

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **What is the Law of Christ? (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21)**

In the New Testament, there are two references to the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21). What is the law of Christ? Is it different from the law of Moses, the Torah? Let’s look at the passages containing this phrase:

#### **Galatians 6:2**

[Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.](#)

#### **1 Corinthians 9:21**

[To those outside the law I became as one outside the law \(not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ\) that I might win those outside the law.](#)

Before we explore these passages in greater detail, what do modern Christian teachers say about the law of Christ? Scholars and theologians offer different interpretations. One view that is especially popular among dispensationalists is that the law of Christ refers to only the commandments found in the New Testament. These commandments have supposedly replaced the Torah as God’s standard for how his people should live. The following comments from Christian theologian, Charles Ryrie, are representative of this view:

The Mosaic Law was done away in its entirety as a code. It has been replaced by the law of Christ. The law of Christ contains some new commands (1 Tim. 4:4), some old ones (Rom. 13:9), and some revised ones (Rom. 13:4, with reference to capital punishment). All the laws of the Mosaic code have been abolished because the code has.

—Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1999), 351-352

Similarly, Christian theologian Steven Cook writes the following:

Too many pastors and theologians attempt to keep part of the Mosaic Law alive today and make it part of the Christian walk, but there is no need to do this, as the Mosaic Law has been rendered

inoperative in its entirety, and the New Testament guides the believer to live by “the Law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Because God is the Author of both law-codes (i.e. the Law of Moses as well as the Law of Christ), it is not surprising that He chose to incorporate some of the laws He gave to Israel into the law-code which He has given to the Church. When trying to understand which laws have carried over and which have not, the general rule to follow is: what God has not restated in the New Testament to the Church, has been altogether abrogated.

—Steven R. Cook, “The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ,” *Thinking in Scripture*, 7/6/2012, [www.thinkinginscripture.com](http://www.thinkinginscripture.com)

So, according to these Christian theologians, the law of Christ refers only to the commandments found in the New Testament. This is the new “law code” for Christians. If a commandment from the Torah is not restated in the New Testament, it doesn’t apply to Christians. It has been abolished.

This perspective has some significant problems. We will mention only a few.

First, when Paul uses the phrase “law of Christ” in Galatians 6:2, there was no “New Testament” yet. Galatians is possibly one of the earliest writings of the New Testament (Tim Hegg, *Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2010), 6-8). While the apostles certainly knew about Christ’s teachings, when Galatians was written, there simply was no New Testament “law-code” to which Paul could be referring. It wouldn’t make sense for Paul to exhort his readers to follow a law that did not yet exist.

Second, the apostle Paul declares that “all Scripture” is profitable for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). “All Scripture” includes more than just the New Testament. In fact, when 2 Timothy was written, the “New Testament” that we know today had not yet been canonized. So, when Paul speaks of “Scripture,” he specifically has in mind what we call *the Old Testament*, or the Hebrew Scriptures. If the Old Testament writings are profitable for training in righteousness, then that refutes the idea that Christians should only live by the New Testament.

Third, there are commandments that most Christians believe we should keep today, even though the New Testament does not repeat them. For instance, the New Testament never explicitly restates the Torah’s commandments against necromancy or bestiality. But obviously, contrary to the dispensationalist theologians we quoted earlier, this fact does not mean that such commandments are abolished. We as Christians know that we shouldn’t practice necromancy or bestiality because we recognize those things as being against God’s will. But those actions are explicitly prohibited only in the Torah, not the New Testament. To be clear, the New Testament *does* indirectly prohibit these actions because it upholds the entire Old Testament, which we will explain in a moment. But the fact that such commandments are not explicitly restated in the New Testament presents a problem for the dispensationalist view.

Fourth, the New Testament itself affirms the ongoing validity *of the entire Torah!* Jesus—or Yeshua, as he was called in the first century—said that he came not to abolish the Torah but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). He said that nothing from the Torah—not an iota or dot—would pass away until heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished (Matthew 5:18). That is to say, not a single law from the Torah will pass away until the end of the age and the arrival of the new heavens and new earth, when the present created universe passes away (2 Peter 3:7, 13; Revelation 21:1). Moreover, Yeshua admonished his followers to do and teach even the least of the Torah’s commandments (Matthew 5:19). So, any commandment from the Torah that is not explicitly restated in the New Testament is nevertheless reaffirmed here. Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote that our faith as believers does not nullify the Torah

but rather establishes it (Romans 3:31). He said that those who walk in accordance with the Spirit fulfill the Torah (Romans 8:2-4). The fact that the New Testament affirms the entire Torah refutes the notion that the New Testament abolished and replaced it.

