Obedience to the Law of Christ. An inquiry into the function of the Mosaic law in Christian ethics from a Mennonite perspective
Veen, R.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Introduction

§ 1. Occasion and purpose of this study

According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus emphatically denied that it was His intent to reject the validity of the Mosaic law for His disciples. “Do not think that I have come to abrogate the law and the prophets.” Jesus’ mission was not to make void the law or abrogate, but to fulfill it. He who both teaches and does the law shall be called “great” in the kingdom of heavens. Anyone who on the contrary looses a single commandment from the Torah, even the least one, will be called “small” in that kingdom. If one begins to reflect on the meaning of these words without taking immediate refuge in the shelters of seemingly solid exegesis that have been erected around it, one makes a startling discovery. In a way, the Churches have come to the conclusion that Jesus’ mission in effect has abrogated the Mosaic law for His disciples. Do we need to think that Jesus’ fulfillment of the law actually means in practice that its commandments have been set aside?

But how is that possible? How could such a clear emphasis on the continuing role of the Mosaic law for Jesus’ disciples be wiped away in the history of the Church? How could to “fulfill” come to mean “abrogate, to declare void” and thereby indicate the obvious and exact opposite of the saying’s intent? Various kinds of antinomianisms and anti-Judaisms have in effect echoed a single frase in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “for Christ is the end of the law.” (Rom. 10:4) Perceptions of the law as document of condemnation, as tutor that brought in awareness of sin, as mere preparation to the gospel of grace, have been with us since the 2nd century Church in various forms, and have developed into the orthodox position after the Reformation introduced its antithesis of law and grace. Even those who opposed a law-free gospel on the erroneous ground, that it furthered a life of sin because it was a “cheap grace” that was offered to the sinner anyway, almost never returned to the Mosaic law in full. They either used that law as a source of civil law in a society that was Christian in name only, or they dispensed with large portions of the law and sought to formulate a Christian morality, hardly different from what could be expected of any man in a civilized, European society. The distinction between ritual law for Israel and moral law for mankind in effect subsumed the authority of Moses under a contemporary view of Christian morality. With the exception of some strands of Calvinism, the Mosaic law has not been respected — and certainly not in the way Jesus might have understood it from within 1st century Judaism — in the manner and to the degree of the Matthew 5:17 quote.

That tendency to move away from Mosaic law may have had its own historical reason and justification, but can it be affirmed even today? In the last century, particularly after WW II, a totally new approach to exegesis has been opened in this respect. We can no longer take for granted, that the Reformation’s definition of the basic terms of Paul’s doctrines is historically and exegetically a sufficient basis for doctrine. Despite the new respect for Judaism and the essential Jewishness of Jesus, we have had for quite some time an effort (e.g. by the school of Rudolf Bultmann) to transform our historical understanding of the New Testament while at the same time maintaining the basic tenets and emphases of the Reformation. Rudolf Bultmann understood the words of Matthew’s 5:17 to be constructed in a Jewish-Christian setting and directed against the Hellenistic mission among the gentiles. The text established the law as continuing source of obedience to God, at least in the sense of what I will later call its parenetic function, i.e. knowledge of the law as source of ethics. In particular the law was seen historically as a threefold condition in that early predominantly Palestine Church:
• the condition of defining the will of God.
• the condition of salvation, i.e. obedience to the law was in some way vital to redemption.
• the condition of belonging to Israel.

Bultmann observed that “the ‘Urgemeinde’ held on to these three conditions.

“In whatever degree she had (at least in the beginning) become critical towards the Jewish law-obedience under the influence of the words of her Lord, and in whatever degree she had broken away from the Jewish concept of merit that was supposed to have dominated 1st century Jewish thought, she held on to the law as a characteristic of the elect people, and was aware that she represented it.”

But this Palestine theology, though admittedly early and in that sense closer to Jesus, also represented to him a break from the true Gospel which he found almost exclusively in the letters of Paul. Apparently then, the new historical understanding of Jesus as an exponent of Judaism did not lead immediately to a revision of doctrine, and certainly not of moral theory. In Bultmann’s view, Paul’s version of the Gospel in its Reformation version, remained the authentic one, precisely because it broke away from the Jewish pattern of faith that was still so clearly present in Matthew.

We can make several vital objections to Bultmann’s approach to this problem.

