

The Law in Galatians in SDA History

Notes used in Pastor Paul Penno Jr.'s

November 19, 2008 Sermon

The Sabbath School lessons were published in *The Youth's Instructor*. From April-July, 1886, the topic was on the law. These lessons were authored by E. J. Waggoner. Elder Butler wrote to E. G. White about them:

. . . . Elder Underwood and others have told me about the effect of the articles in the SIGNS and Sabbath School lessons, in various localities, and the Law in Galatians. The positions taken are causing great debate, and stirring up a spirit of discussion and controversy and making trouble.¹

The Sabbath School lessons were set up on a question and answer format with a Bible text providing the answer. Waggoner asked:

1. From what has Christ redeemed us? Gal. 3:13, first part.
2. What is the keeping of the commandments? 1 John 5:3.
3. If keeping the commandments is love, can it be also the curse of which Paul speaks?
4. Upon whom does the curse of the law fall? Gal. 3:10. . .²

Through this line of questioning, Waggoner identified the law in Galatians 3 as the Ten Commandments. Because these lessons were studied by the whole church it received a wider audience beyond the readership of the *Signs*. Thus, it provoked a lot of

¹ G. I. Butler, Letter to Ellen G. White, August 23, 1886, Mount Vernon, Ohio. Emphasis his.

² E. J. Waggoner, "The Sabbath-School. Third Sabbath in July. Lesson 13.—Redeemed from the Curse of the Law," *The Youth's Instructor* 34, 26 (June 30, 1886), p. 103.

discussion. It put Elder Butler in a position where he felt he had to do something.

If anything cemented Waggoner's appointment with controversy, it was a nine-part series of articles on the law in Galatians 3 which he wrote for the *Signs*.³ This was the first comprehensive exposition he had published on that chapter. He believed that the law in Galatians 3 was the moral law. "There is probably no portion of Scripture which is more commonly supposed to give 'aid and comfort' to the enemies of the law of God, than the third chapter of Galatians."⁴ But he reassured his readers if they would hear him out, they would discover it to be a strong bulwark in defense of God's law.

Abraham was the father of all faithful believers in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote:

Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.⁵

In his own words Waggoner explained these verses:

Having shown that even Abraham was not justified before God by his own works, Paul shows that the promise is to none but the children of Abraham; and since the children of Abraham are those only who have the same faith that he had, only those that are of faith can receive the promise.⁶

Then Waggoner quoted Galatians 3:10 which Elders Butler, Canright, and Smith applied to the ceremonial law: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written

³ This series ran from July 8-September 2, 1886.

⁴ E. J. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3. No. 1." *ST* (July 8, 1886), p. 406.

⁵ Galatians 3:7-9.

⁶ E. J. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3. No. 1." *ST* (July 8, 1886), p. 406.

in the book of the law to do them.” He put his finger on biblical support for identifying the law here in this verse. Waggoner explained: “These words are quoted from Deut. 27:26, and Jer. 11:2-4, in both of which places they have unmistakable reference to the ten commandments.”⁷

The apostle Paul explained the curse of the law: “For Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:13, 14). The curse of the law was upon sin and disobedience resulting in death. Christ was made a curse for us so that through faith we might receive the blessing of Abraham.

Waggoner was fully conscious of the controversial position he was taking on the law in Galatians 3. He observed: “Since some . . . have supposed that the third of Galatians refers principally to the ceremonial law, it may not be amiss to show briefly why it is impossible that the ceremonial law should be the subject of discourse in that chapter.”⁸

First, the ordinances never condemned anyone. They taught the gospel in the “Jewish age.” Second, neither we today nor the Gentile Galatians could be said to have been redeemed from the ceremonial law. But we Gentiles are under the condemnation of the moral law and locked up by it. It revealed all mankind to be sinners.⁹

The apostle Paul explained the relationship between the law and the promise: “And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect” (Galatians 3:17).

Waggoner pointed out that the law “was the basis” or “foundation of the promise” or “one of the terms of the covenant.” On this point he was in agreement with other Adventist writers. A little further on he said: “As the commandments were the condition of the Abrahamic covenant, so they are of what is known as ‘the second

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ E. J. Waggoner, “Comments on Galatians 3. No. 9,” *ST* 12, 34 (September 2, 1886), p. 534.

