ‘The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ has enabled the believer, the man who is ‘in Christ’, to live ‘not after the flesh’, but ‘after the Spirit’. He is no longer living

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‘under the law’ but ‘under grace’. The purpose of the Father’s plan, the design of Christ’s redemption, and the culmination of the Spirit’s work – which goal is one and the same – is not merely to have a forgiven people, a justified people. No! It is to have a fruitful people, a holy people, a people who glorify the triune God (Rom. 7:4,6; 8:4,8-14; Eph. 5:25-27; 1 Pet. 1:15-16, 2:9, and many more); in other words, a progressively sanctified people. But just as the law cannot produce this justification, neither can it produce this progressive sanctification.

Take Galatians 5:13 – 6:2. It is no accident that ‘fulfilled’ (Gal. 5:14) and ‘fullness’ (Gal. 4:4) come from the same root word (which is, significantly, the same word as in Matthew 5:17), *plēroō*. The truth is, Paul is expounding the theme he has stressed so much in his letter – Christ’s theme in Matthew 5:17-20; namely, the eschatological. The age of the law is over. The ‘fullness’ of the time has come (Gal. 4:4). Christ has come. The faith, the gospel, has come. The Spirit has come as never before (John 7:39; John 14:25-36; 16:4-15). And this has huge consequences for the individual. Paul told believers to remember that:

You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things

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will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:13 – 6:2).²¹

'All the law is fulfilled' in believers by their obedience to Christ and his law in this new age. They are a new creation. And this is what Christ said he came to accomplish (Matt. 5:17). And this is the issue in Galatians 5:13-14.

Compare that with Roberts' prescription!

Paul, it must not be forgotten, is directing his remarks against those 'who desire to be under the law' (Gal. 4:21). To Paul, such a desire is unthinkable, the stock-in-trade of false teachers, the Judaisers, those who had 'sneaked in among the Galatians' (Gal. 2:4), trying to get believers under the Mosaic law. Such teachers have not become extinct! To put a stop to them, Paul stresses the believer's freedom from the law (Gal. 4:21-31; 5:1,13), and this context of Galatians 5:13-14, both narrow and wide, must not be forgotten or ignored. It is the eschatological point all over again, worked out in individual experience. Paul is speaking of the believer's freedom (Gal. 5:1), the freedom he has by the work of the Holy Spirit. The believer has been rescued from this present evil age (Gal. 1:4).

²¹ As I have noted, the entire letter needs to be read.

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As for ‘all the law’ (Gal. 5:14), Paul meant ‘the whole law’, the entire law of Moses; that is, not so much individual commands, but the law in its entirety and purpose. Compare Romans 8:4. The literal Greek, ‘the all law’, is ‘odd’ in that Paul put the ‘all’ in a peculiar place, and this is significant. Moreover, Paul put the definite article – ‘the’ – in a strange position too. None of this would have been lost on the original readers; ‘the all law’ is ‘the entire law’, ‘the heart of the law’, the fulfilment of the law’s purpose.²²

Of course, a believer is justified by his union with Christ, but every believer has the Spirit, the Spirit who enables, empowers and motivates him as an inbuilt aspect of conversion to live the rest of his life in heart-obedience to the law of Christ. If any professing believer fails in this test, he runs smack into this devastating condemnation:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

As I have argued elsewhere,²³ the ‘holiness’ in question in this verse is not justification or positional sanctification, but progressive sanctification. The context

²² What of the seeming contradiction between Gal. 3:10-12; 5:3 and Gal. 5:14? In brief, in Gal. 5:3, Paul was speaking of the attempt to earn justification by ‘doing the law’, which can be only by ‘doing the whole law’, ‘the observance of all that the law requires’ (Gal. 3:12; 5:3). This is impossible for fallen man. *Hence the negative overtones.* In Gal. 5:14, however, Paul was speaking of the new-covenant provisions Christ brought in, by which he gives people grace to ‘fulfil the whole law’, giving them his Spirit to enable them to live a sanctified life which expresses love (see Rom. 8:3-4). ‘The love of God’ – the sense of God’s love to his people – ‘the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). Thus the Spirit enables believers to love in return (Luke 7:36-50; 1 John 4:7-11,19) and so ‘fulfil the whole law’. *Hence the positive overtones.*

²³ See my *Liberty; Fivefold*.

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proves it. A believer does not have to strive for holiness in the sense of justification or positional sanctification. But for progressive sanctification? That's a very different story! The point is, obedience is not an option for the believer, an extra which earns bonus points. Unless a believer lives his life in conscious obedience to the law of Christ, his profession is mere talk:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ... Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13).

And:

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty... What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say: 'You have faith and I have works'. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' – and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (Jas. 2:12-26).

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As I have argued, ‘the law of liberty’ is the law of Christ. I have also said that in the Sermon on the Mount Christ was issuing his law. As he was in John 13 – 16.