First, we must emphasize that Matthew’s gospel was in part written as a response to a Christian practice and theology that may have had its center in Paul, by a theologian in a community that in some way had continued the earliest impulses of Jesus’ disciples. Matthew’s Church at least had more continuity with the earliest theology of the Church in Jerusalem. Now this is not to say, that early means authentic and later must therefore mean falsified. It is important to affirm in advance that there is diversity in dialogue in the New Testament, despite the harmonizing framework that went along with the canonization-process or followed it. But this position does imply that we dispense with the argument of success altogether in dealing with the earliest developments in Christian ethics and theology. The apparent success of the Hellenistic mission with its emphasis on the law-free gospel is in itself not a sufficient argument to dispense with the Mosaic law in Christian ethics, if the latter can be shown to be a consistent position, held by a substantial minority in the early Church and in continuity with the earliest traditions around Jesus. Nor can the argument be construed in opposite direction. What we need is a reason that makes sense in a modern systematic theology to dispense with Matthew’s claim to the validity of the Mosaic law for the Church like has been done in the past. And if we cannot find one, we should be prepared to adopt Matthew’s affirmation of the Mosaic law into the inner circle of foundational notions in Christian ethics. In general, we need to find the biblical and systematic argument if any can be found, for such a direct contradiction to the gospel of Matthew. It is the Church that stands convicted for its past ignorance of Mosaic law if no such argument can be found.

Secondly, we should recognize that there was a vibrant though perhaps short-lived type of Christianity in which the law of Moses continued to fulfill a vital function, independent of, or even contrary to Paul’s teachings. We know that type of Christianity through Paul’s vehement opposition against some of its adherents, and from the scarce evidence provided by Acts and quotations from the Church fathers.

And thirdly, that there was and is a way (opened up in an unbiased and historically informed exegesis) to understand the law as a graceful gift of God to His people, as a source for a distinct way of life, without focussing immediately on the concept of “merit” and certainly without restricting the proper use of the law to its role as indictment and condemnation of humanity. Identifying the keeping of the law in 1st century Judaism with amassing merit in order to gain salvation through “good works” will not do anymore as a historic judgment. It has become part of the consensus over the last thirty years, that “merit” in the 16th century is not the same category as that of 1st century Judaism. It is equally clear, that the “law” in 16th
century parlance does not cover the 1st century meaning of Torah but summarizes both a secular and Roman Catholic usage of "law." It is therefore important to re-evaluate the New Testament-perspective on Jewish law without the bias that has obfuscated the role of the law in the New Testament-Church.

Bultmann's conclusions with regard to Paul's "original" gospel and the necessity to overcome the vestiges of Judaism in the Palestine Church are in need of major modification and have been respectfully challenged in the past 20 years. First of all, there is the evaluation of the historical status of the Mosaic law in 1st century thought. We can no longer understand Jewish law in the 1st century as directed towards merit or acquiring eternal salvation by performing the "works of the law." The positive evaluation of the law in circles of Jewish Christianity can therefore no longer be seen as a residue of the Palestinian Church destined to fade away with the rise of the Pauline Church. Furthermore, the concept of law in Paul itself is more ambiguous than even Bultmann thought. If Dunn is right, most of Paul's antithetical statements with regard to the Mosaic law aim at a particular understanding of the Mosaic law as limiting righteousness to Israel as a special prerogative. If Stowers is right, most if not all negative remarks about the Law in Paul's letter to the Romans are directed against gentile judaizers who sought to add elements of the Torah into the gospel they had received. After a short period in which the scales were tipped to the other extreme, the most widespread position now is that Paul's doctrine of justification is not the core essence of his gospel, nor the polemical slogan of the first decade of the century, but a reasoned attempt to contradict those gentiles who saw the Mosaic law as a necessary condition of salvation or even as an useful addition to the gospel of Christ. In both cases affirmation of the law as a prerogative of the elect or as a means of salvation contradicted the supreme value of Christ.

The kind of position that Bultmann took with regard to the Pauline solution of the problem of the law, however classic though antiquated it may be, might still serve as the starting point of an investigation into the foundations of Christian ethics. For one thing because it is still widely held even outside the circle of New Testament-scholarship. For another, because its result is alluring at least in one respect: no direct connection between Christian ethics and Jesus' absolute moral teachings can be established. By emphasizing the existential call of the gospel and using Paul's doctrine of justification as the foundational paradigm, Jesus' direct ethical exhortation can be laid aside. Bultmann insisted that the "Urgemeinde" did not understand the real fullness of the gospel, that the real gospel was to be explained by Paul in his teachings on justification by faith (alone). Retrospectively that leads to a position in which only Jesus' life and death can become focal points of a Christian ethics of imitatio.

