

“the law was our tutor” (Gal. 3: 23-25)

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In the third chapter of Galatians, we find a passage which is widely misunderstood. A misconception about this particular passage has greatly influenced many to conclude that God’s spiritual law—the law summarized by the Ten Commandments—has been *replaced* by Christ! The thinking is that, ever since Christ came to this earth, there is no longer any *need* to strive to live by God’s spiritual law.

Let’s now consider that passage: “But **before** faith came, we were kept under guard **by the law**... Therefore **the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ**, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come [i.e., after Christ has come], **we are no longer under a tutor** [i.e., we are no longer under the law]” (Gal. 3: 23-25).

So, it says, “before *faith* came.” “Faith” is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). The Holy Spirit—and the faith provided *by* the Holy Spirit—first became available to members of the Church just weeks after Christ’s crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost. And, with that *availability* of the Holy Spirit and true Godly faith, there was no longer *need* for that **law** which had served as a “tutor.”

However—and this is where people greatly misunderstand—*what* law is being spoken of? What law was then abolished?

Is it speaking of God’s spiritual law, the law summarized by the Ten Commandments? No! God’s spiritual law **always has and always will** be in effect!

So, *which* law is being spoken of as having been abolished? We begin to see the answer by looking just a few verses earlier in that same chapter: “What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It [the law] was **added** because of **transgressions**, till the Seed [Christ] should come...” (Gal. 3:19).

Notice that the “law” being spoken of in this verse, was “added because of *transgressions*.” “Transgressions” of what?! There had to have been **another** law that was *already in effect*, which was being transgressed! “...for where there is **no law there is no transgression**” (Rom. 4:15).

The law which was **already** in effect (and was being transgressed) was God’s spiritual law... the law summarized by the Ten Commandments.

As mentioned earlier, God’s spiritual law *always has*—and *always will*—be in effect! It is the law that *defines* what sin is. “...for **by** the law *is* the **knowledge** of sin,” said Paul (Rom. 3:20). He also said, “I would not have known **what sin was** had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the **law** had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom. 7:7, *NIV*). Plainly, the “law” being referred to here is **The Ten Commandments**.

It was because of the fact that this spiritual law was being so flagrantly *transgressed*, that God temporarily *added another* set of laws: the laws of animal sacrifice and the ceremonial rituals.

Laws of Animal Sacrifice and Ceremonial Rituals

Let's first consider the *ceremonial rituals*. These consisted of grain offerings, drink offerings, various washings, and physical ordinances (Heb. 9:10). They were things to do morning, noon, and night. What was their purpose? They were to teach the people *the habit of obedience*... obedience to God's *spiritual* law!

Unlike Christians today, Old Testament Israelites did not have access to the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Today, if a person comes to have the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, then it is actually Christ living *His* life within the person (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:9-10). And, to the *extent* the person yields his life to Christ's guidance, Christ lives in that person the *same* manner of life He lived 2,000 years ago... a life of *obedience* to God's law! Consequently, once the Holy Spirit was made available (after Christ's crucifixion), this ritualistic law of Moses—the “**tutor**” spoken of in Gal. 3:24—was no longer needed. That system of laws had been “imposed [only] **until** the time of reformation”... i.e., *until* the time of Christ's crucifixion (Heb. 9:10).

Now, what about the temporarily added law of *animal sacrifice*? We have looked at the laws of ceremonial rituals; but the Mosaic Law consisted not only of ceremonial rituals, but also of a system of animal sacrifices.

Unlike Christ's sacrifice, these animal sacrifices could *not* “justify” or take away sin (Heb. 10:4; cf. Rom. 5:9). They were only a temporary substitute for, and until, Christ's sacrifice.

What was the *purpose* of these animal sacrifices? (1) These animal sacrifices would serve to repeatedly **remind** the people of their sins, and to remind them that the *penalty* of sin is *death* (Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23); (2) they would also serve as a shadowy type of the *future* sacrifice of a Savior. “For the law [the Mosaic Law of rituals and animal sacrifices], having a **shadow** of the good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those *sacrifices there is a reminder* of sins every year. For *it is not possible* that the blood of bulls and goats could **take away** sins” (Heb. 10:1-4).

