

CHRIST FELLOWSHIP'S VIEW TORAH (OLD TESTAMENT LAW) OBSERVANCE BY CHRISTIANS

STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Must Christians today obey the laws recorded in Genesis through Deuteronomy – “Torah observance” – or not? For instance, are all Christians required to keep the dietary laws, celebrate festivals, and practice circumcision?

This question has practical implications. Is Sunday the day God intended for Christians to worship? Should Christians keep the Passover? Is it acceptable to God for Christians to eat bacon? These and many other practical questions are implicated in the theological issue stated above.

AN EXAMPLE OF TORAH OBSERVANCE BY CHRISTIANS

The Metroplex Messianic Fellowship (“MMF”) of Bedford, Texas is a charter member of the Coalition of Torah Observant Messianic Congregations; these tend to be mostly people of Jewish background who accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Their doctrinal position is typical of Torah-observant groups and churches.

According to a website related to the church (www.messianicmessages.com), Messianic Messages (“MM”) is “a ministry devoted to teaching the predominantly Gentile Church about her Jewish heritage and to instilling a love and concern for the land and the people of Israel through the scripture of Israel.”

In comparison to Christ Fellowship’s doctrinal views, the Statement of Faith of MM might be characterized in the following way:

1. The Statement of Faith is generally orthodox in terms of historic Christian faith, except as cited below.
2. The Statement of Faith takes a strong position on the person and work of Christ and on biblical inerrancy.

3. The Statement of Faith is not easily understandable to most Christians because it uses a considerable amount of transliterated Hebrew, for example, Y'shua [their transliteration] for Jesus, and employs common Jewish techniques for avoiding the use of God's name. The transliteration Yeshua is probably more common and will be used from here on.
4. The Statement of Faith sharply deviates from Protestant Christian doctrine by saying, "We believe that we are called to be Biblically Torah Observant, in that we are called to imitate Messiah Yeshua in all things, and that he is the living Torah so we are called to follow his example." In other words, this group of Christians observes the Law received by Moses.
5. The Statement of Faith incorporates the Thirteen Principles of Faith authored by the Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 AD), except it modifies the 12th principle to incorporate MM's belief in Yeshua (i.e. Jesus) as the Messiah of Israel.
6. The Statement of Faith lacks an explicit definition of Torah. Elsewhere it becomes apparent that Torah is defined by MM and MMF as the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Rabbi Marty Cohen, who has been a leader of MMF and MM, is a rabbi in a special sense of the word, and he has been teaching since 1984. When personally queried about his doctrinal views, Rabbi Cohen professed his belief in the justification of Christians by faith alone, but he further held that Christians today are required by God to keep the laws recorded in Genesis to Deuteronomy, the first five books of the Bible, which he refers to as the Torah. His view is outside of historic Protestant Christianity and differ with the theological views of Christ Fellowship.

The following definition has relevance to the theological issue under discussion: Covenantal nomism is a view which holds that "we enter the covenant by grace but remain in it by obedience to the law."¹

Rabbi Cohen holds to covenantal nomism in that he apparently believes Christians are justified by faith alone but are sanctified or made holy by keeping the Law

¹ "Justification by Faith," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 418.

received by Moses. However, covenantal nomism is not the teaching of the New Testament.

WORDS AND EPOCHS

One characteristic of MMF and MM teaching is the replacement of common Christian words with Hebrew words from the Old Testament. For example, you hear “Yeshua” a lot in place of “Jesus.” The transliterated Greek word “Iēsous” would be a more authentic replacement for “Jesus,” if someone thought a replacement were needed, because the Hebrew word “Yeshua” does not occur in the New Testament. The New Testament is written in Koine Greek.

Similarly, you hear “Moshiach” [MM’s transliteration] in place of both “Christ” and “Messiah.” “Christos” is the Greek transliteration from the New Testament, and the Hebrew word “Moshiach” does not occur in the New Testament.

Lastly, “Torah” is a transliterated Hebrew word meaning “direction, instruction,” according to the standard Hebrew lexicon. Over time Torah added some other meanings; it became a technical word meaning the first five books of Moses or sometimes referring to the entire Old Testament. But the word “Torah” does not occur in the New Testament.

It is somewhat concerning that the perfectly good words from the New Testament are being systematically replaced by words from the Old Testament. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. The bigger portion of the iceberg consists of the fact that MM and MMF teaching tends to ignore the profound change that took place through the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father. It is as if the Old Testament days continue for them. Yet the New Testament makes clear that the coming of Jesus brought a new epoch, a new covenant, in the outworking of God’s plan for our salvation.

