

VERDICT

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Living by the Bible

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Paul's opponents in Galatia urged a religion of Law upon his converts. Their appeal was to the Jewish Torah or Law, which embraced the entire Old Testament Scripture. The religion of Law which they urged was therefore a religion of Scripture.

Paul's opponents, of course, did not urge this religion of Law or Scripture as a means of earning salvation. In view of having heard the gospel about Christ's death and resurrection, their question was rather, 'How then should we live?' The answer of these Judaizing opponents was that believers must live in obedience to the Torah—the Jewish Scripture—as the fruit, the evidence and validation of being true believers. So the Judaizers were really saying, 'We must live strictly by what the Bible says.'

Paul's reply is summarized in Galatians 5:18: "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law [Torah, Jewish Scripture, and Holy Scripture]." In 2 Corinthians 3:6 Paul says, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." In Romans 7 the apostle also uses another synonym for being under the Law—being controlled by the "letter." The Greek word for "letter" is *gramma*, and the emphasis is on the written textuality of the Torah.

In order to appreciate the argument used by Paul's opponents, we need to look at their background in rabbinic Judaism. Before the Exile the Torah was flexible, growing, expanding. It spanned nearly a thousand years of Israel's history. During that time there were great historical changes. Thus, the sacred account expanded in light of additional prophetic insight. After Israel's exile in Babylon, however, the tradition that had developed over centuries was collected, edited and given its final form. That which the Hebrews called the Torah or Law of Moses—in its broad sense: Jewish Scripture—then became fixed and inflexible. Israel made a covenant to live

faithfully by what was written in the Torah. For the first time Judaism became rabbinic Judaism, a religion increasingly controlled by the letter of Scripture.

Paul's opponents who came to Antioch and Galatia had their roots in rabbinic Judaism. They had come to the faith through the background of Pharisaism. They believed in Jesus, who had declared, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). Thus, they believed, that Jesus sanctioned the authority of Scripture—the Torah, the Old Testament. Indeed, they interpreted the new covenant nomistically. If the new covenant means putting the Law in our hearts, it means that by the gospel of Jesus Christ we receive power to carry out the way of life described in the letter of Old Testament Scripture. So the contention of Paul's opponents was that both Jewish and Gentile believers must live strictly by the letter of Old Testament Scripture. Thus, the Judaizers urged circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and the requirement that Gentiles should live as Jews in the matter of eating so that all could enjoy table fellowship together.

The issue, therefore, was not bald legalism. Rather, as Werner H. Kelber has said:

Paul's concern ... is the grammatological nature of the Law. The principal antithesis is not between, Spirit versus works, but between Spirit versus, the Written. Paul's objection is not to the *nomos* [as a legal authority, but rather to the objectification of the Law as *gramma* [letter]....

[This insight] has not been taken with full seriousness. 1

Protestantism as a religion of the Book developed originally in reaction to Rome's ecclesiastical authority. Thus, a Protestant tradition has developed that is astonishingly like rabbinic Judaism. But the Bible itself does not advocate using the Bible like this.

During the entire span of four or five hundred years preceding the Exile, which marked the greatest period of Israel's history, virtually no mention was made of the Torah or Law of Moses—not by David or Solomon or any of the other kings. The great prophets—Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah—and the galaxy of Minor Prophets made little appeal to the laws and commandments of Moses. In commenting on this fact James Barr says:

The prophets may form a good example of how scripture came from God, but they do not seem to be a good example of how one ought to live as a believer in scripture.... According to fundamentalist opinion, a substantial body of scripture had long existed in Israel before the prophetic movement took its rise and long before the time of the great prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah. The Pentateuch, more or less entire, had been written by Moses and was authoritative scripture from the beginning. Yet these same prophets hardly ever refer to this scripture. How many passages can the reader name in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel which refer to the 'books of Moses' or the 'laws of Moses' or which describe how the prophet turned to these books for guidance about the will of God? In other words, whether or not the scriptures of Mosaic times existed, the great prophets of Israel seem to have been anything but scripturally-minded men. In this respect they provide anything but a fitting paradigm for the ideal of a scripturally dominated manor community. Where do they direct their hearers to apply themselves to the scriptures? 2

