

Three Verses Misunderstood

I refer to Galatians 3:23-25, the climax of Galatians 3:10-25. I quote the verses:

Before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept [literally ‘confined’ – footnote] for the faith which would afterwards be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (NKJV).¹

And in other versions:

Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster (AV).

Before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (NASB).

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ [put in charge until Christ came – footnote] that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (NIV).

Before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (ESV).

All these versions have in-built problems of one sort or another, problems which have led many to seriously misunderstand the apostle. And the consequences have been severe. I want to do what I can about it.²

¹ In this article, I mostly use NKJV.

² For more, see my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, especially pp127-140,348-358,420-430.

First, ‘faith’ (Gal. 3:23,25). Paul was not speaking about ‘faith’ as a personal experience – that is, ‘believing’. Rather, he was speaking of ‘the faith’ as the gospel, Christ – that is, ‘who and what is to be believed’. In other words, ‘faith’ here is objective, not subjective.

Secondly, ‘to bring us’ (Gal. 3:24, NKJV, AV), ‘to lead us’ (NASB, NIV). These words are not in the original, and should be removed. They have been the unfortunate source of much misunderstanding. Paul did not say the law was given as a child-custodian ‘to bring us’ or ‘to lead us’ to Christ. Rather, the law was in place as a child-custodian ‘until’ the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19). The ESV got it right: ‘the law was... until Christ came’.

Thirdly, the ‘tutor’ (Gal. 3:24), Greek *paidagōgos*, ‘tutor’ (NKJV), ‘schoolmaster’ (AV), ‘in charge’ (NIV), ‘tutor’, literally ‘child-conductor’ (NASB), ‘guardian’ (ESV). Sadly, some of these translations (especially, ‘schoolmaster’ and ‘tutor’), even the transliteration ‘pedagogue’, give the misleading impression that the law was an ‘educator’, much like *didaskalos* (Rom. 2:20; Heb. 5:2, for example). *This* is not the meaning of *paidagōgos*. The word is a combination of *pais* (child) and *agōgos* (leader), derived from *agō*, ‘to drive, to lead by laying hold of, to conduct’ with the idea of discipline. As Thayer explained: ‘The name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys... The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them, before reaching the age of manhood... The name carries with it an idea of severity (as of a stern censor and enforcer of morals)’. And, linking this with the previous point, the child-custodian’s job was not to *bring* the immature boy anywhere; rather, he had to discipline and protect the boy *until* he reached maturity. During that time, the Jews were ‘kept under the law, shut up’ (Gal. 3:23, AV), ‘were held prisoners by the law, locked up’ by the law (NIV), ‘held captive under the law, imprisoned’ (ESV), ‘kept under guard by the law’ (NKJV), confined by the law.³

³ I was a modern pedagogue – Mathematics teacher – for years, but if I had acted the part of a real pedagogue, the State would have locked me up for child abuse!

Fourthly, what ‘law’ was Paul speaking of? There is no room for doubt. None whatever. Paul was speaking of the entire Mosaic institution. He was not speaking of the moral law, the ceremonial law or the judicial law, allowing the terms for the moment.⁴ Nor was he speaking of Jewish misunderstanding of the law, or legalism. Paul said ‘the law’ and he meant the law, the law of Moses in its entirety. *And he kept to it throughout the passage.*⁵

Fifthly, what of the ‘added’? This word must not be misunderstood. The law ‘was added’ to God’s promise to Abraham, given 430 years before the law (Gal. 3:19). Paul did not say that the law was ‘incorporated’ into the promise, or added to the promise in the sense that the pair made one covenant, a covenant of grace. Quite the opposite, in fact. The law came in as something extra to the promise, a distinct, separate and subordinate economy or system, *not* an alteration of, an adjustment to, or modifier of the promise. The law did not belong to the existing system or promise. It was not part of it. It was something additional, not fundamental. It was an add-on.⁶ As the apostle said: ‘The law entered’ (Rom. 5:20). The Greek word for ‘entered’ is used only twice in the New Testament (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 2:4). In the latter, it means ‘sneaked in’. While in Romans 5:20 it does not bear the evil sense of Galatians 2:4, nevertheless it possesses the connotation, ‘slipped in between’, ‘came in besides’, ‘in addition to’. The law slipped in. Paul’s emphasis on the law’s temporary place in salvation history is obvious here.⁷ It ought to be unmistakable.

The apostle went further. Do not forget the Judaisers’ claim that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants were one and the same.⁸ Paul

⁴ Not that I do allow them! Scripture doesn’t! See my *Christ* pp100-104,392-400.

⁵ Some Reformed commentators are ambiguous on this, or change their mind as they go along, without justification – except to maintain their covenant theology at all costs (including distortion of the text by not allowing Paul to speak for himself).

⁶ It was also temporary (see below), something very different to the promise, which was permanent.

⁷ See my comments on salvation history in my *Christ* pp30-35.