If pressed on this point, MM representatives will push forward the words of Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish these things but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place (Matthew 5:17-18, NET).

Yet Paul, who was summoned to faith personally by Jesus (Acts 9), never commanded any Christian to keep the Law and said that what he taught in the book of Romans upheld the Law (Romans 3:31). Further insight is needed from all over the New Testament.

THE LAW OF MOSES

The New Testament gives numerous reasons for believing that the Law received by Moses was superseded by the death, resurrection, and present intercession of Jesus Christ as our high priest.

First, we will consider Jesus' role as our high priest. The high priest defined by Mosaic Law must be a descendant of Aaron (Exodus 29:7-9; Numbers 3:10), but Jesus, of the tribe of Judah, is our high priest (Hebrews 8:1; 7:14), contrary to the law received by Moses. How can that be?

Jesus did not become a high priest according to the Mosaic Law. Instead, Jesus was appointed a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:17; Genesis 14:18), and he holds his high priesthood permanently since he lives forever (Hebrews 7:24; 8:1). Further, the author of Hebrews wrote that when the priesthood changes, such as when the high priest is appointed in a non-Mosaic way, a change in the law must come as well (Hebrews 7:12). Indeed, the law has changed!

The Law received by Moses has been set aside because it is weak and useless and made nothing perfect (Hebrews 7:18-19). Those are strong words, but the author of Hebrews did not hesitate to state them forcefully. Do other New Testament books say the same?

Paul told us that all believers in Jesus Christ have died to the Law in order that they might serve in the new life of the Spirit (Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 2:19). He later said that Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness for all who believe (Romans 10:4). In Galatians, Paul explained that the Law served as a guardian until Christ, but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Galatians 3:23-25). All of these statements point in the same direction, and Paul applied the concept in Ephesians 2:15-16 in terms of the unity in Christ of believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS

The ministry of Jesus is superior to all others, including the Law, since the new covenant he mediates is also better than the old covenant and is enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). The author of Hebrews said that if the covenant through Moses had been faultless, no one would have looked for a second (Hebrews 8:7). But God demonstrated the fault of the old covenant when he said that the people did not continue in it and had no regard for it; as a result, God promised a new covenant (Hebrews 8:8-12 quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34).

When God spoke of a new covenant, he made the covenant through Moses obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). When did this new covenant take effect? Jesus declared that the “new covenant” was instituted “in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The death, resurrection, and appointment of Jesus as “Son-of-God-in-power” (Romans 1:4, NET) all provided for the institution of the new covenant.

JESUS MEDIATED THE NEW COVENANT

As mediator of the new covenant, Jesus died to set free all those who had failed to keep the covenant received through Moses (Hebrews 9:15; 9:26). Formerly, under the Law of Moses, the sins of the people had to be dealt with in a different way. The priests under the old covenant had to offer sacrifices over and over, year after year (Hebrews 9:25), but the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins permanently (Hebrews 10:4). God did away with sacrifices offered according to the Law in order to establish the one sacrifice made once and for all (Hebrews 10:8-9) by Jesus’ offer of himself for our sins (Hebrews 10:10).

THE LAW OF MOSES IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

The discussion above, principally from Hebrews, raises an important question. New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner says: “Does this mean that there are no laws in the Mosaic law that the believer of today is obligated to obey? Only those that have been reiterated in the NT. We are under the new covenant, and the old covenant has been

done away.”² For example, murder is prohibited in both the Law and the New Testament, but the dietary regulations of the Law were not reinstated under the new covenant (Acts 10). We are required by God to obey the commands given in the New Testament.

Many scholars believe this question of required Christian obedience to the Law of Moses was settled in Acts 15 when a similar controversy disturbed the church in Antioch. Luke said, “While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1, NLT). Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed, and the matter was referred to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). In Jerusalem some believers who were Pharisees said, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5, NLT).

However, Peter led in a different direction by saying, “Why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10, NLT).

In the end, the elders in Jerusalem wrote to Antioch saying: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15:28-29, NLT). The Law of Moses was not required of the Gentiles.

Although the Law of Moses separated Israel from the nations, it proved unable to achieve righteousness because that was not its purpose. The author of Hebrews said that the law received through Moses was, but a shadow of the good things brought by Christ because it was completely unable through its continual sacrifices to perfect those who came to worship (Hebrews 10:1).

