

The Believer and the Law of Christ in Deuteronomy 30, Romans 10?

Please note the question mark. It is all important.

This article stems directly from my ‘Peter Masters’ Muddle over the Covenants, Part 2’. As I was completing that piece, someone posted a comment on a Facebook thread of mine, a comment with which I strongly disagreed. Although in several of my works¹ I had addressed the fundamental issue my correspondent was raising, I knew I had to deal with its particular twist in that Facebook comment.

The work I was completing – the second part of my response to Masters – was concerned with the latter’s mistaken view that in Deuteronomy 29 – 30 Moses was setting out the new covenant. He was not. Rather, in face of his approaching death, and Israel’s entrance into the land, Moses was exhorting Israel on the basis of the Sinai covenant, the law covenant for Israel. Masters, however, pressed his claim – that Moses was setting out the new covenant – on the basis of Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in Romans 10:6-8. Now, it is true that in Romans 9:30 – 10:13 Paul is clearly setting out the new-covenant doctrine of justification by faith as opposed to the old-covenant doctrine of justification by works, yes, and it is also true that he turned to Deuteronomy, but do not miss my careful, deliberate, ‘Paul’s *use* of Deuteronomy’. For Masters to make his case, he has to show that Paul directly quotes Moses because Moses was teaching the very doctrine that Paul himself is now teaching; namely, justification by faith. But Paul does not do what Masters wanted, for the simple reason that Moses was not teaching justification by faith, but justification by law. The truth is, Paul accommodates Moses’ words, and uses them – uses them,

¹ See my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*, and my forthcoming *New-Covenant Articles Volume Ten*, in particular.

I stress – to make his own point. Let me set out the relevant argument from my article to make all this clear.

When he deals with justification in Romans 10, Paul turns to Deuteronomy 30. This is highly significant. I refer to:

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says: ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame’. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Rom. 10:4-13).

Homing in, the essential passage, in which Paul draws on Deuteronomy 30, is this:

But the righteousness based on faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)...

Let us take it slowly. When Paul speaks of ‘the righteousness of faith’, he is clearly referring to the gospel, justification by faith. And he is contrasting that with attempted justification by the law (Rom. 10:5), which is futile, impossible to any sinner (Rom. 7:10; 9:30 – 10:3). So, in prosecuting his argument, in expounding the gospel, Paul turns to Deuteronomy 30:12-14. Does this mean that in Deuteronomy 29 – 30 Moses, himself, was setting out the gospel, the new covenant, justification by faith? Is this what Paul is telling us? Not at all! Notice what Paul does not do. He does not *quote* Deuteronomy 30; he *accommodates* it to suit his

purpose. There is a big difference. He does not say: ‘As Moses said, as Moses made clear, as Moses declared to Israel...’. I am not nit-picking. I am being precise.²

I am not alone in making this point. Albert Barnes:

Paul regards this [passage in Deuteronomy 30] as appropriately describing the language of Christian faith; but [he uses the passage] without affirming that Moses himself had any reference in the passage to the faith of the gospel.

M.R.Vincent:

The quotation in Romans 10:6-8 is *a free citation* from Deuteronomy 30:11-14. Paul recognises [something he can adapt]³ in Moses’ words, and thus changes the original expressions so as to apply them to the Christian faith-system. His object in the change is indicated by the explanatory words which he adds. He does not formally declare that Moses describes the righteousness of faith in these words, but *appropriates* the words of Moses, putting them into the mouth of the personified faith-righteousness.⁴

C.H.Spurgeon:

I want to call your special attention to the fact that Paul *borrow*s the words of Moses.⁵

Yes, Paul finds Moses’ words ‘appropriate’, he makes ‘a free citation’ of them, he ‘appropriates’ them, ‘borrows’ them. That is as much as can be said about Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10. One thing is certain. Paul does not quote Moses to support what he is saying about justification by faith, on the grounds that this is what Moses taught.

