

# Dead To The Law?

by Earl L. Henn (1934-1997)

*Forerunner*, "Ready Answer," October-November 1995

The apostle Peter admits that many of the things that his fellow apostle Paul wrote are hard to understand, and because of this, he warns, some people distort Paul's writings to their own destruction (II Peter 3:15-16). This is still happening today. People—some sincerely and some not—are constantly twisting what Paul said in an attempt to show that the law of God is abolished.

A favorite target of the "no-law" advocates is Romans 7:4. In this scripture, Paul writes that a Christian is "dead to the law" and is now "married to another." From these statements, some conclude that God no longer requires a Christian to obey His laws. Unfortunately, those who force such an interpretation on this verse fail to understand the profound truths that the apostle is explaining in this section of Scripture. To understand what Paul is really saying, we need to take a closer look at this scripture and its context.

We must first examine and understand the principles that Paul was expounding in Romans 6 because they lay the necessary foundation for correctly comprehending the teaching in chapter seven. In Romans 6:3-7, Paul explains how we have been buried with Christ in baptism, that our "old man" has been crucified along with Him, and that we have consequently been freed from sin.

Throughout the remainder of chapter six, he illustrates to us that we are now servants of righteousness and must put sin completely out of our lives. Freed from this bondage to sin, we can concentrate on producing godly fruit and grow spiritually. The chapter ends with the well-known reminder that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life" (verse 23).

## The Law's Dominion

In chapter seven, Paul further expands on this theme, drawing an analogy to help the members of the church in Rome to understand more fully the principles that he had just introduced in chapter six. He begins by stating that the law has "dominion" over a man only as long as he lives (verse 1). Some have interpreted this to mean that, now that we have died with Christ, the law is no longer binding on Christians. Indeed, some modern translations of the Bible translate this verse to say just that. However, note how Paul uses this word "dominion" in other places.

In Romans 6:9, Paul speaks of Christ's immortality now that He has been resurrected, saying, "Death no longer has dominion over Him." During the period that Christ was a flesh-and-blood human being, He could die, and He did die on the cross. Now, however, death no longer has any power over Him, because He is an immortal Spirit Being.

In verse 14, Paul uses the same word to describe our relationship with sin. "For sin shall not have dominion over you." Here he shows how our past sins have been forgiven, and we have access to Christ's atoning grace for forgiveness of future sins. Therefore, sin no longer has the power to condemn us to death.

Throughout Romans 6 and 7, the Greek word translated "dominion" is *kurieuo*, meaning "exercise lordship over." Paul uses this term in the context of having power over something. In Romans 6:9

and 14, he states that death and sin no longer have *power* to harm us or to cause any adverse effect in our lives.

Now we can better understand Paul's meaning in Romans 7:1. In this verse, Paul explains how the law has "power" over a human being only while he lives. He means the law has power to condemn us as a sinner and, consequently, condemn us to death only as long as we are alive. Once we have died, the penalty for sin has been paid, and the law has no more power to condemn us.

### **Analogous to Marriage**

In verses 2 and 3, Paul continues to discuss our relationship to the law and begins to draw the analogy from a human relationship, marriage, which illustrates the points that he was making in chapter six. He explains how a woman is bound by the law to her husband for as long as he is alive. However, marriage is "till death do us part." Death breaks the marriage bond. Therefore, if the wife marries another man while her first husband is still alive, the law has the power, the authority, to condemn her as an adulteress. However, if her husband dies, the marriage bond is broken, and if she remarries, the law cannot condemn her as an adulteress.

Note that the law to which Paul is referring in these verses is clearly the Ten Commandments. The seventh commandment is the law forbidding adultery. Here Paul plainly states that this law against adultery is binding on Christians! How can the law be binding and not binding at the same time? It defies logic!

In verse 4, Paul explains the marriage analogy and how this relationship of a woman to her husband bears upon our relationship to the law and Christ. "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ." Just as the woman in his example cannot be condemned by the law as an adulteress if her first husband dies, so we cannot be condemned by the law because our "old man of sin" has died.

In other words, we have become dead *in the eyes of the law*! At the time of our baptism, the old man of sin was put to death and buried in a watery grave (Romans 6:4). Because Jesus Christ died in our stead, and we have been buried with Him in baptism, the law regards us as having died. Therefore, the penalty for sin (Romans 6:23) has been paid, and the law no longer has power to condemn us to death for our sins.

Paul continues in verse 4, ". . . that you may be married to another, even to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God." In the analogy of the woman and her husbands, the first husband is the old man of sin to whom we were "married" prior to conversion. After the old man of sin died at baptism, we are now free to marry Christ. Just as He died and was resurrected, so our old man of sin has died, and we have been raised out of the watery grave of baptism a new man, empowered to bear righteous fruit in service to God.

In verse 5, Paul explains how that before we were converted, our sinful natures brought us under the death penalty. He shows that the carnal, sinful mind is so hostile toward God (Romans 8:7) that knowledge of God's commandments actually stirs a desire in an unconverted person to commit even greater sins.

Finally, Paul gives the conclusion of the matter in verse 6. We have now been delivered from the power of the law. The law no longer has authority to condemn us to death because our old man of sin

has died, and Christ has paid the penalty for sin in our stead. Now that God has given us His Holy Spirit, we now "serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." In other words, we now keep not *just* the letter of the law, but we *also* keep God's laws in their full spiritual intent and purpose as Jesus Christ magnified them throughout His ministry.

So we see that, far from being abolished, the laws of God are now *even more binding* on Christians. Because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, our sins have all been forgiven, and we now live transformed lives in which we keep God's laws of love through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

We have indeed died in the eyes of the law, and our "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3: 3). As we grow and overcome, God's laws become written on our hearts and minds until we finally are resurrected and inherit God's Kingdom, where we will keep His laws of love perfectly for all eternity!