# Must Christians Keep the “Law of Moses” or only the Ten Commandments?

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#### Do New Covenant Christians need to keep none of the Law of Moses, part of the Law of Moses or “the whole law” of Moses?

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Many Christians who profess to believe in keeping the Ten Commandments somehow fail to realize the simple fact that much of the Old Testament "law of Moses" is still binding upon every true child of God! Does this shock you? Then you need to read every word of this article!

Let us first examine several Scriptures pertaining to God's spiri­tual law as summarized by the Ten Commandments, before looking at the question of whether or not the "law of Moses" is now binding on Christians.

The most perfect code of law ever given to man was God's perfect spiritual law (Rom. 7:14)—the Ten Commandments (James 2:11-12). All of humanity's woes and suffer­ings are the direct result of man hav­ing broken God's "perfect law of lib­erty" (James 1:25).

When God Almighty gave His "royal law" (James 2:8) at Mount Sinai, He did not give TEN SUG­GESTIONS! Rather, He promulgat­ed Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), fully intending, eventually, that His spiritual law [sometimes referred to as a moral or ethical law] **would become a universal law for all mankind** (Num. 15:15-16; Is. 2:3). Those Ten Commandments are sometimes called the Decalogue.

Today mainstream Christianity seeks to minimize, or in some way nullify, that perfect code of law which God gave to man nearly 3,500 years ago. Why do so many hate God's law?

Adolf Hitler, whom Churchill called a "ferocious maniac," once said, "The curse of Mt. Sinai.... This is what we [the Nazis] are fighting against.... Against the so-called Ten Commandments, against them we are fighting" (Quoted by Dr. Herman Rauschning, preface, *The Ten Commandments).*

The father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, revealed an attitude which still reflects the way many Christians view God's law. "I did not love, indeed I hated this just God...for I was indignant against Him, saying, `as if it were really not enough for God that miserable sinners should be...**oppressed with all kind of calamities through the law of the Ten Commandments...'** Thus I raged with a fierce and most agitated conscience..." *(Encyc. Brit.,* 1970 ed., vol. 14). Many religious people look upon God's commandments as "the terrible ten"!

A careful reading of the New Testament clearly reveals that both Christ and His twelve apostles believed in, upheld and, in every way, honored the spiritual law of God, the Ten Commandments (Matt. 19:16-19).

### Paul's Attitude About the Ten Commandments and the "law of Moses"

What did Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, teach concerning the law of God and the "law of Moses"? Did he say it was not necessary for Christians to keep the spiritual law of God, the Ten Commandments?

Many theologians are puzzled by Paul's attitude toward the law. In recent centuries the common approach to Paul's writings is to assume that Paul was *antinomian­—*against law. The antinomians say, **"Christians are by grace released from the obligation of observing the moral law.** It was attributed to St. Paul by his opponents [Rom. 3:8], and was held by many of the Gnostic sects, who held that as mat­ter was so sharply opposed to spirit, bodily actions were indifferent. **The teaching was revived at the Reformation as following from the Lutheran doctrine of justifica­tion by faith"** *(The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary,* "Antinomian," p. 57).

The Apostle Peter, writing in the 60s A.D., revealed that Gnostic heretics were then perverting Paul's writings. "Our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles...some things hard to under­stand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

Paul's attitude toward the law is not that hard to ascertain *if* you have an open mind. The apostle to the Gentiles wrote, **"Do we then make void [abolish] the law through faith? Certainly not! On the con­trary, we ESTABLISH it"** (Rom. 3:31)! He also told his Roman con­verts, **"Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good"** (Rom. 7:12). Would God do away with something which was holy, just and good? Paul went even further. He said, **"For we know that the law [of God] is SPIRITUAL,** but I am carnal, sold under sin" (v. 14). Verse seven clear­ly shows that Paul is referring to the Ten Commandments.

In many other Scriptures, the Apostle Paul clearly taught obedi­ence to the law of God. However, he also taught that Christians did not need to keep the entire "law of Moses," or the "whole law" in Galatians 5:3, referring to every­thing in the first five books of the Old Testament. Paul's statement in Galatians 5:3 is in complete agree­ment with the apostles' decision, mentioned in Acts 15.

