

The law of Christ

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This morning, when I read this Sunday's epistle lesson ([Galatians 6:1-16](#)), something jumped out at me: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." It was that phrase "law of Christ" that caught my attention. Law of Christ? What's that? And why is Paul, the suspected antinomian, writing about any sort of law as if it belonged to the one who set us free from the law?

I did a quick search for the word *law* in the Bible. Not surprisingly, it comes up a lot in Galatians—27 times! In the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, only Romans has more incidences of that word (51). In this letter, Paul is deeply and emotionally concerned with a faction in the Galatian church that is insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity be circumcised. At times combative, this letter is Paul's most vehement treatise against those who would require followers of Christ to be adherents to the law of Moses. Among the 27 times that the word *law* appears, 26 of them refer in one way or another to the law of the old covenant. Each time, Paul is laying out a reason why that law is not operative in the lives of those converts. But then there's the exception.

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." To the original readers of this letter, it must have leapt off the page in a way that I missed earlier this week. Law of Christ. If Paul is going to call something the law of Christ, he must really mean it. To someone who wants to be absolutely clear that the law of Moses is fruitless, those are dangerous words. But Paul chooses them carefully and for powerful effect. This is the law of Christ—this is what we, as followers of Jesus who have been justified by faith, are beholden to: we must bear one another's burdens.

But Paul doesn't mean that in the "Lean on Me" kind of way. He doesn't mean that Christians must share the emotional toil of hardship with other disciples of Jesus. He's talking about ethics, and he's showing us that, when one of us is burdened by a transgression of ungodly, un-Spirit-filled living, everyone feels it. To see that, though, one needs to flip back to the end of Galatians 5 (or at least remember last

week's epistle lesson).

At the end of chapter 5, Paul argues that "the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." In contrast, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." In this, Paul isn't offering a prescription for participation in the body of Christ. No, he makes it clear in that same paragraph that those who "are led by the Spirit ... are not under the law." This isn't a legislated moral code to which followers of Jesus must adhere. Instead, this is a description of the redeemed, Spirit-enlivened life. And, as we see in this Sunday's lesson, any brother or sister who fails on this point—who is "detected in a transgression"—should be restored to the community "in a Spirit of gentleness" because, as Paul writes, bearing one another's burdens of temptation and transgression is the law of Christ.

Among the many gifts that Paul offers the contemporary church is his understanding of sin as a condition—a sickness that cannot be cured by our will power. Think of all the so-called sinners whom we ostracize from the Christian community. There's a reason that the recovery groups meet in the basement, where cheap coffee is served and the protection of anonymity is sacrosanct. Why? Because we have not succeeded in bearing their burdens as our burdens. We drive them to anonymity because we "who are nothing think [we] are something" and thus deceive ourselves. But, as Paul writes, there is a law in Christ—a law that states that brokenness is born by the whole body. We are called "to restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." We are to restore those whom we have shut out through our own condemnation to full participation in the Christian community. Their burdens are our burdens, and Christ invites us to see that.

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