⁹ *Ibid.*

covenant,' which is in every respect the same as that made with Abraham. See Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10.”¹⁰

From these comments we can see that Waggoner did not understand the new covenant as beginning with the first advent of Christ. The new covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ. But “the covenant was confirmed in Christ to Abraham . . . in anticipation.”

“The commandments were the condition of the Abrahamic covenant. . . . Christ taught . . . obedience to the law. . . . Matthew 5:17-19; 19:17; Luke 16:17.”¹¹

Waggoner’s further exposition dealt with Galatians 3:15: “. . . Though it be but a man’s covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto.” Waggoner explained: “It is admitted, even by antinomians, that the law of God was in full force until the death of Christ, and therefore Gal. 3:15 should convince them that it is in full force now.”¹² So Waggoner was not a covenant dispensationalist and not an antinomian, though he agreed along with the antinomians that the law in Galatians 3 was the Ten Commandments. The antinomians attempted to do away with the law because they were covenant dispensationalists.

Where Waggoner really distinguished himself from his Adventist contemporaries was in seeing the covenant made *by God* with Abraham as “in every respect” the new covenant. The old covenant, on the other hand, was made *by Israel’s* promise to God as a nation at Sinai. Picking up the phraseology of Galatians 3:17 Waggoner asked:

What covenant was it that “was confirmed before of God in Christ”? . . .

The promise was that Abraham should be “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:11), and that in his seed all nations should be blessed. The condition was that he should walk before God and be perfect. Gen. 17:1-8. But this was not such a covenant as was made with the Israelites at Horeb. That one contained no reference to Christ, and no provision for

¹⁰ E. J. Waggoner, “Comments on Galatians 3. No. 2,” *ST* 12, 27 (July 15, 1886), p. 423.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

the forgiveness of sins; the one with Abraham was confirmed “in Christ” (Gal. 3:17) and was made not on condition that he should be righteous by his own unaided efforts, but was made on condition of his having the righteousness of faith. Compare Rom. 4:11 with 3:22-25. This of course involved the forgiveness of his sins; and so we see that the covenant with Abraham (which is the one referred to in this chapter) was exactly the same as “the second covenant,” which is made with us. The covenant made at Horeb, and called “the first covenant,” although it was after that made with Abraham, was, as we have before learned, only for the purpose of showing the people the need of the help promised in the Abrahamic or second covenant.¹³

For Waggoner the condition of the new covenant given to Abraham was the law of God. The condition was fulfilled by Christ who gave “the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14). There was only one condition for salvation. Waggoner said: “Faith in Christ is the only condition of salvation.”¹⁴

Why then the law? Waggoner contemporized the question. “If we are saved by grace, what need have we of the law?”¹⁵ The apostle Paul answered: “It was added because of transgression, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” (Galatians 3:19).

George Butler had already gone on record with Ellen White about the “added” law. He had written to Ellen White:

“It would be a most bitter pill to many of our leading brethren to be compelled to see the idea taught generally, that the law which was added because of transgression was the moral law itself.”¹⁶

He believed the whole church would be sold over to antinomianism if the ceremonial law interpretation of Galatians 3:19 was surrendered.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ E. J. Waggoner, “Comments on Galatians 3. No. 3,” *ST* 12, 28 (July 22, 1886), p. 438.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ G. I. Butler, Letter to Ellen G. White, June 20, 1886, Madison, Wisconsin.

The idea of the law being “added” sounded like it just came into existence at Mount Sinai. No law-abiding Seventh-day Adventist would hear of such a thing. They believed the law was co-existent with God. It was no wonder then, that Butler and others viewed the “added” law as the typical remedial system given to Moses.

