

Are We *Under* the Law of Christ?

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In 1 Corinthians 9:21, Paul writes that he is not "outside the law of God but under the law of Christ" (*English Standard Version*). Yet elsewhere, he writes, "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14); and, "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Galatians 5:18). Surely, Paul was under grace and led by the Spirit, so why does he describe himself in 1 Corinthians 9:21 as "under the law?" Is it the fact that Paul is speaking of the law of Christ in 1 Corinthians 9:21 that makes the difference? Does grace take us out from under the law of Moses and put us under the law of Christ? Or, does Paul mean something else entirely?

What Does *Under* the Law Mean?

I have already briefly addressed 1 Corinthians 9:21 in a couple of previous articles. However, because this verse and its surrounding context have become pivotal in a controversy over whether Christians are under any biblical law at all, I have decided I had better devote an article to it. If we misunderstand this verse, we can easily fail to comprehend the Christian's relationship to the law, which, in turn, can lead to a distorted view of the Gospel itself. This has, in fact, happened. There are now people who call themselves New Covenant Theologians or adherents to New Covenant Theology whose understanding of 1 Corinthians 9:21 conflicts with the Gospel. I will explain why that is so later.

As we examine relevant Scriptures, it helps to know that in the majority of cases where English Bibles read "under the law," the word "the" is not present in the Greek. It merely says "under law." When it is not clear whether the writer means a specific law—such as the Law of Moses—or not, reading the context can often help. Even so, Paul sometimes seems to use the Law of Moses as representative of all law. In 1 Corinthians 9:21, however, most English translations say something like, "under the law of Christ."

Speakers and writers frequently use the term "under the law" when discussing the Bible, but I have rarely heard anyone define the term. What does it mean to be *under* the law?

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In the vast majority of cases, "under" is translated from the Greek word *hupo*. "Under" is the proper definition of *hupo*.

Logically, we can conclude that to be *under* the law means that the law is *over* us. In what way? The pertinent definition for "under" in the *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary* says that it means, "subject to the authority, control, guidance, or instruction of." Oxforddictionaries.com defines this use of "under" this way: "Controlled, managed, or governed by" (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/under>). It gives this example: "the province is now under martial law." Do these definitions describe the Christian's relationship to law? Are we under the authority and control of law? Are we managed, guided, or governed by law? The Bible says we are led by the Spirit (Galatians 5:18). Scripture after Scripture present us with an either/or choice: *Either* we are under law and not led by the Spirit, *or* we are under grace and led by the Spirit. The Word of God never presents us with the possibility of being under law *and* under grace, or of being led by law *and* led by the Spirit.¹

To those who insist that Christians are *under* the law of Christ, I ask this question: If I am a believer and I am under the law of Christ, and I, still having flesh and being not yet perfect, transgress that law by acting unloving, what happens? Will God punish me, a believer? Will He condemn me? When someone is under a law and breaks that law, what happens? The person comes under condemnation. Judgment and condemnation for transgression are inseparable from law. Yet, Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (and remember that Galatians 5:18 indicates that we are led by the Spirit).

If we believers are under law, how can there be no condemnation? How can you be under a law and subject to it, but be immune to punishment if you break it? Either that law is no real law at all, or you are not really under the law. To be a believer and to be under the law is an irreconcilable contradiction.

Romans 8:2 shows what is really at work: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death.

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/>).

(Romans 8:2)." We are free from the law because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has liberated us from it. But, you may say, that's exchanging being under one law for being under another, isn't it? No. Notice: "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" (Romans 8:3-4). God didn't take us from being under one law and put us *under* another. He took us from being under law by having Jesus Christ fulfill the law in us who walk according to the Spirit. This is what Paul means by "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" in verse 2. It is not a law that we are *under*, but a law that we are *in* because we are *in* Christ Jesus, and it is a law that is in us, because Jesus Christ is in us.

1 Corinthians 9

To get some context, we should see that in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul is addressing whether believers should eat meat that has been offered to idols. His argument is that, even though we may know that we are free from all such restrictions, in eating these meats, we may wound the consciences of weak brethren. The chapter ends with Paul saying, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will eat no meat forevermore, that I don't cause my brother to stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13).