In light of these facts, it seems clear that the dispensationalist interpretation of the “law of Christ” is insufficient. The “law of Christ” cannot mean only the New Testament writings. But is there a better option for how to understand this phrase? There is! A better interpretation of the law of Christ is that it refers to Christ’s *interpretation* of the law of Moses, the Torah (See Craig Keener, *Galatians: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 270-272).

Why does Paul refer to this as the law of Christ in Galatians 6:2? Because Christ taught and exemplified genuine Torah observance based on love. Yeshua said that love is at the heart of genuine Torah observance:

### **Mark 12:28-31**

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus [Yeshua] answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Shortly before Paul mentions the “law of Christ” in Galatians, he teaches the same concept:

### **Galatians 5:13-14**

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

(See also Romans 13:8-10)

As we can see, there are some clear connections between Galatians 5:13-14 and Galatians 6:2. Paul mentions serving one another, which is similar to his admonition to bear one another’s burdens. He also mentions fulfilling the law in both places. So, it seems that the law of Christ has something to do with the command to love one’s neighbor. This commandment is from the Torah, Leviticus 19:18, which Paul quotes in this passage:

### **Leviticus 19:18**

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD [YHWH].

Thus, the law of Christ is Christ’s interpretation of the Torah, which is based on love for God and for each other.

Now, a person might object at this point, saying that Galatians 5:14 indicates that the law of Christ is not the commands in the New Testament, nor the Torah, but rather it is love. If love fulfills the whole law, then we don’t need the law; we only need love. For instance, on the popular Christian website “Got Questions,” there is an article that states the following:

Christ freed us from the bondage of the hundreds of commands in the Old Testament Law and instead calls on us to love.

—“What is the law of Christ,” *Got Questions Ministries*, [www.gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org)

However, the problem with this reasoning is that, without a firm foundation in the Scriptures, how do we know what “love” means? For example, if we strip the command to love from its Torah context, progressive “Christians” can argue that they’re free to disregard God’s standards for sexual morality because, after all, “it’s all about love!” And that is precisely what they do to justify sexual immorality. From their perspective, “love” means whatever *they* want it to mean. Also, you dare not challenge their perspective either—that would, of course, be “*unloving!*”

Paul cannot mean that loving your neighbor and keeping the Torah are two different things. Rather, the Scriptures, and the Torah in particular, describes *how* genuine love is to be expressed:

### **1 John 5:2-3**

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

So, Paul is not disregarding the Torah when he says that love fulfills the law. He is simply agreeing with Yeshua and John that the essence of the Torah is love. Love is the guiding principle for *living out* the Torah. As Christian New Testament scholar Charles Cousar writes:

[L]ove does not do away with the law but confirms it and provides its correct interpretation. Paul turns to the *torah* (Lev. 19:18) itself to find the “one word” which describes its fulfillment. The *torah* is not then destroyed but set in a new perspective by the command to love ... The obligation demanded by the law is in no way lessened by love; it is instead made more radical and comprehensive.

—Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 131-132

Messianic theologian Tim Hegg also provides some excellent insights:

Yeshua, both in His words and in His actions, brought the divinely intended meaning of the Torah to the eyes and ears of those He taught. His emphasis was upon living in accordance to the Torah in a manner which displayed genuine love for God and for one’s neighbor. Such was to be the driving factor in *halachic* decisions. While the Sages were experts at piling burdens upon men’s shoulders without lifting a finger to help them bear the load (Matt 23:4), Yeshua sought to unwrap the Torah from the entanglements of men, and to show that living a life of Torah by faith is not a burden, but a delight. Therefore, by bearing the burdens of one another, the followers of Yeshua fulfill the Torah as it was intended to be fulfilled, by living it out in the context of love for God, and love for one’s neighbor. In this way, the Torah as taught and modeled by Yeshua would be fulfilled.

—Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2010), 256

So again, the law of Christ in Galatians 6:2 refers to Christ’s interpretation of the Torah, which is based on love for God and each other. If God’s people keep the Torah the way Yeshua taught and

demonstrated for us, then we will love one another and bear one another's burdens. Love does not replace the Torah but is the guiding principle for how to interpret and obey the Torah.