After convening the first Church council, oftentimes called the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15, to discuss the question of whether cir­cumcision was essential for a Gentile man to have access to God and thus have access to salvation, the apostles wrote their conclusions in the following letter:

The apostles, the elders and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have trou­bled you with words, unset­tling your souls, saying, **"You must be circumcised and keep THE LAW"** ["law of Moses"—v. 5]—to whom we gave no such command­ment...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and. from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell [Acts 15:23-24, 28-29].

The Jerusalem Council didn't dis­cuss the issue of whether or not God's spiritual law (the Ten Commands) was to be kept! Obedience to the Ten Commandments was understood and accepted by all—whether Jews, pros­elytes or Gentile converts! The early Christians clearly understood that obedience and NOT rebellion was to be practiced by the faithful. The Jewish Christians knew what they were to obey. The question was about what sections of the law applied to the Gentiles. There was no need to waste precious time dis­cussing obedience to the "moral law," the Decalogue, because belief in and adherence to God's spiritual law was taken for granted as a given by all present!

"The law" mentioned in Acts 15:24 is explained earlier in verse 5. "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, say­ing, `It is necessary to *circumcise* them [the Gentile converts—v. 3], and to **command them to keep the law of Moses.'”**

Paul also wrote to the saints in Galatia, saying, "And I testify again to every man who becomes *circum­cised* that he is a debtor to keep the *whole law* [of Moses]. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified [forgiv­en] by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:3-4). [Read John Ogwyn's article "Galatians—Epistle of Christian Liberty" in this issue of the GCN for a full explanation of Paul's teaching about circumcision]. Paul then went on to say, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (v. 6). He also told the saints at Corinth, "Circumcision is nothing and uncir­cumcision is nothing, but **keeping the commandments of God is what matters"** ( 1 Cor. 7:19) !

What did Paul mean when he spoke of the "whole law" (Gal. 5:3)? Clearly, in context, he was referring to the whole law of Moses, which did include the Ten Commandments, God's statutes and judgments—and also the animal sacrifices, meat and drink offerings, carnal washings, rituals and numer­ous ordinances pertaining to the `flesh **which were added by God, later, to the covenant He had already ratified with Israel (Ex. 24*) after* the Israelites had sinned by making an idolatrous golden calf** (Ex. 32).

If one carefully studies all the Scriptures mentioning the law of Moses (Acts 15:5; Heb. 10:28), he will readily see that it was the entire legal system of ancient Israel, having laws, statutes, and ordinances, some of which pertained to animal sacri­fices, food and drink offerings, the carnal washings and other fleshly ordinances such as circumcision.

What, then, was Paul teaching? He taught that Christians need not keep the whole law (meaning the whole law of Moses). But that did not annul every other portion of God's law. Even today, if a court annuls or abrogates or supersedes some specific part of a state's legal code, does that court's action throw out the entire penal code? Certainly not! Our primary Christian focus should still be on the SPIRITUAL LAW of God as summarized by the Ten Commandments. But even they are not the only part of the Mosaic law Christians are still required to observe.

As we saw, the apostles' letter to the Gentile converts listed four prohibitions: 1) things offered to idols... 2) blood... 3) things stran­gled..: 4) sexual immorality—all of which are specifically prohibited in the five books written by Moses—­Genesis through Deuteronomy! Note that eating things strangled (Lev. 22:8), eating blood or fat (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17), and immoral­ity such as prostitution (Lev. 19:29; Deut. 23:17-18) were all strictly forbidden in the law of Moses.

Those prohibitions were specifi­cally mentioned because devotees of the Gentile religions often utilized temple prostitutes, offered unclean animals to their idols, ate or drank blood, especially by eating the flesh of strangled animals from which blood was not drained. Notice that these prohibitions were part of the divine statutes which clearly defined how you were to live by the Ten Commandments. God's statutes and ordinances clarify, define or reveal how to apply God's spiritual law to practical living situations. Clearly, these four specific prohibitions and even numerous other laws besides the Ten Commands are still binding on all Christians today!

