

Must We Obey a New Law?

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New Covenant Theology teaches that Jesus Christ fulfilled the law, and that by fulfilling it, He ended it. But some within New Covenant Theology have also taught that Jesus instituted a new law that we must obey. Is there a new law with new commands that Jesus has given us under the New Covenant? If so, must we obey these commands?

Neonomianism

Because some works on New Covenant Theology teach that Jesus Christ instituted a new law, New Covenant Theology has been accused of being neonomian (from the Greek *neos*, "new," and *nomos*, "law"). Historically, neonomianism taught that the Gospel is a new law. The Puritan, Richard Baxter (1615-1691), taught that the requirements of the new law are faith and repentance. This is an error that some slip into today when they teach that we are saved by faith and/or repentance. To say that we are saved by faith or repentance is to teach a works salvation. It makes faith and repentance laws that we must keep to be saved. There are, in fact, some teachers whom critics sometimes put into the New Covenant Theology camp who teach that Jesus has paid the penalty for everyone's sins except the sin of unbelief or lack of faith. This makes belief or faith the one work of the saved sinner that distinguishes him or her from the unsaved sinner. This sets faith up as a new law, causes salvation to be dependent on the work of the sinner instead of the grace of God founded on the work of Christ, and is, in fact, neonomianism. But it is not true New Covenant Theology.

Yet, Neonomianism doesn't have to be confined to the new laws that Baxter specified—faith and repentance. Keeping any new laws to earn any part of our salvation is a form of neonomianism.

New Law?

One of the reasons New Covenant theologians are accused of being neonomian is because some do teach that Jesus Christ did, indeed, give us a new law. This stems from the history of New Covenant Theology. When it was young, its pioneering theologians saw an error of Covenant Theology.

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Covenant theologians believe that the New Covenant is merely a new administration of the Old Covenant, and that Jesus only corrected the Pharisees' misinterpretation of the Old Covenant law. Covenant Theology's position is a curious one, since we can find where Jesus quoted the Old Covenant law and then said, "But I tell you." Plainly, Jesus was not correcting misunderstandings of the Mosaic Law. His words were not in contrast to misunderstandings. They were in contrast to the law itself (see "The Sermon on the Mount") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/sermononthemount.htm>).

In response to Covenant Theology's error, early New Covenant Theology taught that, instead of correcting misunderstandings of the Mosaic Law, Jesus was giving new law. This solved the obvious mistake of Covenant Theology, but, unfortunately, it created a new error. It said we are under a new law of Christ that must be obeyed, yet it also said that the new law was gracious.

Law, however, cannot be gracious. Law and grace are mutually exclusive. When we are under one, we cannot be under the other: "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). Certainly, we all agree that Christians are led by the Spirit. "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under [the] law" (Galatians 5:18). "Law" does not have the definite article "the" in the original Greek of this verse. Paul is not just speaking about the Old Testament law. Christians are not under law.

In an early book on New Covenant Theology, John G. Reisinger rightly criticizes teachers who tell Christians to look to the Mosaic Law for their standard of conduct. Unfortunately, however, he then merely replaces the Law of Moses with a set of commands he calls the Law of Christ. He says this Law of Christ is gracious, but notice what he also states: "Christ is demanding that we live under the new laws that He is giving.... He is holding us accountable as individuals to personally take **His new laws into our own hands!** Christ is commanding us to respond in pure grace and pity in the same situation that, under the law, *had to be dealt with without pity* by an 'eye for eye' justice" (John G. Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You....*, Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, 1989, 40, all emphases in original).

Remember, the Bible says that we followers of Jesus Christ are not under law but under grace. Are people who are commanded by new laws under grace? No. They are under law. John G. Reisinger made many advances in New Covenant Theology, but I'm convinced he was

mistaken in his idea about the Law of Christ. The logical outcome of Reisinger's teaching was that Christ took us out from under the bondage of the Old Covenant law and put us under bondage to New Covenant law. Reisinger called this law gracious, but that is an impossibility. The Bible says we are not under law but under grace.