⁸ For more on the Judaisers, see my *Christ* pp16-18. The modern equivalent are the Reformed who, holding to Calvin’s three uses of the law, claim that

did not fudge the issue. They could not be more wrong. He was adamant. Going for the jugular, he categorically *contrasted* the two covenants, and let all concerned – the Galatians and the Judaisers – know the consequence of denying the contrast: ‘For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise’ (Gal. 3:18). This he confirmed in Galatians 4:24-26, where he argued that the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant were two separate, distinct, covenants, not two parts of the same. What is more, throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul stoutly preserved this separateness, standing firm against the Judaisers who, as I say, wanted to blend the promise and the law into one.⁹

There is no question but that Paul was thinking of the law’s vital, though temporary, role in the unfolding of salvation history. That history is not flat, nor smoothly evolutionary in character. Rather, it is the record of God’s interventions. God broke into the history of the world to give Abraham the promise. 430 years later, he intervened again to give Israel the law through Moses. Centuries later, at the right time (Gal. 4:4), he intervened again and sent his Son, the Seed (Gal. 3:19). He intervened again with the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2).¹⁰ To lose sight of Paul’s eschatological argument is tragic.¹¹

Moreover, as with the previous point, Paul was speaking about the law – the law in its entirety, the law full stop! It was the law, the whole law, that was added 430 years after the promise, and it was the law, the whole law that was temporary in that God intended it to last until the coming of the Seed. There is not the slightest hint that Paul was saying the whole law was given at Sinai, two thirds of which lasted until the coming of the Seed, the remaining one third being eternal.¹²

unbelievers must have the law preached to them to prepare them for Christ (preparationism), and believers must be under the law for sanctification.

⁹ This, of course, puts the Reformed advocates firmly on the side of those Paul was speaking against!

¹⁰ There is one more intervention to come; Christ’s return.

¹¹ See Isa. 34:4; 65:17; Hag. 2:6-9,21-23; Heb. 12:25-29; 2 Pet 3:3-7. This, of course, takes us to the continuity/discontinuity debate. See my *Christ* pp76-79,374-380.

¹² Actually, less than 1% of it.

Sixthly, the ‘us’. When Paul said: ‘Christ has redeemed *us* from the curse of the law, having become a curse for *us*’ (Gal. 3:13), to whom was he referring? Was he speaking of elect Jews? Or was he speaking of the elect, full stop, both Jews and Gentiles? There are strong arguments for both. The problem of the ‘us’ is not confined to Galatians 3:13-14, of course. It also arises in Galatians 3:23-29 and 4:3-7. It is likely that Paul was speaking primarily of elect Jews – and this is where the emphasis must fall – yet encompassing all the elect, both Jew and Gentile, in Christ’s redemption.¹³ While historically and actually it was only the Jews who could be said to be ‘under the law’, Paul probably included the Gentiles on the basis of Romans 2:14-15.¹⁴

And, *seventhly*, do not miss the unity which the apostle stresses in this passage. The Seed is one (Gal. 3:16), God is one (Gal. 3:20),

¹³ The arguments in favour of viewing the ‘us’ as Jews can be summarised thus: while all men, both Jew and Gentile, are sinners, since it was only the Jews who were under the law, its curse could only apply to them, and therefore redemption from the law could apply only to them; since Gentiles are spoken of in Gal. 3:14, it is likely that the Jews were being spoken of in Gal. 3:13; Paul said ‘we who are Jews’ (Gal. 2:15); note the us/you contrast of Gal. 3:23-25 and 3:26-29; and, finally, the contrast in the Greek between ‘us’ and ‘the Gentiles’.

¹⁴ See my *Christ* pp27-37,337-347 for my reasons. Perhaps Paul was treating the Jews as a special case of redemption (Matt. 15:24; John 4:22), or in their priority over the Gentiles in its order (Luke 24:47; John 1:11; Acts 1:8; 3:26; 10:36; 13:26,46; 28:28; Rom. 1:16; 2:9). As I showed in my *Christ* pp47-48,342-347, it may be that Israel and the law served as a paradigm for Gentiles; the Gentiles are answerable to God for the moral standards he has placed upon them and within them, just as Israel was answerable for the law. This is why the Old Testament prophets could condemn the nations for their failure, just as they could condemn Israel for hers – even though the Gentiles and Israel were not under the same law. And this might be the explanation of Paul’s warning in Gal. 4:21 and 5:4. For unbelievers, God’s ‘law’ – whatever form it may take – continues to condemn those who are not in Christ and thus have not fulfilled the law. And whatever the arguments over the *us* in Gal. 3, in any event all men need redemption since ‘they are all under sin’, ‘the Scripture has confined all under sin’ (Rom. 3:9,22-23; 11:32; Gal. 3:22). All men – Jews and Gentiles – are slaves to sin. See my comments on Rom. 3:19 in my *Christ* pp35-37,339-341.

and believers (whether Jew or Greek) ‘are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28). In short, Gentiles do not need to go under the law to belong to the people of God, or to ratify their belonging to that people. They should pay no attention to the Judaisers who want them to submit to the law to make them ‘kosher’. In Christ, they, along with believing Jews, ‘are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus’. They, *all* of them, have ‘put on Christ’, ‘are Christ’s’, and ‘are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ (Gal. 3:26-29), and that without the law.¹⁵

Having teased out these seven preliminary – but far from trivial – details, we can now get to grips with Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:10-25. *Trivial* details? If they were to be grasped, it would signal an end to this debate on the believer and the law.

Now for the passage. I take it up from Galatians 3:8.