In chapter 9, Paul, as he often does, ties the topic of our rights as free Christians balanced with our responsibilities to our brethren to the topic of his rights as an apostle. Just as all believers must sometimes forgo their rights for the sake of others, so he as an apostle sacrifices his rights in deference to others. "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Haven't I seen Jesus Christ, our Lord? Aren't you my work in the Lord?... Have we no right to eat and to drink? Have we no right to take along a wife who is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or have only Barnabas and I no right to not work? What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, and doesn't eat of its fruit? Or who feeds a flock, and doesn't drink from the flock's milk?" (1 Corinthians 9:1, 4-7). Paul is saying that he has as much right as the other apostles to not have to have other employment to survive. The brethren should be supporting him for his work in the Word.

Paul supports his position by quoting Deuteronomy 25:4: "You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the grain." He also speaks of how the farmer plows in hope of the harvest (1 Corinthians 9:9 and 10). He then asks, "If we sowed to you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we reap your fleshly things?" (verse 11). Paul further supports

this by pointing out that the priests in the Temple have a right to a portion of the sacrifices. He next plainly states, "So also the Lord ordained those proclaiming the gospel to live from the gospel" (verse 14).

Paul has shown that he has a right to receive support from the brethren. The apostle then goes on to explain that, although he has this right, he has never used his authority to enforce this right lest (as he explained in verse 12) doing so "hinder," "cut into," "interrupt" (*egkopē*) the Gospel. In other words, he is using the same principle he established in chapter 8 (e.g. 8:13). He would not demand his right to financial compensation lest it wound the conscience of a weak brother; that is, lest someone be turned away from listening to the Gospel because the person wrongly assumed that Paul was preaching only for the money.

"For though I was free from all, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more" (1 Corinthians 9:19). This is even better translated by the *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*: "For being free of all, I enslaved [*douloō*] myself to all, that I might gain the more." Paul sometimes referred to himself as a servant (*doulos*—"slave") of Jesus Christ. This verse explains why. It is not because he saw himself as being under the law of Christ. By preaching the Gospel even when no one gave him financial support, Paul had enslaved himself.

So, Paul's theme, as he developed it from chapter 8, is that he will give up his rights, his freedoms—bend over backwards, we might say—if that is necessary to further the Gospel. Now keep all of this in mind as you read 1 Corinthians 9:20-22.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became as weak, that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.

In keeping with his theme, Paul says that, to gain the Jews under the law, he became as one under the law. This does not mean that Paul was actually under the law. Christ had freed him from the law. But for the sake of the Jews, he was willing to reason with the Jews from the Scriptures of the Old Testament law to prove that Jesus was the Christ (see, for example, Acts 17:1-3). Not only that, but from what we know of the Jews, they would not have listened to someone—especially a Jew, as Paul was—who was not living according to the law. So, to get

them to listen to him, Paul, at least during those times he was reasoning with the Jews, lived according to the law. He understood that he was not *really* under the law, but he lived *as* under the law.

In 1 Corinthians 9:21, the verse in question, Paul speaks of those "without law," "outside law," or "lawless" (*anomos*). He is, of course, speaking of the Gentiles. In other words, his freedom from the law allowed him to live outside the law, as did the Gentiles. He did this for the sake of being able to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul then includes a parenthetical statement in which he explains that, although he is as without law to these Gentiles, he is not without law to God. How? Paul tells us: "not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ." This is where nearly every commentator and nearly every translation, including the one I've just used, fall down. Paul has up to now consistently used the words *hupo nomon* for "under law." But that is not what he says here. Here he uses the single word, *ennomos*.

Ennomos literally means "in law." It thus means "within the law," "lawful," or "legal." The sense of *ennomos* is not that of being under the subjection and obligation to law, but the state of being within the law.

The only other place in the New Testament where this word is found is in Acts 19 where the town clerk of Ephesus tells the mob that Demetrius and the craftsmen should settle their grievance in court (Acts 19:38), and if the people have any other concerns, "in the legal assembly it shall be determined" (Acts 19:39, *Young's Literal Translation*). "Legal" is from *ennomos*, and "assembly" is from *ekklēsia* ("called out assembly"—the very word mistranslated "church" in most of the New Testament). In other words, instead of meeting illegally, the people were to bring their concerns before the city's legal assembly.

Paul did not choose his words carelessly. You can be sure that since he used *hupo nomon* to mean "under the law" earlier, he did not use *ennomos* to mean the same thing. As we've seen, to be under the law means to be subject to the law and to its punishments for disobedience. *Ennomos*, on the other hand, means "in law," "within law," "lawful," or "legal."