The same pattern is observed in Jesus and the apostles. Although Jesus revered the Scriptures and taught that they were authoritative, it is clear from all the Gospels that he went beyond the bounds of the Old Testament in many of his teachings. Even in the Sermon on the Mount, in which he affirmed the validity of the Law and the Prophets, he did not merely expound the meaning of Scripture. He elaborated on some scriptures; some he flatly contradicted. Thus, it was said in Moses, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,” but Jesus said not to behave that way at all in his kingdom (Matt. 5:38-42). It was said in Moses, “Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce,” but Jesus instructed another thing altogether (Matt. 5:31, 32). Jesus often went beyond Scripture. The great body of his teaching was not derived from Scripture. He did not say, “Thus saith the Lord.” He simply said, “I say unto you.” He taught by his own authority. And most of his teaching was in parables— stories taken from life and from nature. His use of the Old Testament was very imaginative. For example, when he introduced the Sabbath argument, he said, “Have you never read what David did...when Abiathar was high priest...?” (Mark 2:25, 26). Abiathar, of course, was not the high priest at all. Thus, Barr states, “Jesus himself, and the New Testament writers after him, handled the texts and the facts of the Old Testament in a rather free and easy way.” 3

Jesus’ knowledge of God and of his relation to him was not dominated and controlled by Scripture. Furthermore, Jesus did not advocate that his disciples should have a religion rigidly controlled by the scriptural text and by writing and studying what was written. Jesus himself, the greatest of all teachers, never wrote anything except in the sand, and that was soon swept away. Furthermore, he never urged his apostles to write anything. We must now confess that we have no firsthand apostolic record of the life of Jesus in the New Testament. Matthew did not write Matthew. The author was a rabbinic Jew in a Jewish-Christian community. Mark was not a firsthand witness. Neither was Luke. He was a convert of Paul. The book of John was not written by the apostle but represents a Johannine tradition. Barr summarizes this point by saying:

There is no doubt that Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels, accepted the ancient Jewish scriptures as the word of God and authoritative. They witnessed to him and provided analogies and images within which his own work and mission could be set forth. But these ancient scriptures, although they supported and confirmed the understanding of his work and life, did not control it absolutely. Jesus was not bound by ancient scripture and overstepped it in numerous ways; his teaching was not in principle an interpretation of ancient scripture and was rather a statement of himself in his own words, with the confirmation of ancient scripture where appropriate. There is no evidence in the Gospels that suggests that Jesus planned or intended for his own followers a further extended ‘scripture’ in which a ‘New’ Testament of Christian writings would be joined with the ‘Old’ Testament of pre-Christian Judaism. Within the teaching of Jesus and within the main parts of the New Testament as we have it, the basic communication of the Christian gospel, and the basic criteria for the evaluation of religious belief, do not lie in a written scripture at all. 4

Like Jesus before them, the apostles were not dominated and controlled by Scripture. They appealed to its background, its imagery and its witness to the Messiah where appropriate. But the extent to which the New Testament uses the Old

is astonishingly limited. And when the apostles did use Scripture, it was often in a free and easy way. Matthew, for example, says that “what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled” (Matt. 27:9). But Matthew is here actually referring to Zechariah. Mark says, “It is written in Isaiah the prophet” (Mark 1:2). He then quotes from Malachi as well as from Isaiah. Such inexactness was unthinkable in the tradition of rabbinic Judaism with its passion for extreme exactness in letter. The apostles also favored the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament, rather than the original Hebrew. The Septuagint was a popular but corrupted translation. For example, the passage in Hebrews 10 which says, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me,” is taken from the Septuagint. The original scripture in Psalm 40 does not say “a body you prepared for me.” It says “my ears you have opened.” But the writer to the Hebrews was making a point with a free and easy way of using Scripture. Many similar examples could be given. Barr comments on this matter as follows:

The New Testament writers were clearly often very free in their use of the Old. They did not worry much whether the translation they used was accurate, they used arguments that were built upon errors in the texts [from the Septuagint and they followed texts that disagreed with the presumably inspired Hebrew as God had given it to Moses or to the Psalmist....Their religion was of a quite different pattern and structure, ‘They used scripture (roughly speaking, the Old Testament) as support and confirmation, as source for ideas and images, as means for expression and validation; but they were not bounded and confined by it. 5

The book of Romans is the most complete exposition given anywhere of the Christian gospel and its ramifications for life. But there is an astonishing aspect to this book. Nowhere does Paul tell how to study the Bible and how urgent it is to live by the Bible. In fact, such instruction is nowhere in the great body of Pauline literature. Paul did not live by the letter of the Torah— by the letter of Scripture. His religion was not textually dominated and controlled. In his attacks in Galatians and Corinthians he makes clear that this manner of using the Bible kills rather than brings life. It imprisons rather than frees. Living by the letter incites one to do evil and stimulates a person to do exactly what it forbids (Rom. 7). Used in this way, the Law— the Torah, Scripture— stirs up all kinds of evil desires. Indeed, Paul uses the analogy of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. “Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death” (Rom. 7:11). Such use of the Bible really makes people hypocrites.

The Judaizers in Galatia, of course, did not seriously intend for the Gentile converts of Paul to keep all the Torah. They recognized that in the changing circumstances of history it would be clearly impossible to do all that the Torah required. The Judaizers simply used the authority of the Torah in order to bring people into slavery to their own system. But Paul said, “I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (Rom. 5:3).

So it is today. There is not a soul on earth who carries out all that the Bible says. For example, the Old Testament says that when we lend to our brother we must not

take interest from him, but we can take interest from strangers (Deut. 23:19, 20). What Christian today practices this principle? We conveniently ignore it as much as the Judaizers did. We realize, of course, that we live in a new dispensation. But there is much instruction in the New Testament that we conveniently ignore as well. An earnest young man asked the Lord, “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Obey the commandments.... Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matt. 19:17, 21). Does this passage receive serious consideration today? Many other New Testament examples could be given. Barr summarizes the real issue in the following brilliant statement:

Fundamentalists seem to me to fail to perceive that the Bible itself can be made into the instrument of human pride, human self-affirmation, human will to dominate, human ideological fervour. They cannot believe it of the Bible. If one really and completely accepts its authority, one will not be able to go wrong. But this is what does happen, and there is plenty of evidence and experience for it. People who sincerely and completely accept the Bible can build it into the structure of their own will and desire, just as any other object can be so used. Religion is not immune to becoming the instrument of the human passions. If it is true of the rest of religion, it is true of the Bible also. If it is true of the church— and surely almost all evangelicals would affirm that it is— then it is, or may be, true of the Bible also. And the fact that people believe, even quite sincerely, that their purposes, their motives and their ideologies are sanctioned by the Bible may only destroy their powers of self-criticism and make them less able to judge the ethical dimensions of what they are doing. 6

Looking back on Christian history, it has so often been true that the Bible either found people mad or made them mad. Luther gave good advice when he suggested that many people would be better off if they read some other book.

Thus, in Paul’s attack on the letter he declared that living by the letter— living a scripturally-controlled religion— kills. It imprisons. It incites to evil. It leads to hypocrisy— because we do not actually carry it all out— and in our arrogance we thereby dehumanize ourselves and others.

Many earnest Christians today are uneasy about the findings of modern scholarship. But biblical scholarship, particularly since World War II, has made amazing progress in the study of the Bible. Advances in biblical understanding in the last fifty years exceed all advances made in the previous nearly two thousand years of Christian history.

Four contributions of biblical scholarship should be emphasized:

1. Biblical scholarship has made it abundantly clear that the Bible is not inerrant. It contains numerous mundane mistakes and inconsistencies. We need not be frightened by this. God could have given an inerrant book if he had wanted to. But perhaps the mistakes are a protection from bibliolatry, a defense against a religion of letter.