Paul reminded his readers of God’s promise to Abraham that through him he would bless the nations, which promise, as the apostle explained, is fulfilled in the calling of the elect (Jew and Gentile) to faith and justification in Christ. This justification, Paul stressed, is by faith in Christ, not by the law. In fact, the law can only curse; it is antithetical to faith. But Christ has redeemed the elect from the law’s curse – and in so doing has accomplished the promise God made to Abraham; namely, that the elect, including Gentiles, should ‘receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’ (Gal. 3:14). This takes us as far as the apostle’s earlier rhetorical

¹⁵ Gal. 3:20 has baffled most, if not all, commentators. While I have strong objections to N.T.Wright’s theology on several vital issues (see my *Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners; The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion*), I like the following: ‘Moses, to whom the Galatians are being tempted to look for membership in the true people of God, is not the one through whom that single family is brought about... The law cannot be God’s final word: God, being himself one, desires a single family, but the Mosaic law was given to one race only [the Jews], and therefore cannot put this plan into operation’ (N.T.Wright: *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp169,172). In other words, Gentile believers must not go back to the law. Wright drew attention to the parallel in Rom. 3:30-31. For his full argument, see Wright pp157-174.

question: ‘Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?’ (Gal. 3:2).

Having cleared the ground thus far, Paul powered on. Even a man’s covenant cannot be broken – let alone God’s. This principle the apostle worked out in the following verses (Gal. 3:15-18). Nothing can alter, let alone ‘annul’, God’s promise and purpose in the Abrahamic covenant – not even the law. In short, the law cannot contribute to our justification. But neither can it do away with God’s earlier promise.

Such statements, of course, raise a question. And Paul asks it. ‘If what you have said is true, why ever did God give the law to the Jews through Moses on Sinai?’ As the apostle put it: ‘What purpose... does the law serve?’ (Gal. 3:19). Good question! As always, you can tell whether or not you are getting Paul’s drift – does the question that he asks spring to your mind, too? If the law could not justify, and if the law did not abolish the promise, why ever did God give it to the Jews? What purpose did God have in mind when he gave the law to Israel?

Now for the answer. We are left in no doubt since Paul himself answered his own question, and his answer must be definitive, settling the issue once and for all. Here it is. The law? The purpose of the law? ‘It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made’ (Gal. 3:19).

There are two points.

First, God’s purpose¹⁶ in giving the law was to do with sin; ‘it was added because of transgressions’ (Gal. 3:19). While this is not easy to interpret, some things are clear. The law was not added because transgressions *existed* – before the law there could be no transgression. Rather, the law brought home that fact that sin (which did exist) was sin against God, it was transgression of his law (1 John 3:4), the law having turned sin into transgression. Men were sinners before the giving of the law, of course, but the law turned sin into transgression – where there is no law, there is no transgression (Rom. 4:15; 5:13). What is more, while the entrance of the law did not create sin, it promoted it, increased it, exhibited it, defined it. This is what the law does. This is why it was ‘added’. It exposes sin,

¹⁶ The ‘because’ has a forward look; it is a word of purpose.

and convicts the offender of it (Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-13). It arouses sin (Rom. 7:5,7-11), brings a curse (Gal. 3:10), slavery (Gal. 4:1-8) and wrath (Rom. 4:15). 'The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law' (1 Cor. 15:56). 'The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners' (1 Tim. 1:9-10). To break one commandment of the law is to incur the guilt of all (Jas. 2:10-11). As for the Jews, the law was 'added', it was given to them as a prison keeper, prison house, or child-custodian (Gal. 3:23-25). Note Paul's stress on being guarded, confined, restricted, locked up and ruled by the law. So important is this idea, to drive it home the apostle uses the illustrations of slavery (Rom. 6), marriage (Rom. 7), the child-custodian (Gal. 3), the steward (Gal. 4) and Hagar (Gal. 4). 'Moreover, the law entered that the offence might abound' (Rom. 5:20). 'The offence'? What offence? The offence of Adam's sin: 'Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men... by one man's offence many died... by the one man's offence death reigned through the one... through one man's offence judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners' (Rom. 5:12-19). 'Moreover the law entered that the offence' – Adam's offence, and its consequence throughout the human race – 'might abound' (Rom. 5:20). *This* was God's purpose or intention in giving the law. It was to make offence 'abound'. In short, the law was to do with sin, transgression, guilt, wrath, curse, death, condemnation, prison and bondage. And it made the offence abound. This is why God 'added' the law. This is why he gave the law to Israel.

So much for the first point.

