

The Law That Passes Away

By Frank Zimmerman

Debating with Protestants

IN THE YEARS from about 1860 to 1888, Adventists sometimes held public debates with Protestants, regarding the law of God and the Sabbath. The Adventists were fairly successful, but the book of *Galatians* was often the source of dispute. It stated that:

Galatians 3

²⁴ The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ,

²⁵ But after that faith is come, we are no longer under the schoolmaster.

There were some other statements in the book that were also problematic. But Adventists had an answer:

“Paul is speaking about the ceremonial law!”

Protestants argued that it was actually the moral law, and objected that Sabbath-keeping was therefore done away with. Adventists felt that as long as they held to their interpretation, that the law in *Galatians* was the ceremonial law, they could deal with these objections.

The 1888 Message

Then around 1887, a young Adventist doctor and editor (E. J. Waggoner) published some articles in one of the church papers arguing that the law in *Galatians* was actually the moral law! This was in part an answer to some articles George Butler (then-president of the church) had published in another church paper.

They argued these points back and forth through their respective church papers, and then Ellen White rebuked them for bringing out these differences via a public forum, as it

showed weakness and division within the church.

But the 1888 General Conference loomed in sight, and church leaders had become polarized around these issues. The majority sided with Butler, who was telling them to “cling to the landmarks” and not let these young up-starts remove the foundation. They thought that to argue that the law in *Galatians* was the “moral law” was essentially to do away with the law entirely, and especially with the need for Sabbath-keeping.

But Waggoner did not come to the Conference to debate, only to share the truth that the Lord laid on his heart. When Ellen White heard his presentations, and those of A. T. Jones, she was delighted. It was the first time she had heard such clear gospel truth. She also saw light in Waggoner’s presentations on the “Law in Galatians,” and although some of the thoughts were new to her, she said it was worth honest investigation. A few years later, she wrote that the law in *Galatians* was both the moral and ceremonial law.

An Ishmael Religion

But what did that do to all the arguments that Adventists had trusted in up to that point? It showed that their understanding, and the arguments they used to convey that understanding, were not quite right. They had failed to understand how the law and the gospel worked together.

Waggoner argued that the law in *Galatians* was the moral law, because this was the law that showed us our sinfulness, and led us to Christ to be healed. Once the sin was cleansed away, and real righteousness planted within, then obedience to the law would spring forth naturally. This did not do away with the Sabbath, but made a new distinction between dry, legalistic Sabbath-keeping, and real living Sabbath-keeping.

The Law condemns any kind of obedience that falls short of the righteousness of Christ. But when the dominion of sin is

broken, and the life Christ is planted within, the Law witnesses and approves of the new life, and it's new obedience.

Romans 3

²¹ But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, *being witnessed by the law* and the prophets.

The law, in its role as a “schoolmaster” is done away with, because it has led us to Christ, where real heartfelt obedience is obtained.

It is faith,—a constant looking to Christ as the source,—which maintains righteousness. When the Galatians turned to a punctilious observance of commandments and laws, they were turning away from Christ as the source, to their own natural strength. In essence, they were saying, as the Israelites did in the Old Testament,

Exodus 19

⁸ All that the Lord has spoken, WE will do.

This meant that they had lost sight of their own weakness, and more importantly, of Christ's eternal strength. They were turning to legalism: a false gospel.

To this day, Waggoner's views have not been accepted by the church, hence recently a book was distributed to the world, *The Ten Commandments, Twice Removed*, which argues that the law in *Galatians* is the ceremonial law! For over 100 years nothing has changed!

The importance of seeing this point in the book of *Galatians*, is that this book is all about how easy it is for Christians to deviate into a false gospel. Since the Adventists had difficulty seeing that *Galatians* was also speaking of the moral law, they were in danger of not seeing the difference between real faith, and legalism.

After all, very few people today keep the ceremonial law, so does that mean the book of *Galatians* does not apply to us any

longer? No, it does apply to us, because its main teaching is that man is not saved by his attempts to keep the law (any law, whether ceremonial, moral, or humanly-devised) but by faith in Christ. The difficulty that the brethren had in 1888, was that they had an “Ishmael” religion, and didn’t want to give it up to receive the “Isaac.”

Now I certainly do not believe that the apostate Protestants had the right view of the law in *Galatians* either. In the years leading up to 1844, they had rejected the first angel’s message of *Revelation* 14:6-7, which is stated to be “the everlasting gospel.” If they rejected the gospel, then they certainly could not have it.

Therefore, their interpretation of *Galatians*, which discards the moral law entirely, and thus side-steps the need for any kind of Sabbath-keeping, is only another form of legalism, or another false gospel. For having thrown out God’s standard, they are left to form their own; which is well represented by Sunday, a day of man’s devising.

But the danger for Adventists is that they have a nominal faith, one that does not really bring the promised blessing, and then try to tack onto that some good works, according to their understanding of what it means to keep the commandments. It is still legalism. Ishmael was the son that Abraham produced by his own works, it was not the son which God had promised.

Faith must lay hold of God’s power to make the changes in the soul that will bring it into harmony with God. It is just as impossible for man to do the good works that God requires, as it was for Abraham to bring forth a son in his (and Sarah’s) old age. But God promised to do it, just as He promises to make...