For more on how love and law are connected, see our teaching [No Law, No Love](#).

What about the second reference to the law of Christ in 1 Corinthians 9:21? To fully understand Paul's use of this phrase in this verse, we will need to go through all of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 in detail.

### **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God **but under the law of Christ**) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

There is a lot going on in this passage! It is commonly assumed that Paul is describing an evangelistic strategy by which he changes his behavior when around different groups in order to bring them to salvation. Traditionally, it is said that this strategy involves Paul obeying the Torah when around Jews, not as a matter of obedience but as a matter of *expedience*. In other words, Paul "kept Torah" only to trick the Jews into becoming Christians. This strategy also involves Paul abandoning Torah observance when in the company of Gentiles. Within this interpretive framework, some see in this passage a distinction between the Torah and the "law of Christ." That is, even though Paul abandons the Torah when in the company of Gentiles, he remains faithful to the law of Christ, which is supposedly something different from the Torah.

We address more problems with the traditional interpretation of this passage in our teaching [Pauline Paradox: Corinthians](#).

But we'll mention a couple of things here. According to the traditional view, Paul's actions seem very dishonest. He would be misleading Jews into thinking he is Torah observant when he really isn't. This portrayal of Paul as unprincipled and deceitful is not consistent with what we know of Paul from Scripture. Paul declared to the Corinthians that he did *not* practice deception when sharing the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:2). In addition to the moral problem, the traditional view of Paul's strategy wouldn't have been effective. Jews certainly would have noticed that Paul was only putting on a show of Torah observance. After all, Paul's house church in Corinth was literally right next door to the Jewish synagogue (Acts 18:7). In light of these problems, it seems unlikely that Paul would adopt such problematic tactics. As the scholar David Rudolph writes:

It is doubtful that Paul employed such a foolhardy strategy. Once his inconsistency with respect to basic Torah commandments became known, it would have caused to "stumble" the very people he was trying to "win." His behavior would have been seen as unprincipled and devious, thus bringing his message into disrepute.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 12

Given the problems with the traditional approach, is there a reasonable alternative interpretation? There is! Rather than Paul changing his behavior in regard to Torah observance when around different groups, what this passage more likely describes is that Paul changed how he argued.

In other words, Paul's approach is really no different from Yeshua's. Yeshua didn't act like a prostitute or sinner when he was in the company of prostitutes and sinners. But he spoke to them about the gospel differently than how he spoke to, for example, the Pharisees. Yeshua employed different rhetorical strategies to reach different types of people in different situations. For example, when Yeshua was telling the Jewish scholar Nicodemus that he was the Messiah (John 3:2, 16-18), he appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures, because Nicodemus knew and believed in them (John 3:10-15). However, in the very next chapter, when he was telling a Samaritan woman the same thing (John 4:25-26), he did not appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures, but instead convinced her by showing her that he had prophetic knowledge (John 4:16-19).

Paul did the same thing. In fact, a great example of Paul employing different rhetorical strategies is what we observe from Paul's visits to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens in Acts 17. When Paul interacted with other Jews in the synagogues, he reasoned with them from the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 17:2, 11, 17). From that common ground, Paul could make his case for the gospel. But appealing to the Hebrew Scriptures would have been meaningless to Paul's pagan audience when he spoke before the Areopagus. So, what did Paul do? Did he start worshiping idols in order to appeal to his pagan audience? No! He referred to his audience's own customs and poets in order to establish some common ground. Then, based on that common ground, he made his case for the gospel. So, he changed his way of arguing for the gospel in order to relate to his audience, but he always reached the same conclusion. He did not change who he was or how he behaved, but only what arguments he used (Acts 17:22-31). Thus, Acts 17 gives us a great example of Paul adapting his rhetorical strategy to different settings without changing his behavior in regard to Torah observance.

For more on what we can learn from Acts 17, see our teaching [Lessons from Paul's visit to Athens \(Acts 17:16-34\)](#).

Now, Paul did change his behavior to some degree in order to better relate to different audiences. He never changed his behavior to the point where he would sin—that is, he would not violate the Torah in order to preach the gospel. But he would have respected different cultural customs governing table-fellowship. Understanding this important historical background to this passage requires some explanation.