Secondly, the law was only a temporary economy or system: 'It was added... till the Seed should come' (Gal. 3:19). Paul highlights this temporary nature of the law in two ways. In addition to the word 'added' – which speaks of the law's supplementary role¹⁷ – note the words, 'till the Seed should come'. I draw attention to the *till*. The law was revealed on Sinai to Moses – 'it was added', it 'entered' at that time (Rom. 5:13-14,20; Gal. 3:19) – and it entered the world to

¹⁷ See my *Christ* pp30-35.

last only *until* the Seed should come. This refers first and foremost to the law's historical significance. That is to say, it was a temporary system given to Israel through Moses, 430 years after the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:17), and lasting *till* or *until* the coming of the Seed. Who is the Seed who was to come? Christ: "'And to your Seed", who is Christ' (Gal. 3:16). So now – do not miss that vital eschatological word, once again – since the Seed, Christ, *has* come, the reign of the law is over, the reign of the law must be over, the law's day is done, its sun has set. This is what the *until* means here. Note the *before* and *after* in Galatians 3:23. As Paul stated: 'Before [the] faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for [shut up to, confined for] the faith which would *afterwards* be revealed' (Gal. 3:23). The time element is very prominent once again – *eis* appears twice in Galatians 3:23-24. In both verses it means 'until'; in neither does it mean 'to'. Paul's argument is that *until* the coming of 'the faith', *until* the coming of the Seed, *until* the coming of Christ, *until* the bringing in of the gospel, it was the time or age of the law.

Not only was it the time of the law: until the coming of Christ, the law *reigned*. The law 'kept under guard' the Jews, imprisoning them, confining them, shutting them up to the coming of the gospel. For, as Paul said, referring to Jewish history from Sinai to the coming of the Messiah, 'the law was our [that is, for the Jews] [child-custodian] to [*eis*, until] Christ' (Gal. 3:24). Until the coming of Christ, the law was disciplining those under its rule, the Jews, shutting them up until the coming of the gospel in Christ. 'The law was put *in charge* until Christ came' (Gal. 3:24, NIV footnote).

'But after [the] faith has come' – that is, now that Christ has come and brought in the gospel – 'we are no longer *under* a [child-custodian]' (Gal. 3:25). 'We', the Jews,¹⁸ said Paul – the Gentiles never were under the law in any case – we are no longer under the

¹⁸ Jews? Jews as Jews? Or converted Jews? Are any Jews under the law today? This takes us far beyond the remit of this article, but since Christ has fulfilled and abolished the law, and its age is therefore over, I am inclined to think the law's old-covenant role has gone. I know that some Jews are still mistakenly waiting for the coming of the Messiah, but if any are still under the law, if the law is still in place, where are the priesthood, sacrifices, *etc.*?

law. So how could anybody be under the law since the age of the law is over – now that Christ has come?¹⁹ Now that the faith – the gospel – has come, the law has served its purpose. ‘For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). ‘On the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness... On the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope... For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second... In that [God] says: “A new covenant”, he has made the first obsolete’ (Heb. 7:18-19; 8:7,13). ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory’ (2 Cor. 3:6-9).

All this is reinforced by Paul’s use of ‘pedagogue’. The pedagogue was a guardian, a child-custodian, whose job it was to restrain a minor from immoral behaviour, and to protect him until he matured. Once the juvenile reached maturity, however, the pedagogue’s work was finished. He had no more say over his former trainee. He was out of a job, surplus to requirements. His old power and rule had ended. Paul used this well-known practice to illustrate the law’s relationship to the Jews, standing over them, keeping them in line throughout the age of the law.²⁰ The Mosaic order (the old-covenant administration, economy, dispensation), the law, was the pedagogue which kept Israel in order until the coming of Christ and his new covenant.²¹ Once Christ had come, however,

¹⁹ This question has to be answered also by those who mistakenly think Paul was speaking about an individual’s experience of the law before conversion. It has especially to be answered by them! See below.

²⁰ As I have noted, all this is reinforced by Paul’s use of the guardian or steward in Gal. 4:1-7.

²¹ See Acts 15. Note the *our fathers nor we* (Acts 15:10) – clearly a reference to the Jews; Peter, a Jew, was speaking about the Jews. Note the reference in Acts 15:21 to synagogues and sabbaths; clearly Jewish – not Gentile – terms. The law distinguished between – divided indeed (Eph. 2:14-15) (see my *Christ* pp27-37,200-207,337-341,478-480 – Jews and Gentiles, but grace, through trust in Christ, makes them one (Acts 15:7-9; see also John 10:16; 11:52; 17:20-24; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:13-22).

believing Jews were no longer under the law (Gal. 3:25). And if Jewish believers are no longer under the law, then, of course, neither are Gentile believers.

Note the repetition of ‘under’ – the key word – in ‘*under* guard by the law’, ‘*under* a [child-custodian]’, ‘*under* guardians and stewards’ and ‘*under* the elements of the world’, and ‘*under* the law’ (Gal. 3:23,25; 4:2-3,5). The repetition of ‘under’, and the thrust of the argument, show these phrases are all saying one and the same thing. Which is? The law, bringing in and imposing rules, governed and guarded the way the Jews behaved, confining them *under* itself. The law was over the Jews, they were *under* it, *under* its grip, *under* its power. It revealed sin, and aroused or stimulated it. Paul says the same thing in Romans 6 and 7. In both Galatians and Romans, the apostle makes it as clear as noonday that there are two stages of salvation history. The former age, ‘under law’, and the present age, under Christ, ‘under grace’. The apostle always heavily contrasts the two. The former age was the age or realm of bondage; the latter, freedom. Now when Paul spoke of ‘being under the law’, he meant more than being under its curse.²² He meant being under *it*, under the law as a system, under it as a realm, under it as a rule of behaviour, under the law as a child-custodian, under its reign, under its grip, under its power. It is all a question of maturity, of age, epoch, realm and status. To be under the law is to be under a child-custodian, whereas to be under Christ is to be free. Just as a mature man is no longer under the child-custodian, so the believer is no longer under the law, no longer subject to the imposition of its rule.²³

And since this is so, how can believers think of going under the law? After all, the child-custodian only had a job while the child was immature. When the child reached maturity, not only the child-

²² This, of course, is a common ploy adopted by the Reformed, which, coupled with their almost incessant use of the non-scriptural ‘the ceremonial law’, marks their determined (but desperate) attempt to evade the plain meaning of the apostle’s words.

