

Unasked Questions

Unasked by whom? Unasked by consistent covenant-theologians.¹

But the two questions I have in mind have been asked. Both were raised by Paul when he was setting out his doctrine of the believer and the law. He thought these two questions vital. And so he asked them. Vital? Yes, indeed. At key points in his teaching, having made an amazing statement, a statement that was bound to raise questions that objectors to his doctrine – objectors who could hardly believe their ears – would be thinking of, he immediately posed a question for his readers. Why? Since he was arguing against those who wanted to impose the law on believers, he knew they would have criticisms of his doctrine, and he had to answer them. Master teacher that he was, he himself raised the very issues that would have been passing through their minds. Even more pressing, he wanted to make sure his readers did not miss what he was saying.

Significantly, having raised the objections, the apostle did not retract the statements which had provoked them. Nor did he respond by saying: ‘Oops! Made a mistake there! Let me re-phrase that’. Nor did he call on the politician’s ploy: ‘You’ve taken me out of context!’ No! In fact, on both occasions he gave the supposed questioner short shrift, dismissing his objection out of hand, and driving home his doctrine even harder: ‘You heard me! You got it! That’s what I said, and that’s what I meant!’

What are these questions? Let me give the apostle’s statement followed by the question it provoked:

The first statement

‘Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace’ (Rom. 6:14).

The question which it provoked

¹ For my supporting arguments for this article, see my works (which may be found at davidhjgay.com).

‘What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?’ (Rom. 6:15).

The second statement

‘My brothers, you... have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God... We are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code’ (Rom. 7:4-6).

The question which it provoked

‘What then shall we say? That the law is sin?’ (Rom. 7:7).

These two statements and the respective questions they aroused go right to the heart of scriptural teaching on the believer and the law. I repeat my assertion: consistent covenant-theologians never ask these questions. Why is it that they do not – cannot – provoke these questions? The answer is patent: these questions make no sense whatever to covenant theologians. In their system, such objections simply do not arise. No covenant theologian would ever think of them.

So, what is it about Paul’s teaching that is so radically different to that of covenant theologians? Paul declared that the believer is not under the law of Moses, that he is released from the law of Moses – indeed, that he has died to the law of Moses. Covenant theologians say the opposite. They claim that the believer is under the law of Moses for progressive sanctification. Consequently, no covenant theologian would ever dream of asking such a questions as: ‘Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?’ Covenant theologians would never say anything that might give rise to any doubt about the permanency of the Mosaic law² over believers as their perfect rule of life. No covenant theologian would give the impression that the believer is not under the law of Moses. The very suggestion is the high road to ‘antinomianism’.

² Limited, in their case, without scriptural warrant to the ten commandments which they call ‘the moral law’.

Yet Paul did ask these very questions! Indeed, his doctrine demanded that he ask them!

Furthermore, his answers, like his statements and the questions they provoked, are full of interest. Look how he responds to both questions: ‘By no means! God forbid! Out of the question! Unthinkable!’

In neither case did Paul back off. Read the entire passage (Rom. 6:14 – 7:6) and see. According to apostle, the believer is not under the law of Moses. But he is under Christ, under his headship, rule, governance and law. The believer, having the Spirit, is moved to love Christ and his law – which he finds written in Scripture – and moved to obey it to the glory of his Redeemer.

I leave the matter there. All I want to do in this article is to encourage covenant theologians and their followers to ask themselves a question: ‘Why is that Paul’s doctrine demanded these questions, and yet my system not only does not demand the same, but actually looks upon them as nonsense?’

‘Ridiculous! Misrepresentation! Of course we raise these questions and answer them!’ I can hear the chorus!

Really? Well, certainly not in my experience! Yes, the questions are ‘raised’ by covenant theologians – as they have to be when such teachers are reading (and especially expounding) Romans. But they are raised only to brush them aside, brush them aside by glossing Paul’s statements – ‘the law for justification’, ‘the ceremonial law’, ‘the law as a covenant but not as a rule’, and such like. This means that the questions remain, in reality, unasked. It means that Paul is insulted by the explaining away of his doctrine. And it means that covenant theologians are not facing up to the glorious truth about the believer and the law as set out by the apostle. And what a loss that is! Moreover, in what grim bondage does it leave any believer who adopts covenant theology!