

Some Thoughts on 'Keeping the Law' or 'Torah Observance'

by Reggie Kelly

The Church's distinctive stewardship is to show forth the life, power, and freedom of the new creation 'apart from the works of the law'.

Scripture: Galatians 6:15

Topics: "Law And Grace", "Justification By Faith"

Description

Reggie Kelly preaches about the importance of understanding the distinction between the commandments given to Israel and the new creation brought by Christ. He emphasizes that keeping the commandments is a result, not a cause, of being made new in Christ. Paul's teachings highlight the need for believers to rely on the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit rather than on human effort or works for justification. The sermon underscores the unique stewardship of Israel under the law and the Church's role in manifesting the righteousness of God through faith in Christ, apart from the works of the law.

Transcript

Certainly for Paul, keeping the commandments in a true and living way was the equivalent of a new creation (in the sense of its sure and necessary evidence). This is clearly seen when 1 Cor 7:19 and Gal 6:15 are compared in juxtaposition. But the 'keeping of the commandments' is never the cause, but the sure and certain 'result' of "a new creation" (defined as vital regeneration, the resurrection life of Christ in every living believer). To 'get the cart before the horse' in this matter constitutes 'another gospel.'

However, Paul just as clearly declared himself (not only gentiles as in Acts 15:10-29) 'free' (except for expedience sake) from certain regulations of the law (1Cor 6:12; 9:19-21). In some instances, however, these 'regulations' were not merely rabbinic custom but divine commandment. How can this be? Since Paul never releases even gentile believers from the keeping of the essential commandments of God (far from it!), what has changed? Why is anyone at any time released from circumcision or any other commandment of the law?

Though not stated so explicitly (or where would be the controversy, and hence the divinely intended crisis?), there is a certain 'kind' of commandment that the apostle calls 'carnal' (Heb 7:16 and 9:10). Which commandments come under this designation?

The evidence suggests to me that such a distinction has in view those particular commandments given specifically to Israel that are 'physical' and outward, the performance of which lies within the reach of the natural man, and do not require for their fulfillment the miracle of regeneration. It is not so with the perfect holiness required by the law. By divine intent, this requirement is necessarily beyond natural ability, and possible only to God through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, "the power of an endless (or indestructible) life." It is these physical ordinances in particular that formed part of Israel's unique stewardship "under the law" that stood between Jew and gentile. But now, since "the time of reformation" (Heb 9:10), these particular kinds of commandments are no longer permitted to divide between members of the eschatological 'one new man.' God is jealous that this issue of divine contention not be compromised by well meaning believers as did Peter in the episode that Paul records in Gal 2:11.

Paul is clear that to rest in any form of "works" (anything possible to man) for justification is ultimately fatal, but what of the question of observing such humanly doable ordinances strictly for the sake of witness or a presumed 'higher sanctification'? In my view, this is to surrender something that is critical to the heart of the divine purpose for this dispensation. It misses entirely God's very point in removing the temple and sacrifice and in giving the Spirit to gentiles "in order to provoke" the 'observant' Jew to jealousy [Paul argues that such fastidious 'observance' apart from the Spirit falls fatally short of true "commandment keeping"].

It is to miss entirely the very cause and nature of the believer's distinctive stewardship (calling/trust/responsibility) ordained for this present time while the Jew is under the particular form of judgment decreed for this dispensation. To return 'at this time' to these particular kinds of 'dispensationally conditioned' ordinances is to give back the very ground that Paul rebukes Peter for yielding to the men that came from James (Gal 2:12-18). It is to build again what was destroyed (I ask, what was "destroyed"?), and makes the one returning to the old (something is "old") standard of division a transgressor. Furthermore, it removes from God the very leverage of appeal that is intended to demonstrate to the Jew that "righteousness does not come by the law" (Gal 2:21; 3:11; Heb 10:8) which in Pauline usage means that perverse "confidence in the flesh" that imagines that the holiness of the law can be approached by man as man. Regardless of time or dispensation, the law is fulfilled only by the power of the Spirit, perfectly and flawlessly in Christ, but substantially and visibly in every 'living' believer.

Many of the laws first given at Mt. Sinai are provisional for a theocratic nation 'in the land'. They are not eternal. Abraham was no less a commandment-keeping man of the Spirit, as are all his true born progeny (see John 8:39), yet he knew nothing of many of the laws first instituted at Mt. Sinai. These were distinctive and restrictive in their intention for the new theocratic nation. However, the righteousness embodied, articulated and required in that distinctive covenant is indeed eternal. The law requires nothing less than the perfect righteousness of God Himself and cuts off all else. This righteousness perfectly fulfilled only in Messiah's flawless humanity (Lev 18:5; Mt 3:15; Gal 3:12), is in substantial measure fulfilled also in the believer by nothing less than a comparable incarnation of the Spirit (new creation) mediated through a regenerating miracle of divine revelation that issues in true repentance and saving faith. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and is fundamentally axiomatic for any time or dispensation (the new birth is not peculiar to the New Testament "Are you a master in Israel ...?").