²³ This does not mean that the believer has nothing at all to do with the law, but the law is not the rule nor norm for defining his walk with God. See my *Christ* pp289-294,530-540 to see how the law plays the role of a believer’s paradigm as part of 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

custodian's work, but the child-custodian himself, was finished. Well then, as Paul states so clearly, believers are 'all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:26). Sons? The apostle uses *huiōi* – grown up, mature, sons. And he declares that believers, all believers, the moment they trust Christ, are fully-mature adopted sons of God. Consequently, just as, on reaching maturity, the minor was released from the child-custodian, the believer, being a mature son, cannot possibly be under the law. See Galatians 4:1-7, where the apostle clearly contrasts the infant, *nēpios*, with the son, *huios*. In short, for converted Jews to go back to Moses, or for converted Gentiles – who never had the law – to go under Moses, is unthinkable. Or ought to be.

Here we have it. Galatians 3:10-25 shows us that there have been two great ages, two epochs in human history; first, the age of law from Moses to Christ, and then the age of grace under Christ. And these two ages are sharply contrasted with each other. The law was a temporary or interim measure, a parenthesis, an age which Christ in the gospel brought to an end and did away with. Paul's compelling line of reasoning in this Galatian passage is from start to finish to do with the eschatological, the historical, and he builds his case with invincible clarity and devastating power. The temporary, provisional, age of the law was abrogated with eschatological finality by Christ when he brought in the gospel revelation. Such is Paul's majestic argument. 'All the prophets and the law prophesied until John' (Matt. 11:13). So said the Lord Jesus. Even as he spoke, the age of law was coming to its appointed end. And when Christ died, 'at that moment' (NIV), God tore down the temple curtain (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). The age and reign of the law was over. The law had been fulfilled, Christ having brought it to the end that God had always determined for it (Matt. 5:17-18; Rom. 10:4). This is what Paul teaches in Galatians 3:10-25. This section of Scripture, it might well be argued, constitutes the zenith of the apostle's teaching on the law.

But many place a very different construction on the passage. Very different! They say that Galatians 3:19,22-24 speaks of the personal experience of conviction of sin during an individual's experience of coming to faith in Christ. Paul, they allege, was saying the Spirit uses the law to convict the sinner, closing every

avenue but grace, forcing him to Christ for relief from his sins by trusting him for salvation. In other words, the law rules over an individual unregenerate sinner until Christ has come savingly to that individual sinner. Furthermore, the law ‘brings us’ to Christ (Gal. 3:24). It is not a question of history, at all. It is a personal experience, today. And these teachers, building on this personal idea, say that the preaching of the law is essential in order to prepare the sinner to come to Christ.²⁴

This notion of personal preparationism by the law is *not* what Paul was arguing.²⁵ Not at all! For a start, as I have explained, ‘to bring us’, is a translators’ insertion, and a bad insertion at that. Paul said nothing of the sort. Preparationism’s entire edifice is built on this non-existent textual foundation. But preparationism comes to grief on far more than a single text. It is the context!

For a start, consider the immediate context from Galatians 3:10. The apostle was clearly speaking of two ages in the history of the world – before the coming of the Seed, and after. He was not remotely addressing the individual’s personal experience. No! He was taking a grand, overall view of the sweep of the history of redemption. Then there is the wider context of Galatians to bear in mind. How preparationism can be made to fit with *that*, I am at a loss to comprehend. The Judaisers got some things wrong, but, after all, they *were* preaching the law – just the job for bringing sinners to Christ! Strange, then, that Paul did not commend them for this part of their ministry, merely fine-tuning the bit they got wrong. And then there is the wider context still – the rest of the New Testament. If the apostle, in Galatians 3:24, had been setting out the way a sinner is brought to Christ, we ought to find several examples of apostolic preaching of the law to Gentiles, especially by Paul. After

²⁴ But even if this is the correct view of the passage – and it most certainly is *not* – Paul’s: ‘The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ... But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor’ (Gal. 3:24-25), destroys at a stroke Calvin’s third use of the law. On the Reformed view, the law acts as a tutor until the sinner comes to personal faith in Christ, and then that converted sinner is immediately put back under his tutor, the law! How can this be squared with what Paul actually said? And where is the text that states the Reformed view?