Simply put, table-fellowship refers to communal meals, which often involved various blessings and customs concerning ritual purity, such as ritual hand-washing (Mark 7:3). There were also different standards regarding which foods were considered ritually pure for table-fellowship, and some groups considered even biblically clean foods to be unacceptable. (B. B. Blue, "Food, Food Laws, Table Fellowship," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, R. Martin & P. Davids, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 376-379).

We see an example of Paul adapting his behavior in regard to these customs in the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians. He instructs the Corinthians that they should not eat anything that causes their brother to stumble, even if eating that thing is not technically a sin (1 Corinthians 8:13). This is an example of keeping an unnecessarily strict tradition for the sake of promoting the gospel.

We see another example of Paul adapting to different cultural standards regarding table-fellowship in the book of Romans. In Romans 14, Paul says he is willing to give up his freedom to eat meat that is *koinos*—that is, “common”—in order not to offend those in his audience he calls “weak.” He advises those in his audience he calls “strong” to make this same accommodation (Romans 14:14-15:1-7). That Paul references “the weak” again in 1 Corinthians 9:22 indicates that he is addressing a similar issue in both passages.

Significantly, Paul does not invalidate the Torah in Romans 14, as traditionally assumed. Paul’s instructions in Romans 14 are in the context of a controversy over different cultural sentiments and customs related to eating, but the issues are within the realm of “opinions,” not God’s commandments (Romans 14:1). This is clear by Paul’s use of the word *koinos* to describe the food that some Jews in Rome objected to (Romans 14:14). The term *koinos* does not refer to meat that the Torah calls unclean but rather to clean meat that some Jews in Rome would have considered ritually impure based on their own traditions and cultural opinions. Many Jewish groups at this time, such as the Pharisees, held to additional restrictions on eating that were not commanded in the Torah. The gospels refer to such additional restrictions as the tradition of the elders (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:2). Josephus writes that the Pharisees “have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.297).

For more on this, see our teaching, [Matters of Opinion \(Romans 14\)](#).

In light of this context, Paul’s actions are not deceptive or dishonest but simply respectful. Perhaps a modern equivalent might be to say that Paul had good manners. Different groups had different cultural customs and traditions surrounding table-fellowship, some more strict than others, and everyone at the time acknowledged such differences. Adapting to these customs is how Paul could “become as” different groups.

As the scholar Robert Kelley remarks:

In the various cultures underlying the New Testament, dining with someone indicated solidarity with that person. To eat with is to identify with.

—Robert L. Kelley, “Meals with Jesus in Luke’s Gospel,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 17:2 (1995): 123

Similarly, the scholar David Rudolph writes:

In the ancient world, the circle of people one ate with was an outward expression of the people with whom one identified. This sociological reality is sometimes referred to as “like ate with like” or “like with like.” Table-fellowship was the quintessential expression of concord and unity ... When Paul wrote that he “became as” others, in all likelihood he did not mean that he imitated them like a chameleon but that he closely associated with them through table-fellowship, and conformed to their customs (within the limits of God’s law) in keeping with the Jewish ethic of hospitality ... I conclude that Paul “became” all things to all people by adapting to his Jewish or Gentile host. By being an accommodating guest at the table, Paul entered into the lives of all so that all could enter into his life in Christ.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 191, 194

The surrounding context of our passage contains other hints that Paul is addressing the accommodation of different groups in the context of table-fellowship. Again, chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians is Paul's instructions regarding eating food offered to idols; he advises his readers not to do that which might cause one's brother to stumble. 1 Corinthians 10:27-28 also contains Paul's instruction to "eat whatever is set before you" unless you are informed that the meal had been offered in sacrifice. 1 Corinthians 11:33-34 includes instructions for when the community eats together. This table-fellowship context likely forms the backdrop to Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. As Rudolph writes:

Paul's accommodation language in 1 Cor 9:19-23 likely refers to halakhic adaptability in different table-fellowship contexts, with ordinary Jews, strict Jews and Gentiles.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 17

So, we can understand Paul's strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 as follows: Paul adapts his rhetoric to the different groups he fellowships with and conforms to their customs, but he does not violate the Torah. When Paul says he "became as" different groups, what he means is that he would abide by their food customs in order to fellowship with them. With this broader perspective in mind, let's take a closer look at this passage:

### **1 Corinthians 9:19**

[For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.](#)

Earlier in chapter 9, Paul explained that he was entitled to monetary support as a minister but that he voluntarily gave up that right. From Paul's perspective, giving up this right freed him to be a servant to everyone. Apparently, some other traveling preachers were exploiting the Corinthians for personal financial gain during this time (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:17). Paul wanted to draw a sharp distinction between himself and those other traveling preachers so that nobody could suspect that he was "in it for the money," so-to-speak. So, even though Paul had the right to be supported, he chose not to avail himself of this right in order to not "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:12).