Isaiah 61

¹¹ ...righteousness and praise spring forth.

When God makes the change, there is no need for a list of “thou shalt not’s” to be printed on our walls, for we will naturally do what the law says. And if our obedience does not proceed from within, if it is a forced outward compliance, while the inner man is full of turmoil and strife, the moral law is there to convict us that the work of grace in the heart is lacking.

It does not take God a lifetime to remove sin from our lives. Granted it does take time for us to see what and where the sin is, and there is a process of growing into the truth, but once we confess the root of a particular sin, He can cleanse it in a moment.

Romans 6

⁷ He that is dead is freed from sin.

The Desire of Ages, p. 391:

By the transforming agency of His grace, the image of God is reproduced in the disciple; he becomes a new creature. Love takes the place of hatred, and the heart receives the divine similitude.

Serious Problems

There are serious problems now in Adventism because of the rejection of the 1888 gospel message.

- People do not know how to be born again, or what this really means. I know this, because I went through that struggle.
- They do not realize what sin actually is, and therefore waste time asking God to do what He has not promised to do.
- There is no clear distinction between the Protestant (false) gospel and the Adventist one, other than the legal keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath. Therefore Protestant books are freely sold in the Adventist Book stores.
- The general expectation and teaching is that we will go

on sinning and repenting until Jesus comes.

All of this would be impossible if Adventists understood and held to the 1888 gospel.

Keeping the Commandments?

Today, the general expectation and teaching among Seventh-day Adventists is that we will go on sinning and repenting until Jesus comes. This idea was borrowed straight from the fallen Protestant denominations. It is not compatible with the 1888 message, nor with many statements in the Bible, nor with the Adventist understanding of the cleansing of the sanctuary.

But the real problem with this is that it removes all need to keep the Ten Commandments. The Bible states:

James 2

¹⁰ For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

¹¹ For He that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if you commit no adultery, yet if you kill, you are become a transgressor of the law.

If it is believed that “we cannot keep them anyway,” then there is no need to tell people to keep the commandments. Even one slight offense nullifies all the rest of their obedience. Do you think God will save us because of our good intentions? Where does the Bible teach that?

This dreadful teaching, that “we can’t obey the law anyway,” is Satan’s masterstroke. It negates all the power of the gospel, and opens the door wide to justifying any cherished sin.

What is Perfection?

I was in a Sabbath School at the local SDA Church a few years ago, and one elder commented:

“It is impossible to live a perfect life. I don’t know anybody who is perfect, do you?”

The problem with his statement is that it is worded in a deceptive way. Perfection is often caricatured as a nit-picky kind of nervous disposition to always make sure there is “no dust in the corner” or “the drapes are straight” or “the table is set just right.” The idea that obedience consists mainly of an outward performance of multitudinous rules and regulations is a false view of Bible perfection.

Also, just because we don’t know anybody whom *we think* is perfect means nothing. Jesus was perfect, and almost nobody thought He was; in fact they thought He was the worst sinner, and treated Him accordingly. So what makes us think we could possibly identify a perfect person? It shows sheer self-confidence in our own judgment.

Bible perfection is accomplished deep within man. It means pure heartfelt obedience, without a taint of rebellion or murmuring. It springs from within, naturally and without being forced. It will be expressed in works, but only those who have the same spirit of obedience will truly recognize those works. Mary’s washing of Christ’s feet was a perfect work, but even Christ’s own disciples thought it was faulty, because it did not match their idea of a perfect “outward” performance.

We are assured in the Bible that Jesus, as the great High Priest, will...

Malachi 3

³ ...purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

Their offering, their works, will be entirely acceptable to God because of the purifying work of Christ. This is the aim of His ministry...to see His character perfectly reflected in His church. When it is, He will come.

Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 69:

“When the fruit is brought forth, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.” Christ is waiting

with longing desire for the manifestation of himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.

Is the Way of Jesus Too Hard?

Let us turn the question of the elder around:

“Which sin or temptation is too difficult to overcome?”

Really, which one? Which one can't Jesus save us from? Lusting after women? Appetite? Love of money? Spiritual pride? And where will you draw the line about which sins are acceptable in a Christian and which are not? What new and lower standard will the church invent to reach the low faith and performance of her members? And once you have set such a standard, then you have just as effectively replaced the law of God, as the Sunday-keepers, even if you continue to attend church on Sabbath. As soon as you say,

“The law can't be kept under some circumstances,”

–or,

“Our flesh is too weak to obey perfectly,”

–then you open up the door for sin. Your gospel becomes a system of indulgences, no better than the Catholic one in Luther's time. And then the same charge that the apostle Paul made to the Jews will apply to your church:

Romans 2

²¹ You therefore which teach another, do you not teach yourself? you that preach a man should not steal, do you steal?

²² You that say a man should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? you that abhor idols, do you commit sacrilege?

²³ You that make your boast of the law, through breaking the law do you dishonor God?

²⁴ For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles

through you, as it is written.

You see, if you tell Protestants to “keep the law” (by observing the Sabbath), but you admit that we all must break it from time to time, then you effectively set it aside. They will just say,

“Well you do not keep it either, so why do you burden us with it?”