The Greek verb for “to sanctify” [better “to set apart as holy”] is *hagiazō*, and it occurs 28 times in the New Testament. For example, sanctifying (Greek *hagiazō*) Christians does not take place through keeping the Law but did take place through the one-time sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 10:10). The author of Hebrews also said, “For by a single offering he [Jesus] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified

² Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 376.

[Greek *hagiazō*]” (Hebrews 10:14). In fact, only judgment and punishment await those who reject the blood of the new covenant that sanctified [Greek *hagiazō*] them (Hebrews 10:29).

The above ideas lead to a conclusion: Sanctifying Christians does not take place through keeping the Law but instead took place through the one-time sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 10:10).

Indeed, rather than sanctifying us, the Law kept us enslaved until Christ redeemed us and gave us full rights through our adoption as sons of God with the Spirit indwelling us (Galatians 4:1-7). Going back to keeping the Law has a disastrous effect. Paul said that taking on the obligations of the Law is rejection of freedom in Christ in favor of slavery (Galatians 4:21-5:1).

It is ominous to say, but anyone who puts themselves under the Law is obligated to keep the whole Law (Galatians 5:3; James 2:10). For reasons discussed below, the only way for a contemporary Christian to keep the Law is through a number of reinterpretations (e.g. “We don’t need to make the required sacrifices when no Temple exists”).

SOME REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

If MMF and MM are correct in thinking that that all Christians are required to obey all the laws given by Moses, then it seems reasonable to expect we would find certain things in the New Testament:

1. A New Testament command to keep the Law received through Moses; there is none!
2. A New Testament statement that keeping the Law is essential for sanctification or growth in Christ; there is no such statement!
3. Statements in Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament that Christians were going to the Temple – still standing until 70 AD – to make sacrifices according to the Law received by Moses; there are no such verses!
4. A New Testament command to keep the festivals of Israel; none exists.

There is just one way to overcome this lack of evidence, and that is to say that we are obligated to imitate Christ, who kept the Law. So, the MMF Statement of Faith says, “We believe that we are called to be Biblically Torah Observant, in that we are called to imitate Messiah Y’shua [i.e. Messiah Jesus] in all things, and that he is the living Torah so we are called to follow his example.”

The idea of imitating Jesus in all things has been popular in certain parts of Christian history, but it has some serious limitations. Just to pick a few easy ones, who among us can be born of a virgin or die to atone for the sins of the world? Are you able to create the church or send the Holy Spirit? Which of us can stand up and say, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18)?

Imitating Christ in all things is not put forth in the New Testament as the method for Christian sanctification. Instead, New Testament authors occasionally called on believers to imitate Paul or their spiritual leaders (1 Corinthians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:7; 3:9; Hebrews 6:12; 13:7), to imitate God in terms of love (Ephesians 5:1-2) or to have the same self-sacrificing attitude as Jesus (Philippians 2:1-11). The sanctification of Christians is not based on keeping the Law or imitating Christ but on the finished work of Christ on the cross (Hebrews 10:10).

WHAT JESUS KNEW

The idea that Christians must keep the Law runs headlong into serious problems. There is no Temple or priesthood to support required sacrifices. The Roman general Titus destroyed the temple in 70 AD, when the Church was in its infancy. Nor is there any provision in the Law saying that it is okay to lapse on those parts if no Temple or priesthood exists.

Consider too that no one other than Jesus ever was able to satisfy the requirements of the Law. To say that Christians must keep the Law to be sanctified is setting them up to fail. The new covenant operates on a completely different principle than keeping the Law – grace.

THE LAW OF CHRIST

Paul said of himself that “I am not free from God’s law but [I am] under the law of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:21, NET). He also said, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). James 2:8-13 is also worthy of close study in regard to the centrality of love for one’s neighbor. There is no doubt whatever that the Holy Spirit is central to living under the new covenant (Romans 6, 8).

Christians today are not required to obey the laws of Moses in Genesis to Deuteronomy (so-called “Torah observance”). For instance, we are free from dietary restrictions and are not required to celebrate the Jewish feasts. We summarize with Paul’s ringing words to the Galatians: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery”(Galatians 5:1, NET).

*Christ Fellowship’s views on this subject are guided by the authoritative Word of God.
Not all biblical references in the Word of God pertaining to this subject are listed.
Biblical references are from the New International Version (NIV) 2011 unless otherwise noted.*