This motivation is important for understanding the next set of verses. Paul was unwilling to do anything that might put an unnecessary obstacle between someone and the gospel. Even if he didn't personally live by some Jewish community's stricter customs governing table-fellowship, he did not let that be an obstacle to fellowship. He gave up his rights or freedoms, if you will, to accommodate the group and hopefully "win" some of them to the Messiah.

As a modern analogy, consider the topic of drinking alcohol. The Bible does not prohibit us from drinking alcohol, but some people are opposed to it—maybe they incorrectly consider it to be sinful, or maybe they have had bad experiences with alcohol in the past. If we drank alcohol in the presence of those people, that might bother them and create an obstacle to fellowship. While we are free to enjoy alcohol, Paul instructs us to give up that freedom for the sake of our brother (Romans 14:21; 1 Corinthians 8:9). That is, we should not drink alcohol in the presence of those who might stumble over it. It is more important to maintain fellowship and promote the gospel than to insist on our freedom to drink. On the other hand, if you are in a group where nobody stumbles over alcohol, go ahead and enjoy it. Of course, that doesn't mean you are free to get totally wasted. Again, like Paul, we adapt to different groups and situations, but we do not adapt to the point of sinning. For more on what the Bible says about alcohol, see our teaching [Does the Bible Permit Drinking Alcohol](#).

Let's continue:

### 1 Corinthians 9:20

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

When Paul says, “To the Jews I became as a Jew,” this obviously doesn't mean that Paul stopped considering himself Jewish after coming to know the Messiah. Paul repeatedly acknowledges his Jewish identity (e.g., Romans 11:1, 14). Again, given the setting of this passage, what Paul means is that he closely associated with ordinary Jews in table-fellowship.

But what does Paul mean when he says, “to those under the law I became as one under the law”? Who are “those under the law”? Traditionally, “those under the law” is understood to mean people who obey the law. So, according to the traditional view, Paul only pretended to be Torah-observant when he was around other Torah-observant people, but he personally was not “under the law,” that is, obedient to the law.

However, the phrase “under the law” does not mean to be obedient to the law. When Paul says that he is “not under law,” he is not saying that he has stopped obeying the Torah. That idea would be inconsistent with the Bible's portrayal of Paul elsewhere (Acts 21:17-26; 24:14; 25:8; 28:17). For instance, in this same context, Paul appeals to the law as authoritative and applicable to his readers (1 Corinthians 9:8-12). It wouldn't make sense for Paul to appeal to the law as authoritative for his readers only to say that he doesn't consider the law authoritative in his own life just a few verses later. Not only that, but in the next verse, Paul says that he is not “outside the law of God.” We will unpack that more fully in a moment, but this statement indicates that Paul still considered himself within the limits of the Torah. If we take the traditional view that “under the law” means obedient to the law, then Paul's statement that he is not outside the law of God directly contradicts his previous statement that he is “not under law!” Thus, the traditional interpretation of “under the law” in this passage doesn't work.

But what does this phrase actually mean? The phrase “under the law” occurs several other times in Paul's writings (Romans 6:14-15; Galatians 3:23; 4:4, 21; 5:18). Scholars give different interpretations, and it is not necessarily the case that this phrase conveys the same idea in every occurrence.

In regard to our passage here, there are two reasonable options. First, “those under the law” might refer to Jews who have a strict *halakhah*, or application of the Torah. If “the Jews” refers to ordinary Torah Observant Jews, it's reasonable to see that “those under the law” might refer to Jews under a more narrow or strict interpretation of the Torah—possibly the Pharisees. Paul does say that the Pharisees are “the strictest party of our religion” (Acts 26:5). And as noted earlier, we know that the Pharisees were known for having stricter standards of ritual purity for table-fellowship (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:2). Once again, Scripture calls these more stringent standards the “tradition of the elders.” As David Rudolph writes:

Pharisees observed narrow interpretations of the Torah that restricted personal freedom and naturally imposed a heavier burden on the individual. The polemical descriptor “under the law” may have subtly expressed the nuance “under heavy burdens [of the law], hard to bear.”