But Waggoner pointed out that the words “spoken” or “emphasized” were more precise than the King James Version translation “added” (Galatians 3:19). “It was *spoken* because of transgression.” Waggoner affirmed: “. . . the law was already in existence, and known to man, although only by tradition; but now the Lord added it in written form.”¹⁷

A parallel passage to which Waggoner referred was Romans 5:20: “Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound.” Explained Waggoner: “The ‘entering’ of the law was at Sinai. Why did it enter?—That the offense (sin) which previously existed might abound.”¹⁸ This was Luther’s first use of the law. The law was emblazoned at Sinai so that they would recognize their utter sinfulness. “. . . It was necessary for men to see the real nature of sin, in order that they might seek the grace that is in Christ, which alone can take away sin.”¹⁹

D. M. Canright represented the brethren in the East when he wrote about the “added law.”

. . . The second law was added to point to the promised seed till he should come. . . . Why was this law given? . . .
“It was added because of transgressions, *till the seed should come*.” Then it was not the moral law; for that does not point to Christ, nor say anything about the coming of the seed, while the law of sacrifices, types, and shadows, related wholly to that promised seed.²⁰

So Canright viewed the law in Galatians 3 as the ceremonial law. In addition, he interpreted the coming of the seed to be Christ’s first advent anticipated by the sacrifices and types. In doing this, he

¹⁷ *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ D. M. Canright, *The Two Laws* (Review and Herald, Battle Creek, Michigan: 1886), pp. 9, 10. Emphasis his.

denied the function of the moral law in pointing us to Christ as the only means of solving the sin problem.

However, Waggoner kept in view the full scope of God's promise to Abraham. The cross was of strategic importance in ratifying the covenant, but its ultimate fulfillment would not be complete ". . . till the seed should come to whom the promise was made. . . ." (Galatians 3:19b).

What is the coming of the seed? Certainly, not ultimately, the first advent of Christ, Waggoner replied. God promised Abraham, "And thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" (Genesis 22:17). Christ's enemies as well as Satan would not be removed until the second coming (Revelation 19:11-21).²¹

The Apostle Paul continued: "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed" (Galatians 3:23). Waggoner observed: "The idea of bondage is everywhere connected with sin. It is a cruel master."²² The law "shuts up" its violator. He was kept "in ward." The only way of escape was "the faith" of Jesus which brought sweet release from certain death. Waggoner saw the movement of this passage in Galatians 3 as descriptive of the law's action upon the heart of the individual sinner. He did not see this passage through the paradigm of a typological old covenant succeeded by the new covenant dispensationalism; however biblical that might be (see for example, 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 9:1).

Waggoner asserted that the law did not refer to the ceremonies because they never preceded faith in Christ. The sinner believed in Christ first as his Saviour from sin, and then by faith in his Substitute brought the prescribed sacrifice. The ceremonial law never locked up the sinner, but it was possible to be locked up by the moral law before it drove the sinner to the faith of Christ.²³

Next, Waggoner gave attention to verse 24. "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). He explained: The law served as a correctional officer in prison. It locked up its violator. Plus the law,

²¹ E. G. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3. No. 4," *ST* 12, 29 (July 29, 1886), p. 454.

²² E. J. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3. No. 8," *ST* 12, 33 (August 26, 1886), p. 518.

²³ E. J. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3. No. 9," *ST* 12, 34 (September 2, 1886), p. 534.

under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, literally drove the sinner to Christ. The law hemmed the sinner in through personal guilt. It provided no recourse for freedom. The sinner only learned from Christ, who was the perfect embodiment of the law, how to walk in righteousness and consequent liberty.

The Apostle Paul spoke of the coming of “faith.” “But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (Galatians 3:25). In Christ was the perfect law of liberty. The forgiven sinner walked free in Him. Therefore, the believer was no longer under law, but under grace. He walked in perfect harmony with the law because of Christ. When the forgiven and cleansed sinner walked in harmony with the law through Christ he was “no longer under a school master.” The law had nothing against one who was in harmony with it.

Referring to the “law was our schoolmaster,” Waggoner commented:

The past tense can be used here only by those who have come to Christ and have been justified by faith, as Paul shows in the next verse. Since the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, it must still be the schoolmaster (*pedagogue*) to those who are not in Christ, and must retain that office until every one who will accept Christ is brought to him. Therefore the law will be a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ, as long as probation lasts. But the Levitical law passed away hundreds of years ago; therefore it cannot be the law referred to here.²⁴

In Waggoner’s view, Galatians 3:24 was not a typological covenant dispensational text. It did not say the law was abolished at the cross. What Galatians 3:24 *did* say was that for the Christian, the law’s function as a correctional officer ended when he was released by Christ the Saviour from sin. So the “schoolmaster” had a role in every sinner’s life no matter whether they lived in the old dispensation or in the new dispensation.

²⁴ *Ibid.*