The difference between *hupo nomon*—"under law"—and *ennomos*—"within law" or "lawful" or "legal" is not merely a shade of a difference. It is a world of difference. Everyone living in the United States is *hupo nomon* to the laws of the United States. They are under the authority of the laws of the United States and obligated to keep them. But not all of those people are *ennomos*—legal. Some are illegal aliens, and

some are unlawful because they are breaking other laws that have authority over them.

What Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 9:21 is that, although he can live as without law to gain the Gentiles, he is not really without law. To God, he is within law, legal, because of his relationship with Jesus Christ. He is in Christ, and Christ is in him, and Christ is his legality. As I explain in "What Is the Law of Christ?" the law of Christ is Christ Himself (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/law-of-christ/>).

Since Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, dwells within every believer, and the law of Christ is Christ Himself, then the law of Christ is in every believer. This is what makes the believer *ennomos*—legal or lawful—to God.

Please understand: It is neither the indwelling Christ's enabling of the believer to do good works, nor the good works themselves, that make the believer lawful. It is the fact of Christ's indwelling that makes the believer lawful. It is true that Christ in us enables us to do good works, but our legal status with God does not come from those good works. It comes entirely from Christ's finished work on the Cross.

We sometimes hear Bible teachers speak of the balance between law and grace. Where does the Bible ever speak of such a balance? It always contrasts law with grace. Grace is unmerited favor. If we say that we have grace but we must balance it with any measure of obedience to the works of law—any law, then the favor we receive from God is no longer unmerited. Grace is no longer grace. As Paul wrote, "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6).

Paul also wrote,

However, what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yes most certainly, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and count them nothing but refuse, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

Philippians 3:7-9

Did you notice it? Paul says that he suffered the loss of all things, and counted them nothing but refuse that he might "gain *Christ and be*

found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ" (emphasis mine). What was important to Paul was to be in Christ, and to have a righteousness that was not his own from law-keeping. As believers, our righteousness does not come from being *under*, and therefore obligated to keep through our works, any law, even the law of Christ. Our righteousness comes simply from being in Christ because we have faith in Christ.

This is why Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:12, repeats a statement the Corinthian brethren had made without contradicting it, but he does give a qualification: "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are expedient. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be brought under the power of anything." "Expedient" is from *sumpherō*. It means, "what comes together for good," "worthwhile," "profitable." A Christian, because Christ is in him and he is in Christ, cannot be anything but lawful in God's sight. When God looks upon the Christian, He looks upon Christ's perfect righteousness. But not all things have harmless outcomes in this life. Having the Spirit of Christ in us, we want to always act in love. Thus, we would not want to do something that would harm anyone.

Paul takes this one step further in 1 Corinthians 10:23: "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are profitable. 'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things build up." "Build up" comes from the Greek word, *oikodomeō*, which literally means "to build a house." It is sometimes translated "edify." So, although all things are lawful, we should not only not be doing the negative—harming someone, but we should be doing what is positive—building up or edifying.

We know that we are always within the law or legal to God and Christ because we are in Christ. Although we sometimes give in to the old habits of our flesh, for the believer, God never counts them as sin. We are not under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14). This is why John can say, "We know that whoever is born of God doesn't sin, but he who was born of God keeps himself, and the evil one doesn't touch him" (1 John 5:18). That is, those in Christ cannot have sin imputed to them, and, thus, Satan cannot accuse them before God.

Conclusion

To say that we are not without law to God because we are *under* the law of Christ turns the thrust of the Gospel on its head. To be under a law is to be under the control and authority of that law and bound to the duty to obey it in all points or receive judgment and condemnation. For the Christian, this cannot be. Our Savior has kept the law perfectly for us, and He has born the judgment and condemnation we deserved. We are not outside the law to God, but within the law—legal—to Christ. In Jesus Christ, God reckons us as lawful. We must not let teachers, however innocent or not may be their motives, bring us again under the bondage of law.

Further reading: "What Is the Law of Christ?"

(<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/law-of-christ/>)

"Are We Sanctified by Works or by Grace?"

(<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/sanctified-grace-works-1/>)

"Did John Teach Sinless Perfectionism?"

(<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/1jn5-sin-qa/>)