

The Meaning of Romans 10:4

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Introduction

Paul was nearing the end of his third missionary journey when he wrote to the Christians living at Rome (Rom 15:14-29). He had been traveling through the regions of Macedonia and Achaia collecting donations for the poor. He intended to deliver this donation to the church at Jerusalem and make his way to Rome before continuing on to new missionary fields in Spain.

His purpose in writing was to introduce himself to the saints at Rome and to acquaint them with the essentials of his message (Rom 1:8-15). Because he addresses the concerns of both Jewish and Gentile believers, the Book of Romans contains one of the most systematic and thorough explanations of the gospel in the entire Bible.

The basic theme of the Book of Romans is the righteousness of God (Rom 1:16-17). Paul defends God's right to condemn all men as sinners, to justify sinners by faith, and to decide the fate of nations by election. The Book of Romans is both theoretical and practical, sweeping in scope and yet personal in tenor.

In the midst of an extended discussion about the fate of Israel, Paul asserted that "Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4).¹ Over the centuries, theologians have proposed various interpretations of this passage. This paper will examine the essential facts related to the meaning of Romans 10:4.

Grammatical Analysis

Although there are no significant textual issues, translations of this passage are remarkably diverse. The following table shows the original Greek text along with several well-known translations for comparison:

Interlinear Greek NT	<i>telos gar nomou christos eis dikaiosunan panti to pisteuonti</i>
New King James	For Christ <i>is</i> the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes
Good News Bible	For Christ has brought the Law to an end, so that everyone who believes is put right with God.
New Living Translation	For Christ has accomplished the whole purpose [goal] of the law. All who believe in him are made right with God

The basic reason for this diversity is that several key terms within this passage have a wide variety of meanings, which makes translating more difficult. For example, *telos* can refer to a termination, conclusion, goal, or toll.² Second, Paul used the term *nomos* to refer to the Mosaic Law (1 Cor 9:9), the whole Old Testament (1 Cor 14:34), specific statutes or commands (1 Cor 7:39), or as a principle or nature with humanity (Rom 8:2). Third, the preposition *eis* is quite flexible and can be translated as "for" (purpose), "so that" (result), or "with respect to" (reference), each of which carries a subtle shade of meaning.³

¹ Scriptures are quoted from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., s.v. *telos*, 811.

³ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 369-71.

Translators must choose suitable English terms based on the definitions of the original Greek words, the grammar of the sentence, and the overall context of the passage. For example, in Romans 13:7, Paul uses *telos* in the context of paying taxes, which indicates that he was referring to toll or tribute money.

Unfortunately, the immediate context of Romans 10:4 does not provide a clear solution. The Greek conjunction *gar* is used to connect the four subordinate clauses in Romans 10:2-5 to the main thought in Romans 10:1. These clauses explain Paul's original thought, which forms the immediate context of this passage. Essentially, Paul is saying:

I hope and pray that Israel may be saved (Rom 10:1)

1. Because (*gar*) they are zealous but misguided (Rom 10:2)
2. Because (*gar*) they are ignorant of justification by faith (Rom 10:3)
3. Because (*gar*) Christ is the *telos* of the law (Rom 10:4)
4. Because (*gar*) law based righteousness depends on obedience (Rom 10:5), while faith based righteousness depends on the heart (Rom 10:6-11)

In this context, *telos* could be rendered as "end" or "goal" and still make sense.

To make matters worse, theologians have long disagreed over Paul's view of the law. At times, Paul appears to disparage the law, while at other times he upholds the moral law as still binding for Christians. This tension between abolition and fulfillment has led theologians to propose solutions that range all the way from strong discontinuity between the law and the gospel to radical continuity (e.g., the theonomist movement). While some theologians favor a moderate form of continuity, others believe that "Paul's theology of the law is inconsistent and contradictory."⁴

Theological Analysis

Consequently, theologians have proposed several different interpretations of this passage. In fact, there are no fewer than eight different positions, but they are not of equal weight among scholars. Only the four most significant will be considered here.