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 201

If this interpretation is correct, what did Paul mean when he said that *he* is not “under the law”? Quite simply, Paul personally did not adhere to strict Pharisaic halakhah or tradition governing table-fellowship. As we read in Romans, Paul did not consider biblically clean meat purchased from the Gentile marketplace to be *koinos*—that is, common (Romans 14:14). The Pharisees did. However, Paul taught that these strict rules concerning marketplace meat should be accommodated when fellowshiping with those who abide by them. He said, “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble” (Romans 14:21). In other words, Paul accommodated “those under the law” in table-fellowship so as not to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. However, he personally did not live by their strict standards and traditions (Romans 14:14; 1 Corinthians 8:8). This option seems to fit well with the overall context in 1 Corinthians.

The second option for understanding the phrase “under the law” is that it refers to Jews who did not confess Yeshua as Messiah and were thus under the penalty pronounced by the law for sin. This also provides a reasonable explanation for Paul’s qualification that *he* is not under the law. This meaning of the phrase coheres better with what this phrase conveys in its other occurrences in Romans and Galatians.

In either case, Paul closely associates with “those under the law” in table-fellowship, but he does not consider himself under the law.

Let’s continue:

### **1 Corinthians 9:21**

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

Who are “those outside the law”? This phrase likely refers to Gentiles. We can be confident that this is the case because Paul’s main point in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 is summarized and restated in 1 Corinthians 10:32-33, where he specifically mentions “Greeks”:

### **1 Corinthians 10:32-33**

Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

But why does Paul use the phrase “those outside the law” instead of just saying “Gentiles” or “Greeks”? The most likely reason is that he wanted to emphasize that these particular Gentiles are “lawless,” that is, sinners. Like Yeshua, who ate with sinners and tax collectors, an act that the Pharisees considered scandalous (Luke 5:29-30), Paul did the same in order to minister to those “outside the law.”

But in what way did Paul adapt to the table-fellowship setting of a lawless Gentile’s household? As the next chapter suggests, it means that Paul was willing to eat meat sold in the marketplace and whatever his host served him without raising questions “on the ground of conscience,” unless he was clearly informed that the meat had been offered in sacrifice:

### **1 Corinthians 10:25-28**

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in

sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience.

Did Paul violate the Torah by eating with those outside the law? Not at all. In fact, knowing that some might misunderstand him when he says that he became as one outside the law, Paul qualifies his statement by saying that *he is not* “outside the law of God...” Thus, it is unlikely that Paul violated the Torah by becoming “as one outside the law.” Contrary to the opinions of some Jewish groups at the time (Acts 11:3), it was not against God’s law to eat with unbelievers.

Did Paul eat unclean meat when he fellowshiped with Gentiles? That is unlikely. Again, Paul explicitly clarified that he did not go outside the law of God (1 Corinthians 9:21), and God’s law prohibits eating unclean animals. Based on Paul’s affirmation of the Torah (1 Corinthians 9:8-12, 21), it can be reasonably assumed that Paul wouldn’t eat meat designated as unclean by biblical standards. However, he would have no problem eating meat considered *koinos*, common, by the standards of some stricter Jews. Again, for more on this, see our teaching, [Matters of Opinion \(Romans 14\)](#).

Additionally, David Rudolph has some noteworthy remarks:

The example given in 1 Cor 10:25-30 suggests that Paul was willing to eat food sold at the meat market without raising questions of conscience as long as the origin of the food was indeterminate; he adapted in this manner to Gentiles for the sake of the gospel ... there is no reason to think that Paul’s “don’t ask” policy with respect to accommodation violated the Torah or that it represented indifference to Jewish food laws. More likely, Paul considered his actions to be within the boundaries of Torah observance. Granted, strict Jews may have rejected Paul’s lenient halakhah. But Gentile inclusion in the people of God, the presence of Diaspora Jews who ate with Gentiles within defined contours of Jewish flexibility, and Christ’s halakhah of commensality with sinners...all would have empowered Paul to regard his dietary adaptation to be within the parameters of Torah observance. Stated differently, far from being indifferent to biblical dietary laws, Paul’s ability to adapt to different table-fellowship contexts within biblical limits was an expression of halakhic flexibility consistent with Jesus’ example and rule of adaptation.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 206