²⁵ See my *Christ* pp51-61,348-358.

all, so we are told, this is *the* way for sinners to come to Christ! So where are these examples in Scripture? We find none. Not one! Why did the apostle not take his own medicine? Why did he not make use of this sovereign way of bringing sinners to the Saviour? If, that is, this passage teaches what is claimed for it! Yet he, with the other apostles, saw many Gentile sinners converted to Christ – without first preaching the law to them. Why, Paul told us his method was the very opposite of the idea. He explained how, when wanting to ‘win’ ‘those who are without law’, he himself went ‘without law’ (1 Cor. 9:21). How anybody can argue that the right way to preach the gospel to Gentiles is to begin with the law, when Paul expressly says that he set his face against such practice, baffles me. And certainly his sermons to Gentiles, as documented in Acts 14:15-18; 17:22-32, lend no support whatever to the claim that he preached the law. On the contrary, they amplify and more than justify what he said about his guiding principles (1 Cor. 9:21).²⁶

But let me take time to give one further biblical case to prove that preparationism by the law is wrong. Moreover, it is the obvious case, since it is Paul’s choice in Galatians 3:10-25. And what a case! I refer, of course, to Abraham, the pivotal figure in the human race as far as the history of redemption is concerned.²⁷ Nor must the contextual significance (the Judaisers’ attack) be missed: to make his point about conversion, Paul went back, not to Moses, but to Abraham. When we first meet Abraham in Scripture, he is an unbeliever, a pagan, uncircumcised (Rom. 4:1-25), a spiritually-dead sinner without God (Rom. 5:12-14). Yet, in this very state, he is confronted with God’s command to quit his homeland (Gen. 12:1-3), which he obeys (Gen. 12:4), receives the promise of God (Gal. 3:16-18), and was later justified by faith (Rom. 4:1-24), and all this without any personal experience of conviction by the law to bring him to Christ. How could he have had a law work? The law was not given for another 430 years (Gal. 3:17)! Even so, he is the prime

²⁶ As I say, see my *Christ* pp51-61,348-358.

²⁷ Note how Paul uses him again in Rom. 4:9-16 to show that justification is not by circumcision in particular, or by law in general.

example in Scripture of believing in Christ for justification (Rom. 4:1-25; Gal. 3:6-29). And this without the law.²⁸

The tragedy of misunderstanding and misapplying Galatians 3:10-25 is far wider than this question of preparationism, however – though that is serious enough, in all conscience. The Galatian passage is vital for understanding the place and purpose of the law in salvation history. Failure to see *this* point is tragic beyond words. *We must not miss the big picture.* Paul was speaking about the two great epochs – law and grace, law and gospel, before Christ and after Christ.²⁹ The apostle in this passage most definitely was not concerned with an individual’s experience of conviction of sin and subsequent conversion. No! While the individual’s experience is, of course, of the utmost importance (to the individual, as it was to Paul – see Galatians 5), the apostle here was speaking of something on a much vaster scale; namely, the historical aspect of the law in the history of salvation. Paul was referring to the law’s reign over the Jews in the age before Christ came. The apostle said that the law ‘was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come’ (Gal. 3:19). When the Seed came, the law’s work was over. That is what Paul said. That is what he meant. To say that the law must be preached before the gospel in order to convict sinners and bring them to Christ is to miss the point and to minimise Galatians 3. Paul was speaking of the historical role of the law, and its temporary nature – ‘it was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made’ – not of its supposed role in restraining sin in the unregenerate. The idea that the law exists today to do something which was ended nearly 2000 years ago by the coming of the Christ, is remarkable, to say the least. Coming from

²⁸ If, in reply, it is pointed out that Christ did not come into Abraham’s conviction of sin, may I ask: But we all believe in progressive revelation, do we not, and therefore we expect clearer light than in Abraham’s day, do we not? In any case, my point stands – Abraham was convicted without the law. And he did see Christ! As Christ said: ‘Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad’ (John 8:56). As Paul put it: ‘The Scripture... preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand’ (Gal. 3:8). Where does it say that it preached the law to him?

²⁹ BC and AD are not mere convenient calendar divisions invented by men. This, of course, is being whittled away by the use of BCE and CE.

the other direction, if the law *was* given to bring sinners to Christ, why was it limited to the time that the Seed should come? Surely Calvin, and those who follow him, argue that the law does that work *nowadays*, do they not? Consequently, the notion that Galatians 3:24 justifies the preaching of the law to prepare sinners for Christ is quite wrong. And it is just as wrong to preach the law to believers to sanctify them.

The passage above all is historical in both its meaning and context. It is eschatological. It explains the two great systems of God's dealings with men; namely, through Moses or Christ, by law or by grace (John 1:17). In particular, it sets out the passing of the old age, and Christ's bringing in of 'the time of the new order' (Heb. 9:10, NIV). The historical nature of the Galatian passage must be emphasised. It is absolutely paramount. It cannot be overstated. It certainly can be understated. Worse, it can be ignored. Worst of all, the passage can be warped to make it teach that which Paul never did.

And this of course brings us back to Calvin's third use of the law for sanctification. A right understanding of Galatians 3, I say, utterly destroys the idea. How? As I have already noted, even on the Reformer's (mistaken) understanding of Galatians 3:24-25, once the sinner has come to Christ, he is no longer under the law. But of course, the idea that Paul was talking about the believer's individual experience is a bad mistake, falling far short of what the apostle really was thinking of. I say it again: *Do not miss the big picture*. The passage teaches there have been two great ages in the history of the world; the age of the law and the age of grace. The age of the law was temporary; it is over now that Christ has come. How then, can the law be the means and the motive for the believer's sanctification? The believer belongs to a totally different age. Grace, not law, is the age in which the believer lives. Grace, not law, must be the means and motive for his sanctification.