So, when the sacrifice of Christ came, it was God's desire that the Mosaic Law of rituals and animal sacrifice should *cease*. However, the religious leaders *rejected* Christ as the Savior (the “Lamb of God”—John 1:29), and so they *continued* the ritualistic law (including animal sacrifice) up until the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

(For a more detailed discussion of the laws of sacrifice and rituals, as well as a discussion of the Old and New Covenants, see the article “The Old and New Covenants.”)

Further Evidence

Let's now see *further* evidence that the “law” referred to in Gal. 3: 23-25 is referring to the Mosaic *ceremonial* laws—and **not** to the spiritual law (summarized by the Ten Commandments). This “further evidence” concerns Paul’s usage of the phrase “works of the law.”

The phrase “works of the law” is found in only five scriptures in the entire Bible (*KJV* and *NKJV*), and all five are *Paul’s* writings. Four of the five are in the book of Galatians, and three of those are in chapter 3 (which is the chapter containing the verse that is under examination in this article).

What does Paul mean by “works of the law”? Well, additional light has been shed on the meaning of this phrase by an article published in the Nov./Dec. 1994 issue of *Biblical Archeology Review*. In that article, entitled “Paul, ‘Works of the Law’ and MMT,” Dr. Martin Abegg states the following: “This Dead Sea [‘MMT’] Scroll and Paul use the very **same phrase**... *ma’ase ha-torah* is equivalent to what we know in English from Paul’s letters as ‘*works of the law*.’”

Dr. Abegg’s article reveals that “recent translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls show that the expression ‘works of the law’ was used **in the first century Jewish community** [the time of Paul’s writings] to refer to human efforts performed in order to gain right standing with God. **This often involved the kind of purity rituals** that the Pharisees emphasized so much.”¹

“The Dead Sea Scrolls were the products of a Jewish sect dwelling at Qumran, a desert community. According to Lawrence Schiffman, a leading scholar involved in translating some of the Dead Sea texts, the Jewish community [or sect] at Qumran had its *origins*... [due to **conflicts among priests**] ‘**mostly over sacrifices and ritual purity**’” (*Biblical Archeologist*, Jan. 1995, p.37).²

So, when Paul spoke of the “works of the law,” he was referring to the ceremonial or *ritualistic* laws... **not** the Ten Commandments! And Paul *used* this phrase “works of the law” **three times** in this *same* chapter where he said that “the law” *was* our tutor, and that we are **no longer** under that tutor.

Clearly, Paul’s entire discussion in this passage concerns these temporary, **ritualistic** laws... laws which God gave to teach the people the habit of obedience—obedience *to* God’s spiritual law. Once the Holy Spirit was made available after Christ’s crucifixion, those *ritualistic* laws were no longer needed.

Conclusion

In Galatians chapter 3, Paul said that after the coming of Christ, we are no longer under a “tutor” ... no longer under the law. Yet, *which* law was he speaking of? We have essentially seen **three** proofs that in this passage, Paul is **not** speaking of God’s spiritual law; and that he is **instead** speaking of the **ritualistic** laws given to Old Testament Israel.

The *first* proof is more thoroughly discussed in another article on this website, “God’s Law ALWAYS HAS and ALWAYS WILL Be in Effect.” And, since God’s *spiritual law* will **always** be in effect, Paul’s statement could **not** be referring to *that* law! However, Paul shows in Hebrews chapter 9 that *another* law—the law of **sacrifice and rituals**—was indeed imposed only **until** the time of Christ.

The *second* proof is that the “law” in Galatians chapter 3 which Paul said was done away by Christ’s coming, had—as Paul said in verse 19—been “**added** because of **transgressions.**” Therefore, we know that **another** law—God’s spiritual law—was **already** in effect and being “transgressed.” And, it was *because* of transgressions of that **spiritual** law, that God had *temporarily* **added** the ritualistic and sacrificial law.

The *third* proof is that recent translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls show that Paul’s use of the term “*works of the law*” refers to the **sacrificial and ritualistic law**. And THREE of the 5 times Paul *used* that term, he used it **IN** this chapter which we are examining—where Paul said that “the law was our tutor” and that we are *no longer under* that tutor.

Plainly, then, the “law” which Paul is referring to in Gal. 3:23-25 is the law of sacrifice and rituals! Paul is **not** saying that God’s *spiritual* law has been done away!

References:

1. *Tomorrow’s World Bible Study Course*, Lesson Ten, Dec. 2000, p.7
2. *Tomorrow’s World Bible Study Course*, Lesson Eleven, Jan. 2001, p.4