When Paul wrote his epistle to the Hebrews, just a few years before 70 A.D., the Temple was still stand­ing. The priests were still offering daily animal sacrifices and perform­ing all of the rites, rituals and cere­monies pertaining to the law of Moses. Paul makes it clear that the keeping of some of the OT statutes and ordinances were no longer required of Christians. He explains that those things in the law of Moses which were no longer binding on Christians were "symbolic for the present time in which both **GIFTS and SACRIFICES are offered** [present tense] which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with **FOODS and DRINKS, various WASHINGS, and FLESHLY ORDINANCES** imposed until the TIME OF REFORMATION" (Heb. 9:9-10).

Did Paul consider these gifts, sacrifices, washings, etc., to be sin­ful? Not at all! Paul himself partici­pated in this Temple service when he visited Jerusalem (Acts 21:15-26).

The sacrifices and washings were imposed on God's people "until the TIME OF REFOR­MATION." What did Paul mean by the expression "until the time of REFORMATION"? Most Christians today speak of the reli­gious upheaval of the 1500s (sparked by Martin Luther) as "the Reformation"—sometimes called the "Protestant Reformation." But the true Reformation occurred nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus Christ offered Himself as the Lamb of God and then ascended to heaven to serve as High Priest for the people of God, who are now partakers of the "New Covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 12:24)! Jesus Christ's blood washes away our sin and His indwelling life perfects our consciences. The OT sacrificial system never promised to do this.

### The Law of Moses and Christ's Apostles

We have seen that the Jerusalem Church Council (c. 50 A.D.) enjoined on Gentile Christians four prohibitions found in the law of Moses. But how can one know which other laws, statutes and judgments of the law of Moses are to be kept, today? Should individual Christians or churches each pick and choose which laws, statutes, ordinances or testimonies of God they will keep? Or, should they let the New Testament Scriptures show them which laws, statutes and judg­ments in the law of Moses are still binding on true Christians today?

There are literally scores of laws, statutes or judgments in the law of Moses which any honest Christian would have to freely admit are still obligatory for the followers of Jesus Christ to keep in the mod­ern world.

God used His statutes and ordi­nances as practical applications of the spiritual principles of the Ten Commandments. Can you figure out which of the spiritual principles of the Ten Commandments apply to the following examples? 1) Would any Christian say that "witchcraft" or sorcery is now per­mitted, while it was strictly forbid­den (Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18) in the law of Moses? 2) How about God's statute forbidding kidnap­ping (Ex. 21:16)? Is it still binding on Christians? 3) Should Christians keep the law of Moses that requires one to honor the elderly (Lev. 19:32)? 4) Are the Mosaic laws prohibiting bestiality (Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18:23) still binding on Christians? 5) Is homosexual con­duct forbidden to Christians (Lev. 18:22; 1 Cor. 6:9)? 6) Are those laws which prohibit oppressing or afflicting widows and orphans (Ex. 22:22-24) still to be kept by Christians? 7) Are Christians allowed to "revile God...[or) curse a ruler" of their people (v. 28)? 8) Is the law against being a talebear­er or gossip (Lev. 19:16) still to be observed by all true Christians? 9) Can Christians ignore God's statute which says an employer must never defraud his employee (Lev. 19:13)? 10) Would Christians deny that one must be diligent to maintain just and equal weights and measures (Lev. 19:35-36)?

These are just a few of the exam­ples of ethical standards which God expects His people to keep. There are many other laws, statutes and judgments in the law of Moses which true Christians must still obey!

Again, how can one really know what is still binding on Christ's followers and what is not? One must diligently study the entire NT to see what Christ and His apostles believed and prac­ticed! As an example, Jesus and His apostles kept God's Sabbaths (Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14-15; 17:1-4; 18:4). They also observed the annual Holy Days of God (Lev. 23; John 7; Acts 2; 12:1-4). Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, kept God's Holy Days (Acts 20:6, 16; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 16:8).

And, nearly ten years after (c. 41 A.D.) the first Pentecost, Peter said, "I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 strictly prohibited eating what God's Word calls "unclean" foods—meats which God forbade His people to consume. Clearly, Peter did not believe those laws forbidding "unclean" meats had been abolished when he received his vision to take the Gospel to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-35). There is absolutely nothing in the NT which abolishes those so-called dietary laws! Rather, those dietary laws will still be valid in God's eyes when He sends Jesus Christ to rule the whole earth (Is. 66:15-17, 23-24)!