This is why it is wrong to speak of being *under* or *bound to* "New Covenant law." *Under* and *bound to* are correctly used for law and show that it obligates us to keep it and punishes us when we don't. We Christians are not *under* or *bound to* any law.¹ Paul describes himself as being "lawful to Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21, *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*) or "in law to Christ," as the Greek has it. The Greek does not say "under the law to Christ," as so many translations wrongly render it. We are in Christ, and by our standing in Christ, we meet the righteous requirements of the law. The law holds nothing over us. We are not under the law; we are not bound to it; we cannot be condemned by it. By being in Christ, we are perpetually in a right standing to the law, not just the Old Covenant law that was a shadow of God's righteousness, but to His real standards as Jesus revealed them.

We Cannot Add to Christ's Perfect Sanctification

Since the early days of New Covenant Theology, some proponents have taken the idea of new law and run with it. Some insist that we must keep Jesus' new law for our "progressive sanctification." John Reisinger himself stated this: "...the purpose of the Law of Christ is to furnish the renewed mind of saints with truth that leads to a more sanctified life (*But I Say Unto You....*, 77). So, according to Reisinger, by keeping the "commands" that Christ gave in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, we can become more sanctified than we are by the imputation of Jesus' righteousness and the fact that He is our sanctification: "But of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who was made to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Thus, since sanctification is part of our salvation, the implication is that we can add to our salvation by our works.

¹ Although we are under grace, the Bible tells us to subject ourselves to civil authorities (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-15). Because their authority comes from God, they have a legitimate function. We should set a good example to the world, and unnecessary disobedience would hinder the spread of the Gospel. But the Bible never says Christians are *under* their laws. For further information, read, "[The Refugee Question: Answered by Christian Mercy or the Sword of the State?](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/the-refugee-question-answered-by-christian-mercy-or-the-sword-of-the-state/)" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/the-refugee-question-answered-by-christian-mercy-or-the-sword-of-the-state/>)

Further Reading: "Are We Sanctified by Works or by Grace?"
(<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/sanctified-grace-works-1/>)

I have no doubt that John Reisinger would be horrified by this implication and had no intention of making it. Nevertheless, based on what he wrote, the implication is valid. In developing a new theological system, it should be expected that we will make some errors. This is why we should carefully examine and re-examine everything and be willing to make changes when necessary. We must not allow New Covenant Theology to become an ossified system that is beyond criticism and correction. We must be careful to not allow its tenets to become another set of stone tablets.

It is not accurate to say that we are obligated to keep any law for any part of our righteousness or salvation. But we can read God's standards that Jesus revealed in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. If we were under these standards as a law, they would instantly condemn us. But we meet these standards by grace through being in Christ. And, with Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit, we are motivated to live by God's standards by acting in love toward others. We don't do this perfectly, but we can safely grow and learn through trial and error with no fear of condemnation. In doing this, we let God work His pleasure in us (Philippians 2:12-13) to do the "good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). In this way, we grow in grace. But this adds nothing to our salvation and in no way obligates God to reward us. Our motivation is love.

God is love, and it is through love that we come to know and become like Him (1 John 4:8, 16). Love fulfills the law (Romans 13:8-10). This principle applies even to what Jesus did for us: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). When Jesus died for us, He fulfilled the law. But how does this relate to our acts of love fulfilling the law?

Read the answer in Romans 8:3-4: "For what the law couldn't do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Notice that what Jesus did in the flesh fulfilled the law in us. We would not be able to fulfill the law in acts of love if Jesus had not already fulfilled the law. This, too, is an act of His grace. Always, ALWAYS, ALWAYS, our salvation, including our sanctification, is by God's grace. Never, NEVER, NEVER is it based on any of our works.

So, did Jesus give us a new law with new commandments that we must obey? No. He revealed God's righteous standards that have stood through eternity. Does God in any way require us to keep these standards to earn our salvation, including our sanctification? Absolutely not.

Further Reading:

"What Is the Law of Christ?" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/law-of-christ/>)

"Are We Under the Law of Christ?" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/under-law-of-christ/>)

"The Sermon on the Mount" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/sermon-on-the-mountain/>)

"Why did Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, raise the standard of the law?"
(<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/jesus-law-qa/>)