2. Biblical scholarship has also made it abundantly clear that we have no accurate, direct access to the historical Jesus. Even that history is seen through a glass darkly. There are historical discrepancies in the four Gospels. They do not constitute a

biography. The records that we have of the life of Christ are from second- and third-generation witnesses. We are cut off from direct historical access.

3. There is no homogeneous body of teaching in Scripture. Rather, there is diversity. There are tensions. There are different points of view.

4. Scholarship has clearly demonstrated that despite all the professions of living a life controlled by the Bible, no one does it all anyway.

There is, however, something positive about Paul's approach—the approach of the Spirit. His approach was not new, for while the prophets did not refer to the legal-stipulation side of Moses, they referred repeatedly to the story aspect of the Torah. They frequently referred to the history of God's action of redemption and how God mercifully brought them up out of Egypt. The prophets did that because a story, more perfectly than anything else, conveys the spirit of existence. The story of Israel expresses the spirit of Israel's existence. The prophets reached them by showing them that in their inhumanity toward one another they were not living by the spirit of the Torah. Rabbinic Judaism was attached to the letter of the Torah. But when Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17), he did not intend to make every commandment and ceremony binding. Rather, the teaching of Jesus brought the true spirit of the Torah to glorious expression. Paul, also, was more attuned to the spirit of Holy Scripture. The spirit that animates and breathes through Holy Scripture is best mediated, as the prophets demonstrate, in the story of Holy Scripture.

The high point of the story of Holy Scripture is Jesus—who he was, what he did, how he died, and how he rose again. Everyone who believes that story receives the very Spirit of Christ. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (John 7:38, 39). The gospel is the story of Jesus, and wherever it is proclaimed, it mediates to men and women the very presence of the resurrected One—the Spirit of Jesus Christ. He is the center, and all of Scripture must be seen as the servant of Christ. Christ is not the servant of Scripture. It is there to bear witness to him. It exists to point away from itself to him. Therefore it is to be used in his service. This means that the Bible must be interpreted by the dominating spirit of the gospel—the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This means that the letter of Scripture, whether it is New Testament or Old, cannot control the Spirit. The Spirit is always greater than the letter. The Spirit must control the letter, just as the prophetic spirit controlled the Torah. Over its long, thousand-year period, Israel updated, amended, reinterpreted and even altered the Law to suit new situations.

Just as the prophets, who were Spirit-filled men, in ancient Israel reinterpreted the Law to meet new historical situations, so today the Spirit must control the letter of Holy Scripture. By the Spirit, mediated to us in the gospel, we must reinterpret the letter of Holy Scripture. Sometimes we may have to discard that letter, that Scripture, if it is obvious that it would hurt, wound, damage and dehumanize if we tried to follow

the letter. The Spirit gives that liberty. After all, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). So in the service of the gospel the Scripture must always be for the good of people. By the leading of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we have to reinterpret and even discard the letter of Scripture in light of the gospel. After all, many of the great ethical questions of our time, such as emergency abortion and *in vitro* fertilization, are not resolved by any clear biblical text. We therefore have to ask, “What was the historical situation then? To whom did God speak? What is our historical situation now? How do the gospel and the Spirit of Jesus Christ lead us to handle this in light of present human needs?” While this is a risky task, we ought to carefully listen to the church universal rather than think we are the only ones who have any light and know what to do. If the church universal has universally taught something, we should be very careful concluding that the Spirit has led us otherwise. On the other hand, the church universal has reached agreement on very few things. This means that we have few things to be dogmatic about. Where the church universal has argued on different points—sincere Christians on one side and sincere Christians on another side—it might be well to hold some reservations and conclude that perhaps the evidence is not decisive enough. The Lord has left an element of uncertainty to test our charity toward one another.

In the first-century church there were broad divisions between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, and there were sharp differences between them in the way they viewed and answered many questions. In light of Paul’s universal gospel, however, those who are led by the Spirit will not use the Bible in a Judaistic way to create needless boundaries. Rather, they will seek to transcend human divisions and to embrace all who have accepted one Lord.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the New International Version.

1. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 158 -59.
2. James Barr. *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 29-30.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18—19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 119

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