One cannot properly under­stand the New Testament without the Old Testament and vice versa. The Christians of the first century A.D. did not have the NT Scriptures to go by. The apostles preached Christ and the Gospel right out of the OT. In addition, they also believed in and used the words and examples of Christ as their infallible guide in all matters of doctrine and practice.

The NT explains, amplifies and interprets the OT Scriptures. **We can only know which OT laws, statutes, ordinances and testi­monies are still binding on Christians by carefully studying the words and practices of Christ and His apostles as mentioned in the NT Scriptures.** The New Testament is the real key revealing which laws, statutes, judgments and testimonies (as mentioned in the books of Moses—Genesis to Deuteronomy) are still binding upon Christians in today's modern world.

Not one verse in the entire NT gives the slightest hint that any of the Ten Commandments were abol­ished, either by Christ or His apos­tles! Christ said obedience to the Ten Commandments was necessary for salvation (Matt. 19:16-17). The Ten Commands make up the basic, SPIRITUAL LAW of God (Rom. 7:14)! Without them man would grope around helplessly trying to find his way in a darkened world. "For the COMMANDMENT is a lamp, and the LAW is light..." (Prov. 6:23).

The Bible reveals that God not only spoke the Ten Commands with His own voice (Ex. 20), but also wrote them on two tablets of stone with his own finger (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). Notice that this spiritual law is eternal. "The works of his hands [such as the law written with God's finger] are verity and judg­ment; all his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness" (Ps. 111:7-8 KJV).

The LORD had Moses put the two tablets inside the gold-plated Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 10:1-5). The fact that the two tablets were made of durable stone was intended to symbolize the permanence of God's spiritual law summarized by the Ten Commandments. But God's additional instructions to Moses (recorded in the law of Moses—Ex. 21-23) were written, at that time, on a very perishable animal-skin or parchment scroll which was then put beside the ark of the covenant: "Take this book [scroll] of the law, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God" (Deut. 31:26 JPS). Hebrews 9:4 reveals that the "the [two] tablets of the covenant" were put inside the ARK, under the mercy seat, the very throne of God on earth. The "book of the covenant" was not in such a holy place. Rather, it was placed as ready refer­ence for the priests to copy, teach and transmit its practical judgments to God's people, including their rulers.

Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, **from the one before the priests**, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left; and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel [Deut. 17:18-20].

### Christian Freedom Within God's Law

After Jesus Christ's resurrection, He revealed to His apostles that though they were to keep God's spir­itual law, it was not now necessary for them to keep the whole law, which in NT times was known as the law of Moses.

True Christians are still under the JURISDICTION of the ‘LAW OF GOD. We are still under THE AUTHORITY of the Ten Commandments—as the eternal SPIRITUAL LAW OF GOD (Rom. 7:1 ). However, we are no longer under the death penalty which we all incurred when we transgressed God's spiritual law (Rom. 3:23 6:14, 23).

Paul became "to those who are without law [Gk. *anomos*]as without law (not being without law toward God, but UNDER LAW [Gk. *ennomos,* "within the law"] toward Christ)...that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:21-22). Yes, Paul realized he was still "within [the authority of] the law."

### A Commandment-Keeping Church

God's true Church has always been a commandment-keeping Church-and always will be! The book of Revelation gives the history of God's true Church, from the time of Jesus' birth to His Second Coming (Rev. 12). Immediately before Christ's glorious return to this earth to establish His Kingdom, Satan will make a final, all-out attack on God's Church—seeking to destroy it once and for all. However, God promises that He will protect His true Church, which will "flee into the wilderness" to be shielded by God (Rev. 12:13-14). Then what? "And the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman [God's Church], and went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (v. 17).

True Christians always believe in obeying God's law. Even so, many have falsely accused them of trying to earn their salvation by their good works! Nothing could be fur­ther from the truth. No amount of lawkeeping, no amount of obeying God's laws and commandments, can ever earn us salvation!

A loving, merciful God freely grants salvation to every human who willingly receives His free gift! It is only by God's GRACE and His free Spirit that we are saved (Acts 13:38-39). Through the freely-given sacrifice of Christ, our past sins are forgiven (Rom. 3:25). And it is only through the freely-given Spirit of God that we can receive the love, joy, faith and the strength to keep God's perfect spiritual law in the present. This is all accomplished through the grace of God!