This situation also illustrates the fact that every translation is, on some level, an interpretation of the original. The translator always brings a personal bias to the interpretive process. In this regard, Poythress wisely observes that rigid interpretive frameworks can become self-perpetuating filters that lead to circular reasoning, dogmatism, and harshness. "It is too easy to read into a passage what [one] afterwards reads out."⁵

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 243-244; Schreiner, *New Bible Dictionary* ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al, 3rd ed. (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), s.v. Law, 676.

⁵ Vern S. Poythress, "Effects of Interpretive Frameworks on the Application of Old Testament Law" in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990), 105, 116-7.

The End of the Mosaic Law

The first interpretation is that Christ is the end of the Mosaic Law. This view has wide support, especially in Lutheran circles and among certain dispensational theologians. For example, Ryrie believes that “the law of Christ” has replaced the Mosaic Law; this new code contains some old commands, some new commands, and some revised commands. Thiessen, on the other hand, feels that Christians are not required to obey any commands in order to please God and that the Mosaic code only serves as an instructive guide for understanding God’s will. All are agreed, however, that the Mosaic Law has passed away and that it is no longer binding for Christians; there is discontinuity between the law and the gospel.⁶

Clearly, there are several problems with this approach. First, Christ Himself explicitly upheld the validity of the law for believers (Matt 5:17-19). Paul also expected Christians to obey the moral law and often cited the Old Testament as his basis (Rom 13:8-10, Eph 6:1-2). Second, the New Testament often refers to the law as a present reality. Paul noted that circumcision was of value and personally circumcised his Jewish traveling companion Timothy (Rom 2:25, 3:1-2, Act 16:1-3). He explicitly rejected the idea that faith nullifies the law (Rom 3:31). For Paul, the Sabbaths and the festivals are (not “were”) shadows of things to come (Col 2:16-17).

The End of the Ceremonial Law

The second interpretation is that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law. Traditionally, Reformed theologians divide Old Testament laws into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories.⁷ According to this view, the moral law is still binding for Christians, while the civil and ceremonial laws are not; unlike the previous interpretation, in this case, there is moderate continuity between the law and the gospel.

There are several problems with this approach as well. First, Paul does not appear to be discussing the ceremonial law in this passage. Second, this view does not explain how ending the ceremonial law makes righteousness possible for believers. “Is salvation by law more easily attainable with the moral law still in force?”⁸ Third, Scripture does not divide these laws into discrete categories, and any attempt to separate them is purely speculative and subjective.⁹

The Goal of the Law

The third interpretation is that Christ is the goal of the law. Schreiner notes that this has been an increasingly popular view, which was also prominent, if not dominant, throughout the history of the church.¹⁰ In addition, this view does not imply that the Mosaic Law has passed away or is no longer binding (i.e., dispensational theology).

⁶ Schreiner, “Paul’s View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5” *WTJ* 55 (1993): 113-114; Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 305; Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 170-1.

⁷ Esmond Birnie, *Testing the Foundations of Theonomy and Reconstruction* (Belfast: Queens University, n.d.), n.p.

⁸ Schreiner, “Paul’s View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5” *WTJ* 55 (1993): 116.

⁹ Birnie, *Testing the Foundations*, n.p.

¹⁰ Schreiner, “Paul’s View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5” *WTJ* 55 (1993): 117.