So the law instituted with the Sinaitic covenant is a divine trust given uniquely to the priestly nation, but it also functions as a test and witness to the reality of that nation's true heart condition, i.e. its fidelity to God; it was a provisional stewardship for Israel in particular, conditioned in some respects on endurance in the Land, and never intended to reach beyond its purpose to bring in a new creation of completed perfection;

it was therefore in that sense regarded by the apostles as a temporary dispensation (Heb 9:10). This is in no way contradicted by the recognition that certain elements belonging to that earlier dispensation will again be in force in the coming millennium when the kingdom is restored to Israel. But according to the mystery hid in other ages, the Church of this dispensation is revealed as the eschatological first-fruits, not only of Israel's millennial salvation, but of something even more ultimate than millennial Israel, namely, the "one new man" of the new creation, the heavenly Zion, the completed assembly, the final tabernacle of God (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22; 11:40; Rev 21:3). Thus, the mystery of the Body of Messiah reveals the Church in its essential nature as a kind of 'eighth day' phenomenon. In its invisible essence, the Church is the present realization of that new creation that is beyond even the millennial dispensation. This is not only the destiny, but the now present heavenly position of every true born child of God. Our citizenship is in heaven. And though no less true of all of the 'living' from every age (Mt 12:26-27), this, as so much else, has only come to full light through the revelation of gospel.

Though often confused and improperly differentiated, these important distinctions take absolutely nothing away from the unique role and special stewardship that Israel MUST fulfill throughout the millennium for the sake of 'that' necessary and public vindication of covenant faithfulness on God's part ("This is my covenant with them..."). Rather, it is only to distinguish that the stewardship and calling of the Church of this age is unique to this age, though this is not the last age. The Church is a mystery organism, a phenomenon of divine revelation set 'between the times' as a witness to "the powers of the age to come." Although the "powers" of the coming age have come in unexpected advance of the salvation of the 'last day' (Old Testament 'Day of the Lord') in the person and work of the Messiah and in the Spirit poured out upon the Church, the age itself is still future.

During this present age and dispensation (the time that Israel is under temporary divine hardening), the Church is to show forth the life, power, and freedom of that new order of existence "apart from the works of the law." At the same time, through the eschatological gift of the Spirit, the believer (most remarkably the 'gentile' believer, Col 1:27) is able now to fulfill in real measure the very righteousness required by the law, which is nothing less than the righteousness of God Himself. The Church (when it is the Church) should be distinguished by those miraculous and inimitable fruits of the Spirit "against which there is no law," and thus move Israel to jealousy, NOT because it is observant of those outward ordinances that are possible to unaided human performance, but because it manifests the power of the promise of the new age by the gift of faith in Christ's imputed righteousness to the glory of God alone, and ALL most purposefully and emphatically "apart from the law!" (Ro 3:21). This is God's method of removing all ground of boasting. This is the very point of divine contention. Shall we surrender it?

In my view, it is not only inconsistent, but a serious defection for the gentile believer to take on the yoke of Sabbaths, feasts and other physical ordinances of like kind, and thus remove from God the very thing that He has appointed to make His case against Israel's greatest historic tendency and fatal presumption (Ro 9:32), namely, the lie of humanism, the presumption that in man is anything good. It is only as the Church comes into its appointed eschatological fullness that Israel will be made jealous. Israel will NOT be made jealous by an accommodating zeal for sanctification through Sabbatarian and kosher observance. On the contrary, such a presumption, though perhaps unconsciously, reveals the same inherent humanism that only retards the Church's calling and hinders the fullness that Israel and the end of the age waits. It is by divine design that the Holy Spirit promised to the surviving remnant of Israel at the Day of the Lord should now be seen resting upon unqualified non-observant non-kosher gentiles! This is God's very point; it is His contention with Israel. We must draw the line where an inspired and inerrant New Testament has drawn it.

The offense must continue; it is divinely intended. Israel will come forth from its grave because God insists on being known as "the God that raises the dead," not because we made them jealous through kosher observance or any other "carnal ordinance" (apostolically so-called; Heb 9:10). There is a place where the believer is obliged to not 'give place ... no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you" (Gal 2:5). This is where Paul who could otherwise "become all things to all men" was obliged to draw the line.

I am aware that there is much more to this issue that requires consideration, but these few points are offered as a safeguard against the mounting threat of a Judaizing spirit that still stalks the church, though not always in its original Jewish form. I believe we can expect to see this crisis escalate with an unequalled subtlety towards the end. There is good reason to expect that the church's greatest test will not be the Antichrist, but a deception of a more subtle kind, so that "if it were possible, they (the false anointed ones) shall deceive the very elect." Signs and wonders are not fatal except as they lend support to a lie, and I believe it will be the lie of works righteousness. Licentious antinomianism is not subtle enough to threaten the very elect. However, works righteousness is subtle beyond imagination, as it only takes the least amount of that leaven to spoil the whole.

In trembling contention for the non-negotiable offense of the gospel, Reggie

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