Even so, we humans definitely have our part to play. God demands that we repent of our sins, but He will not repent for us. God also says we must accept Jesus Christ as our Savior if we wish to be saved, but He will not accept Christ on our behalf. Further, He commands us to be baptized, but He won't be bap­tized for us. And this same loving God also commands us to keep His Ten Commandments, but He will not keep the commandments for us. If we are willing, however, He will keep His law in and through us.

But how will Christ live His life in us? If we do truly repent of our sins, then God will give us His Holy Spirit which will empower us to keep His commandments. The Apostle Paul explained it this way, "I am crucified with Christ: never­theless I live; yet not I, but Christ [through His Spirit] liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20 KJV).

Consequently, no mortal human can ever boast! Salvation is not by merit, not of debt, not some­thing which we deserve or can ever earn by our own efforts (good works). Salvation is God's free gift—by His grace. Nevertheless, we must never forget that **"faith without WORKS is dead"** (James 2:14-26). We must not forget that we will all be rewarded according to our works! "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one ACCORDING TO HIS WORK" (Rev. 22:12)! "And their works fol­low them" (Rev. 14:13)!

God promises, "Blessed are those who DO HIS COMMAND­MENTS, that they may have the right to the tree of [eternal] life" (Rev. 22:14). Yes, the founder of Christianity said, "If you want to enter into [eternal] life, KEEP THE COM­MANDMENTS" (Matt. 19:17)!

There is absolutely nothing wrong with God's "royal law" (James 2:8)—His "perfect law of liberty." Nothing! God's good and just law is a perfect "spiritual" law (Rom. 7:12, 14). The Ten Commands are, in fact, a reflection of God's perfect character, person­ality and mind! And God wants us to "be[come] perfect, just as ...[our] Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) !

Under the New Covenant, true Christians are obligated to observe God's Ten Commandments—His eternal, spiritual law; but they are not under obligation to keep the whole law of Moses. However, as we have seen, true Christians are obligated to keep many of the laws, statutes and judgments found in the law of Moses—in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Only by carefully studying the NT Scriptures can we know which laws, statutes, judgments and testi­monies from the Mosaic system Christians should be observing today! Many so-called "Christians" think we only need to keep those OT laws reiterated in the NT. They have it completely BACKWARDS! In reality, we must keep ALL laws revealed in the Old Testament unless they are specifically, or in spiritual principle, abrogated in the NT. That certainly applies to each of God's holy Ten Commandments!

God's Word reveals that , when the law of the LORD goes forth into all the world (Is. 2:3), then, at last, all nations will learn to live in obedience to God's per­fect spiritual law, and the statutes that amplify it, summarized by the Ten Commandments. When men learn to obey God's spiritual law , they will cheerfully "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (v. 4)! Then, and only then, will the nations on this whole earth experience good health, over­flowing happiness, superabundant prosperity and universal peace!

Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* makes the following insightful com­ments regarding the attitude of Christ's apostles and disciples toward the "law of Moses": "The scanty and sus­picious materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the dark cloud that hangs over the first age [the Apostolic Age] of the church" (vol. l, ch. 15, p. 382). "Under these circumstances, Christianity offered itself to the world; **armed with the strength of the Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its-fetters** [i.e. its animal sacrifices, rituals, and carnal ordinances—such as washings].... The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of Christianity" (p. 387).

Furthermore, Gibbons says, "The first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the con­gregation over which they presided **united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ"** (p. 389). "While the orthodox church [the early Apostolic Church] preserved a just medium between excessive veneration and improper contempt for the law of Moses, the various heretics deviated into equal but opposite extremes of error and extravagance" (p. 392).

The above comments make it plain that Christ's apostles and disciples all had high regard for the law of Moses, but, as the Apostle Paul revealed, they believed and taught that, though much of the law of Moses was still binding upon Christians, they were not required to keep "the whole law" of Moses (Gal. 5:3). The apostles' and disciples' NT writings make it clear that Christians are not required to keep the ceremonial, ritualistic and sacrificial portions of the law of Moses!