Several facts appear to support this position. First, Paul himself described the law as “our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24). Second, on at least one other occasion, Paul used the term *telos* with the sense of a goal or purpose (1 Tim 1:5). Third, the preceding passage in Romans contains several goal-oriented terms (Rom 9:30-33). For example, the Greek verb *dioko* (pursue) implies earnestly seeking a goal, and *katalambano* (attained) implies laying hold of a goal (Rom 9:30). Some believe that Paul was building an athletic metaphor in which the Jews were racing to achieve their own righteousness by the works of the law but stumbled over the Rock of offense (Rom 9:32-33).¹¹

However, there are also several problems with this interpretation. First, the primary definition of *telos* is termination, not goal or purpose. Paul used *telos* as “goal” only once out of eleven other occurrences. Thus, while this interpretation is linguistically possible, it is unlikely. Second, Romans 9:30-33 is not part of the immediate literary context of Romans 10:4. The racing imagery mentioned earlier is not found in Romans 10:1-3 and cannot automatically be imported into Romans 10:4 without some credible evidence.¹²

The End of Legalism

The fourth interpretation is that Christ is the end of legalism. Schreiner holds that “Paul is speaking experientially in this text, so that his point is that Christ is the end of using the law to establish one’s own righteousness.”¹³ Murray also concludes that:

Paul is speaking... not of the Mosaic Law in any specific sense but of law as demanding obedience, and therefore in the most general sense of law [based] righteousness as opposed to faith [based] righteousness... his whole statement is simply to the effect that every believer is done with [using] the law as a way of attaining righteousness.¹⁴

There are several facts that strongly favor this interpretation. First, it is consistent with the contrast between faith and legalism seen in Romans 10:3. Second, the primary definition of *telos* is termination, not goal or purpose; therefore, this interpretation is more likely than the previous one. Third, Paul sometimes used *nomos* (law) to refer to legalism. Kaiser notes:

Often when Paul appears to be disparaging the law, he is instead debunking “legalism.” We agree with C. E. B. Cranfield that Paul had no separate word-group to denote “legalism,” “legalist” and “legalistic.” Consequently, some of the passages translated as “law” are incorrect, for what he is opposing is the quest for a righteousness obtained as a result of one’s own efforts and works.¹⁵

If legalism is understood in terms of relying on the Levitical sin offerings to obtain personal forgiveness, then this view does not necessarily imply that the Mosaic Law has passed away or is

¹¹ Samuele Bacchiocchi, “Romans 10:4: Goal or Termination?” in *The Sabbath Sentinel* (Gillette: The Bible Sabbath Association, Sept-Oct 2003), 16.

¹² Schreiner, “Paul’s View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5” *WTJ* 55 (1993): 117-120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 50-51.

¹⁵ Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 309.

no longer binding (i.e., dispensational theology); the sacrificial system continues to be what it always was - a mere symbol of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and not the actual basis for forgiveness. This is also consistent with Paul's view regarding justification and his emphasis on the proper understanding of justification when he would preach the gospel (e.g., Acts 13:38-39).

While the previous interpretation (goal) cannot be entirely ruled out, this last view (legalism) fits the context better and is probably what Paul had in mind. It also has the advantage of avoiding the dispensational implications associated with the first two interpretations.

Conclusion

Various translations of Romans 10:4 are remarkably different for several important reasons. First, several key terms in this passage have a wide variety of meanings. Second, the immediate context does not help to provide a clear solution. Therefore, theologians have proposed several different interpretations based on their respective views of Pauline theology.

One view is that Christ is the end of the Mosaic Law. The basic idea is that the Mosaic Law as a package of laws has passed away and is no longer binding for Christians; however, this position is undermined by Paul's own words and actions throughout the New Testament.

A similar idea is that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law. The basic idea is that Christians are still obligated to keep the moral law but not the ceremonial aspects of the law. However, Paul does not appear to be discussing the ceremonial law in this passage, and this view does not explain how ending the ceremonial law makes righteousness possible for believers.

Another view is that Christ is the goal of the law. This is consistent with Paul's view that the law was meant to bring people to Christ (Gal 3:24). While this interpretation is linguistically possible, it is unlikely; the primary definition of *telos* is termination, not goal or purpose.

The most likely interpretation is that Christ is the end of legalism (i.e., justification through the sacrificial system). This is consistent with the context of Romans 10:1-3 and with the primary definition of *telos*. Paul had no ready term for legalism and sometimes used the term "law" when discussing the concept of legalism.

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