What is more, the fact that God gave Abraham and Moses two separate, distinct covenants is utterly basic to Paul's doctrine in Galatians 3:10-25, God having, long before Moses, established his covenant with Abraham – indeed, 430 years before the law (Gal. 3:17). The Judaisers wanted to meld the two covenants into one. Paul would have none of it. The two covenants, he argued, are

distinct and contrasting. Being so obvious, it is staggering that anyone should question it. But they do.³⁰ The spiritual aspect of Abraham's covenant is nothing less than the new covenant. The Mosaic covenant is the law. That these two covenants in question are utterly different is likewise fundamental to understanding the Bible, which takes it for granted, no less. To say otherwise is to make nonsense of Paul's teaching. In the one covenant, God declared to Abraham and to all his spiritual seed what *he* – God – would do; it was God's promise, the covenant of promise (Gen. 15:17-18; Gal. 3:16-17; Heb. 8:6-13; 10:15-17). In the other covenant, God commanded the people through Moses as to what *they* must do: 'You shall... keep my statutes and my judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them' (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; and many others), and it was verified by the consent of the people (Exod. 19:8; 24:7). The Abrahamic covenant in the new is unbreakable (Jer. 31:31-34), whereas the Mosaic covenant was conditional; sadly, it was broken (Jer. 31:32). The promise is of faith on the basis of grace; the law was of works, a question of earning and meriting (Rom. 4:1-8; 6:23; 11:6; Gal. 3:11-12,24-25; Eph. 2:8-9). The promise brings blessing; the law brought a curse (Gal. 3:10-14); and so on. Now these are large differences. Differences? *Contrast is the word*. The two are mutually exclusive: 'For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise' (Gal. 3:18). 'If those of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect' (Rom. 4:14). 'You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace' (Gal. 5:4). 'If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace' (Rom. 11:6).³¹ How, as many claim, the Mosaic covenant can be thought to be one and the same as the Abrahamic covenant, or that it is 'a fresh administration of the covenant of grace', defies common sense. Worse, it defies Scripture: 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of

³⁰ See my *Christ* pp75-98,369-391.

³¹ Pointing out the obvious – that in Gal. 5:4 Paul was speaking about justification – cuts no ice. The point I am making at this stage is irrefutable – law and grace are contrasted.

condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory' (2 Cor. 3:6-9).

As I have already observed, very often we can test our understanding of Paul by looking at the questions he raises after making his staggering assertions. Paul frequently raised objections to his doctrine – we shall meet it again – and here is a case in point. I draw your attention, reader, in particular, to Paul's use of the word 'then': 'What purpose *then* does the law serve?... Is the law *then* against the promises of God?' (Gal. 3:19,21). In other words, Paul said, in light of my [Paul's] teaching – which, I admit, sounds so startling – how *then* does the law square with the promise? Now, if the commonly-held Reformed view is right, and the law and the gospel comprise one covenant, if it is essential to preach the law to sinners before preaching the gospel, and if it is essential to take sinners, once converted, back to the law to sanctify them, Paul would never have asked such a (redundant) question as: 'What purpose then does the law serve?' 'Why the law then?' (NASB). Such a question could be raised only by someone who knows the two systems are very different, whose teaching has exposed the difference, and yet who needs to make sure his readers do not denigrate the law. No one who teaches the standard Reformed view needs to ask such a question. It simply does not arise. Nor would his hearers ever think of it. It would never cross their mind. Under his teaching, they are never exposed to thinking the law is different to grace, since he has taught them that the law and the gospel are virtually one and the same covenant. If a Reformed teacher did ask such a question, he would surely be shouted down, dismissed: 'As we all know – and, after all, as *you* taught us – the law serves to prepare the sinner for Christ, and to sanctify the saint. That's the law's purpose. You yourself told us! So why are you asking such a daft question?' Consequently, the fact that Paul raised this very question, using the word 'then', and yet did not give the 'standard' answer, proves he was no advocate of the Reformed first and third uses of the law. Far from it! The truth is, he had to explain how the law fitted in with the promise. The law, he said, was temporary, confining the Jews until Christ came. Thus it is the historical setting of Galatians 3:10-25 which must be grasped. It must not be lost in a

welter of words about preaching the law to pagan sinners today. *Do not miss the big picture.*

In the apostle's question, the word 'serve' is not in the original. The original reads: 'Why then the law?' The 'serve' has been added by translators. Very well. But what tense should they have chosen? Is it: 'What purpose *did* the law serve?' Or: 'What purpose *does* the law *now* serve?' The context speaks of the past. This seems, to put it no stronger, to teach that the law has no ongoing function for the believer. But if Paul did ask: 'What purpose *does* the law *now* serve?', why ever did he not reply along the lines of Calvin's threefold use of the law? Why did the Spirit leave it for 1500 years until he made it known to the churches through the Reformer? This is not the same as saying men cannot discuss a problem before it arises – for instance, John Owen did not tackle 'being slain in the Spirit' – for Paul was dealing with the precise issue in hand at this very point. And he was inspired. So why did he not give the classic Reformed answer?