Let me summarise what is happening in Romans 10:

² Another nickname for ‘Puritan’ was ‘Precisionist’. When John Rogers was asked why he was so precise, he replied that he served a precise God. See my *Battle for the Church*.

³ Vincent had ‘a secondary meaning’. This is too strong.

⁴ Emphasis mine.

⁵ Spurgeon sermon 1700, emphasis mine.

1. Paul *uses* the words of Deuteronomy 30 merely as a vehicle to set out his own doctrine. We must also remember that he loves wordplay.⁶ Fascinated by language, and skilful at using language to make a point, he calls on that ability here. Most definitely, he is not saying that Moses taught justification by faith. Moses does not teach it in Deuteronomy 30. Paul is not saying he did, nor is he implying it. It is impossible to infer it. The apostle is simply using Moses' words for his own purpose. Masters' far-reaching claim on this passage is preposterous.

2. Moreover, in accommodating Moses' words, Paul makes a highly significant change.⁷ Moses said:

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring *it* to us, that we may hear *it* and *do it*?' Neither is *it* beyond the sea, that you should say: 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring *it* to us, that we may hear *it* and *do it*?' But the word is very near you. *It* is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can *do it*.

In his free use of Moses' words, Paul said:

But the righteousness based on faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring *Christ* down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring *Christ* up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Moses was speaking about 'it' – God's commandment, God's law – which Israel had to 'do'. Paul is speaking about 'Christ' with no talk of 'do'. These are momentous changes. They alter the whole thrust of the passage. Moses was speaking of obedience to law. Paul is speaking of Christ. *And it is all about justification and*

⁶ 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; Phil. 3:3; 2 Thess. 3:11 (NIV); Philem. 10-11.

⁷ I am indebted to George Platt of Highgate Baptist church for this vital observation.

nothing but justification. And as he goes on to say, the sinner has to believe – trust – Christ for righteousness. This is the apostle’s teaching in this very passage, Roman 10:4-5, the culmination of Romans 3:21 – 8:39. Christ has done the necessary doing, having come under the law, he kept it, thereby earning righteousness for his people, and, by his triumphant death, accomplished their redemption. So that, as Paul puts it: ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 10:4). And by ‘end’, *telos*, Paul means the end, the goal, the purpose and the terminus of the law. The law foreshadowed, pictured Christ, and Christ has rendered the shadow-covenant obsolete by fulfilling it. He himself, he and his work, are the reality of the shadows.

And so on. I said much more than this in my ‘Peter Masters’ Muddle over the Covenants, Part 2’, but I leave it there; we have reached the relevant point.

And what is that point? As you can see Paul, ‘replaces’ Moses’ use of ‘law’ with his own use of ‘Christ’, and he ‘replaces’ Moses’ ‘doing’ with ‘faith’ or ‘trust’. Moreover, it is all, from start to finish, to do with the justification of the sinner. Under the old covenant, justification was by works, by obedience to law (which was impossible); under the new covenant, justification is by faith in Christ. So far so good. But...

At this point I need to fill in the background. As I have explained, in several works I have engaged with those new-covenant theologians who argue that the believer is under no law. I disagree very strongly with them, and have said so in no uncertain terms. One of the issues which cluster round this is their claim that Christ himself is the law of Christ. Now, I readily agree that the ‘the law of Christ’, as a phrase, appears only once in Scripture (Gal. 6:2), but it is, as I have argued, also present in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21. Even so, I grant that the phrase is rare in Scripture. Having allowed that, it is, none the less, a scriptural phrase, let us not forget! But what is this ‘law of Christ’? As I have confessed,⁸ while this may appear a simple question, it is far from simple to answer it in specific detail. But this is not a

⁸ See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

weakness. Rather, it marks one of the glorious differences which make the new covenant better or superior to the old (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:6-13).