Now that we’ve looked at the context, we are in a better position to understand what Paul means when he says he is “under the law of Christ” (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ). Some argue that the law of Christ here is different from the Torah. However, that is unlikely. In the same verse, Paul equates the law of Christ with the law of God:

### **1 Corinthians 9:21**

**To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.**

Why is this significant? Because the lexical evidence clearly demonstrates that the law of God refers to the Torah. Paul uses the phrase “law of God” twice in Romans (7:22, 25), and most scholars agree that both of these occurrences are direct references to the Torah. (See Thomas R. Shreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 375-376; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 393; Douglas Moo, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 461.)

This scholarly consensus isn't surprising considering the fact that the law of God clearly refers to the law of Moses throughout the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—and apocryphal writings (LXX Joshua 24:26; Ezra 7:12, 14, 21, 25; Nehemiah 8:8, 18; 10:29, 30; Psalm 36:31; Isaiah 30:9; Hosea 4:6; Sirach 41:8; Baruch 4:12; 1 Esdras 8:19, 21, 23-24; 3 Maccabees 7:10, 12; 2 Esdras 7:20; 4 Maccabees 13:22).

Additionally, Josephus refers to the Torah as the law of God several times (Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.121, 124, 130).

In light of how “law of God” is defined everywhere else, it is highly improbable that Paul means something different from the Torah when he says “law of God.”

So, Paul says that he did not go outside the law of God when ministering to those “outside the law”—that is to say, Paul continued to live in accordance with the Torah under the law of Christ. How does the phrase “the law of Christ” modify the law of God, the Torah, in this verse?

We've argued that the “law of Christ” in Galatians 6:2 refers to Christ's interpretation of the Torah, which is based on love for God and each other. It seems that such an interpretation of the law of Christ works here as well. Christ emphasized love in his obedience to the Torah. He ate with sinners in order to minister to them. In accordance with Christ's law—that is, Christ's interpretation and application of the Torah—Paul follows Christ's example by eating with sinners. As Rudolph writes:

Contextually, Paul's use of ἔννομος Χριστοῦ (“in the law of Christ”) in 1 Cor 9:21b would seem to represent the law of Moses in the hand of Christ as iterated in Christ's association with sinners.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 170

Let's continue:

### **1 Corinthians 9:22-23**

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The “weak” in this verse likely refers to those who stumbled over certain Torah-permitted foods because of ritual purity concerns (1 Cor 8:7-10; Romans 14:2). Once again, Paul accommodates this group by avoiding certain foods that might cause them to stumble. As Rudolph writes:

Paul also became weak to the weak by adapting to the sensibilities of Jesus-believers for whom certain foods were a stumbling block (1 Cor 8:7-10). Paul describes this scenario in 1 Cor 8:13, “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause my brother to stumble.” Paul's concern not to cause the weak to “stumble” (an ethic rooted in the Torah, the Prophets and Jesus tradition) overrode his general policy to eat what was set before him within biblical limits.

— David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 208

Once again, Paul’s motivation for such accommodations was to avoid putting unnecessary obstacles between someone and the gospel. Paul “[became all things to all people](#)”—that is, he enjoyed table-fellowship with everyone. He did all this “[for the sake of the gospel](#),” that he may share with everyone the blessings of Messiah.

In conclusion, the “law of Christ” in Galatians 6:2 cannot refer to a new law given in the New Testament that replaces the Torah. Such an interpretation would be entirely inconsistent with New Testament teaching that affirms the ongoing validity of the Torah. The law of Christ also cannot be understood as simply the command to “love” because divorcing “love” from its biblical context renders the term meaningless. According to the context of Galatians, the law of Christ refers to Christ’s interpretation of the Torah, which is based on love for God and each other. This definition of “law of Christ” is consistent with the other mention of the phrase in 1 Corinthians 9:21. Paul equates the law of Christ with the law of God, the Torah. This is in the context of Paul describing how he accommodates various groups in regard to table-fellowship. Paul lives under the law of Christ—that is, Christ’s interpretation and application of the Torah—by eating with sinners per Christ’s example.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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