We may put it to the test. Ask any Reformed teacher to tell us the purpose of the law, and he will rattle off Calvin's threefold use. Now ask Paul! Well...?

We may go further. As I have emphasised, the era of the law was temporary.³² It was only an interlude (but a God-ordained interlude, I hasten to add) in God's great plan for the ages. And God gave Moses the law with the intention that it should last only until the establishment of the new covenant by Christ (Gal. 3:16-19,24-25).³³ The entire law, not the law's 'mode of administration', was abolished by the coming of Christ.

As for the law of Moses being temporary, note the following: 'In that [God] says: "A new covenant", he has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away' (Heb. 8:13; see also 2 Cor. 3:11,13). 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).

³² The law of God is eternal; the law of Moses was temporary. See my *Christ* pp222,227.

³³ I am not suggesting for a moment that God changed his mind, that his intention in giving the law was thwarted, or anything remotely like it. God always did intend to bring in the law, *but only as a temporary measure.*

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. 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. In addition to this temporary aspect, there is also a parallel – a connection, indeed – between the *frailty* of man and the *weakness* of the law (Rom. 8:3).³⁴

I have spent some time on this section of Galatians because its importance can scarcely be exaggerated. As I have said repeatedly, *do not miss the big picture*. I have laboured the point simply because many Reformed writers claim the two covenants (law and grace) are one and the same, and because they build so much upon it.³⁵ The fact is, the view we take of Galatians 3:19-20 will largely determine how we think of the believer and the law. Recall Paul’s argument thus far. In dealing with the Judaisers, their claim that the covenants are one and the same, and their call for the believers to go under the law, he has drawn on the Galatians’ experience. He has appealed to Scripture. He has called upon human reason in using an analogy from everyday life (Gal. 3:15) and applied it to God’s dealings with men. He has explicitly set out the temporary nature of the law’s reign. He has proved that the Galatians already have all they need spiritually – God’s promise, the Christ, and the Spirit – and they have it without the law. How can they think of going to the law in face of the evidence he has produced? What purpose could it serve? The law’s sun has set. But, it must be noticed, in light of this, Paul

³⁴ See my *Christ* pp172-176,460-464 on the ‘weakness’ of the law.

³⁵ See my *Christ* pp75-98,369-391.

has to answer the question, if this really is the state of things, why then was the law given in the first place? And this is the very question Paul raises and answers. In truth, he has already answered it. The law was not given to believers in the age of the gospel. It was given to Jews before the coming of Christ. And those Jews had to live under the bondage of that law, even though it did not give them any power to meet its demands. But now that Christ has come, that age is over. The law has ceased. It has not ceased in part or to certain ends. It has ceased. The law, the age of the law, is over. With the coming of Christ, salvation history has entered a new age, the age of the Spirit. Israel's pedagogue, the law, has gone; the Spirit has come. And it is the Holy Spirit, not the law as a pedagogue, who sanctifies the believer. The verb 'led' in Galatians 5:18 comes from the same word as 'pedagogue' – an example of Paul's love of word play.³⁶ The believer is 'pedagogued' by the Spirit, not the law, now that in the fullness of time Christ has come, and the Spirit has been given. The law's time is finished. Now is the age of the Spirit; now is the time for walking in and by the Spirit.³⁷

To sum up Galatians 3:10-25: the law was given through Moses, it was given to Israel, it was given because of sin, it imprisoned and disciplined those under it, it was never intended to be permanent, but to last only until the coming of Christ. How can it be thought that a believer ought to go under the law? To make Gentile believers in the new covenant conform to the law of the old covenant, which was intended to discipline unregenerate Jews in the age before the coming of Christ, is nothing short of incredible.

May I say it just once more. I address all believers. We are given the big picture in Galatians 3. *Do not miss it!* The doctrine the apostle sets out here is of massive importance. Having seen it, do not forget it. Do not allow any man, however illustrious he may be (Ps. 118:9; 146:3,5), to impose any template on Scripture. In particular, do not let yourself be robbed of the apostle's teaching by submitting to the covenant-theology construct which was forged in

³⁶ In addition to Gal. 3:24 with 5:18, see Rom. 8:2-4; 9:6; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; 11:3-16; Gal. 6:2,16, and so on.

³⁷ This is not to say the law has no place at all in the life of the believer. See my *Christ* pp279-298,528-542.

the 16th century. If you do – or if you have – you will find yourself imprisoned under the law for both assurance and sanctification. As a result, you will be cheated of your rightful birthright as a believer – the liberty, the glory and the joy that are in Christ.

There is one lesson above all that we should take from Galatians 3:10-25, as for every passage of Scripture (Luke 24:37,32,45): Look for Christ. Look *to* Christ. For Christ is all (Col. 3:11).

Before Christ came, the Jews were imprisoned under the law, kept there until he came. But Christ has come, and he has established the new covenant. Those who trust Christ are justified by faith. Not only that, in establishing the new covenant, Christ fulfilled and abolished the old, so that believers, having died to the law, are no longer under that killing ministry, but are alive in the Spirit:

Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:2-4).

I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19-20).

Believer, this is your birthright. Realise it. Count on it (Rom. 6:11). Enjoy it.