The position is clear: the believer is no longer under the Mosaic law, including the ten commandments (Rom. 6:14; 2 Cor. 3:1-18; Gal. 3:24-25; 5:18); he is delivered, freed or released from it (Rom. 7:6; 8:2). In fact, he has died to it (Rom. 7:4; Gal. 2:19). Think of that! *Died* to the law. The believer died to the law when he died with Christ (Rom. 6:1-8; Gal. 2:19-20).²⁴ As for Christ himself, after he had died, he was no longer under the law *in any respect*. ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30), he cried, speaking of many things, I realise, but not excluding his relationship to the law. He had fully satisfied it, and all its claims were met. He had fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17-18).

²⁴ One ‘explanation’ of Rom. 7:2-6 is to say a believer has two natures, his old nature has died, leaving his new nature married to the law! This is bizarre. The believer is not a spiritual schizophrenic! He does not have two natures. He is human! Christ alone has two natures, God and man. As for the believer, *he* has died – *he*, not his ‘old nature’ – and *he* – *he*, not his ‘new nature’ – is married to Christ. Another ‘explanation’ is to claim that, in Rom. 7:6, Paul was saying believers have been delivered, not from the law of God, the law of Moses, but from another law altogether; namely, the law of sin, which is defined as the law of God taken over by sin. But Paul was speaking about the law, not the law ‘taken over’ by anything! Another ‘explanation’ is to say Paul was speaking about the law ‘as a script, a mere piece of writing’ – the letter (Rom. 2:29) – that is, this writing divorced from the Spirit, and this is what is old, obsolete, and valueless. But when Paul said: ‘We have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter’ (Rom. 7:6), he meant believers are delivered from *the law*, not a piece of writing read without the Spirit. Paul distinguished between the Spirit and the law, not between two opposing approaches to the law. The believer’s spiritual life is maintained and ruled by the Holy Spirit *in contrast to* the rule of the law.

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Christ *fulfilled* the law, I say again. He did not arbitrarily destroy it, demolish it, invalidate it, violate it, explain it away, dismantle it, or repeal it. He fulfilled it, and therefore completed it. Christ is now not under it. He was once! But, having been born under the law (Gal. 4:4), lived under it, and then died, cursed, under it (Gal. 3:13), having risen again, he is freed from it. Similarly, the believer died with Christ to the law, was freed from it so that he might produce holiness and righteousness (Rom. 7:4), *in order that* he might produce holiness and righteousness. No wonder the apostle declares: ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 10:4).

So much for Paul. As I have noted, there is far more than this on this theme in his writings, all of it expanding and driving home Christ’s words in Matthew 5:17-20 and John 13 – 16. But I leave it there to turn to John.

The Big Picture in John

I mean, primarily, John’s letters. He, too, made a massive contribution to the promised completion of the words of Christ delivered both in the Sermon on the Mount and his final discourse in John 13 – 16. In his first letter, John showed that Christ’s words about the new commandment had made a deep impression on him – ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:34-35). As for obedience to Christ’s commands, John could not have spelled out the truth more clearly. Believers are under Christ’s law, and have to obey Christ’s command. Not a word about Moses, no mention of ‘the moral law’, nothing about the ten commandments, but a great deal about Christ’s commandments:

By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’

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but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining (1 John 2:3-9).

Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (1 John 3:3-11).

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one

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another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us (1 John 3:18-22).

In his first letter, John had not exhausted what he wanted to say on the great question, so he returned to the theme in his second letter:

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady – not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning – that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works (2 John 4-11).

Any comment from me is surely superfluous. The believer has to be in earnest about his progressive sanctification. And that is shown by his obedience to the law of Christ:

Keep his commandments... keep his commandments...
keeps his word... keeps his commandments... his
commandments... abide in the teaching of Christ...

And how does John envisage this happening? ‘By the Spirit whom he has given us’:

The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But

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as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 John 2:27).

* * *

The point we have reached can be summarised thus: Christ fulfilled the law, rendering it obsolete, and set up his new covenant, replete with his own law. The Sermon on the Mount – in which Christ begins to set out his law, the law of the kingdom – is the first instalment of the New Testament teaching on the believer's rule in the days of the new covenant. Just before his crucifixion (John 13 – 16), Christ delivered another major discourse on his law for his people in the new covenant. It was left, as Christ promised, to the post-Pentecost writers to flesh out that law. When we read such passages as the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, we are securely in the realm of the eschatological, at the watershed of the ages, with that all-embracing Bible teaching of the supersession of the old covenant by the new in the work and person of Christ.²⁵

Keeping this securely in mind, we can now close in on Matthew 5:17-20. Whatever view we come to must take full account of the big picture, especially as set out in the post-Pentecost Scriptures.

Having failed to take account of the big picture, it is little wonder that Roberts ended up in Queer Street when it came to a detailed look at Matthew 5:17-20. This passage, it goes without saying, does not stand as an isolated outcrop in Scripture; rather, it sits securely within the context of the entire Sermon. Unless we examine it with that in mind, we are almost certain to get it wrong. In my view, Roberts' cramped 'exegesis' and scheme-dominated application merits Paul's strictures:

²⁵ For Luke's contribution, see my 'Watershed of the Ages' on my sermonaudio.com page.

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Certain persons... have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully (1 Tim. 1:6-8).

Strong words, but if the cap fits...