Is Christ the believer's law? In some sense, yes, but... while I myself have argued that Christ himself is the believer's law,⁹ the law of Christ also involves a written law for the believer – the whole of Scripture (John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17) as seen and nuanced through Christ by his apostles, especially passages such as, for instance, Matthew 5 – 7 and John 12:48 – 16:33 fleshed out by the apostles in the post-Pentecost Scriptures in accordance with Christ's promise (John 15:16-17;16:12-15).¹⁰ I refute the view that Christ himself has replaced the concept of law for the believer. And although I vigorously proclaim the undoubted truth that the believer has the Spirit to enable and motivate him to submit to Christ, I proclaim with equal vigour that the believer's submission to Christ involves determined obedience to the external Scriptures.

That is the background.

It is now time to look at the Facebook post that stirred me to write this article. Let me quote the relevant words my correspondent posted:

Paul... identified the singular law-commandment [given by Christ to believers (John 13:34)]¹¹ as having fulfilment. Not as new laws, but as the person of Jesus Christ. See how he interprets Deuteronomy 30:11-14 very clearly in Romans 10:5-13. The law commandment has been replaced by Jesus... Watch how Paul explicitly interprets the law word, the commandment of Deuteronomy, when he quotes it: 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom 10:8-9). Jesus is our new law... written on our hearts!

⁹ See my 'The Law of Christ Is Christ Himself'; 'Christ the Covenant?'

¹⁰ See my *Christ, Believers*.

¹¹ As I have explained elsewhere, this one new commandment is an envelope for all Christ's commands, including those issued by the apostles. See my 'One Command or Many in One?'

This can be disposed of very quickly.

For a start, as I have shown, Paul did not *quote* Moses; he *used* his words, *accommodated* them, *appropriated* them, *borrowed* them, and did so for his own very different purpose. He did not *interpret* Moses' use of 'law', let alone *explicitly interpret* it. He uses Moses' words as a vehicle to contrast attempted justification by works with justification by faith.

And that is the point! From Romans 9:30, Paul has been concerned with justification, *and nothing else*. To talk, as my correspondent does, of 'the singular law commandment [given by Christ to believers (John 13:34)] as having fulfilment', asserting that that is what Paul is teaching in Romans 10, means he (that is, my correspondent) is reading his presupposition into the text, and then reading it out – pure exegesis. To claim that Paul is teaching that Christ in the heart – with nothing external, you see – is the believer's law, is foreign to the passage. (More, it is foreign to Scripture). Paul is saying nothing of the sort! There's not a word about it! The Romans passage speaks of the unbeliever wanting justification. He has a choice of two ways. He can try to be justified by works, by perfect obedience to the law. That way, he is doomed to failure. Or he can trust the perfect person and work of Christ, his blood sacrifice at Calvary, and receive the imputation of Christ's righteousness – his perfect obedience to the law – and be at once and forever justified, beyond condemnation or even accusation (Rom. 8:1,33-34). This is what Romans 10 is about. It is not remotely about what my correspondent alleged:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'. Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being

ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says: 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame'. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom. 9:30 – 10:13).

Neither passage, Deuteronomy 30 or Romans 10, has anything to do with the believer and the law of Christ in his (the believer's) Christian experience following conversion. Such a thing is not in Paul's purview at all. To foist such a view on the passage, and then try to draw it out, is a totally unwarranted imposition on the text. Paul is not talking about a believer's progressive sanctification here. He is not saying the law and Christ are equivalents for believers. He is not saying that in the new covenant the law of Christ is Christ himself in the sense that this means there are no written commands which the believer has to obey. Paul is not conflating Christ and law. These are vital negatives.

So, that question mark in the title: it raises a question, the answer to which is a resounding 'No!'

As I have said before when grappling with this issue, I have not been arguing about how many angels can squeeze onto the top of a pin. This is not a minor matter – as I have spelled out to the best of my ability in my aforesaid works. My correspondent's mishandling of Scripture has enabled him to put forward a view which, if it catches on, will cause immense damage to believers.

My hope and prayer is that God will use this little work to do something towards preventing such a calamity.