Despite the advance of biblical theology, many of Bultmann's formal assumptions can still be seen as productive. His historical assessment e.g., that Paul developed his justification by faith in opposition to a Jewish doctrine of salvation through works and merit, implies at least a valid systematic correlation between sola gratia and the historical understanding of what Paul was arguing against. That provides us with a necessary though preliminary strategy of how we can tackle the problem of the foundation of Christian ethics. For if our historical understanding of Paul's opponents changes, then, on account of this necessary correlation, our understanding of the doctrine should change as well. And if the latter changes, then also the concept of Christian ethics (or sanctification) that is linked to it, must change with it.

It hardly needs argument that our historical evaluation has changed considerably since Bultmann. It has already become abundantly clear, that the historical correlate of the Reformed understanding of Paul's doctrine was its understanding of Roman-Catholic practice and not Paul's real 1st century opponent. Such a 16th century correlation between Catholic meritology and justification of the ungodly would make one think that Paul understood the law to be an instrument of instilling fear and guilt and as a mere preparation for the gospel instead of it being a "gracious arrangement made by God for ordering the life of his people
while they were awaiting the arrival of the Messiah”.

If the doctrine ultimately rests on an understanding of Paul’s adversary in the exegesis of his letters to the Romans and Galatians, then we must indeed redefine the doctrine as our historical understanding of this adversarial context changes. But there can be no doubt that our understanding in the last two decades of the 20th century has changed considerably since the Reformation, to a far higher degree even than in the days of Bultmann. It has changed to such a degree, that Bultmann’s effort to stay in congruity with the Reformation doctrine can no longer be maintained without running into considerable difficulty.

So this is our first major point of departure: the new image of Paul in his Jewish, 1st-century context, and a new reading of the gospels against the background of Pharisaic (and Qumran-) Judaism. Several changes in our view of history have become part of our new hermeneutical situation: a new view of the meaning of 1st century Judaism as a religion that understood the concept of grace and a Jewish Christianity that managed to combine Torah-obedience and the gospel of Christ into one single kerygma. These two historical elements in particular motivated the basic question that I want to engage in this dissertation:

1. the fact that the early Church still found a meaningful connection to the Mosaic law and its Jewish exegesis and practice (and in quite a different fashion than the Reformation did) and that this connection is not contradicted by Paul’s doctrine of justification since its opposite is not the affirmation of the Jewish law as such but a judaizing theology devised in circles of gentile Christianity;
2. that the antithesis to such a form of “messianic Judaism” has its center in (an interpretation of) Paul’s doctrines, specifically his teachings on justification by faith, that construed its correlate in late Catholic meritology and the practice of repentance and salvation through good works, and not in 1st century elements of Jewish Christianity and/or Hellenist Judaism.

In the last three decades especially it has become clear, that the criticism of the law that we can find within the New Testament cannot have been directed to 1st century Judaism as a whole. The criticism of the law that we find in Paul has now been severed in our understanding from the 16th century assumption that there was a Pharisaic Judaism that taught a redemption by a self-centered attempt to fulfill all the demands of the law and achieve merit with God. Paul’s polemic with the judaizers had been primarily over the shape of the Church and the status of gentile believers, not about the importance and the validity of the law. New Testament-scholars with such different points of view and methods as James Dunn and E.P. Sanders have contributed to this new image. The merit-oriented concept of ‘works of the law” was gradually replaced by either of these two options. (1) the notion that gentile Christians were misunderstanding the law to demand meritorious deeds to gain salvation; Paul’s opponents could then be identified as gentile Christians who sought to reintroduce their particular understanding of Jewish law. Or, (2) that Paul was merely or at least primarily talking about part of the mizvoth, i.e. those that express a boundary marker for Israel to wit: circumcision, kashrut (dietary laws) and table-communion. The area of discussion changed from the gospel versus the law, to the shape of the Church, from soteriology to ecclesiology. There was room now for a more objective evaluation of Judaism and the way was open for a new search for the Jewish roots of Christianity.

The consequences of this re-evaluation of the NT-position towards Judaism and the law both in basic Christian doctrine and in its practical consequence for Christian ethics, have however not been examined yet. But there is an important correlation between the doctrine and Christian ethics as I will illustrate later on. If we have to change our understanding of justification by faith because of our historical insights, we have to redefine the foundation and shape of Christian ethics as well.
The subject matter of this study is therefore the connection between justification (by faith) and Christian ethics, concentrated in the question whether the Mosaic law (both as a written text and as a principle of an attitude of obedience) is a valid source to determine the specific obligations of the Christian way of life. My question is, to put it from another angle, whether the "law of Christ" or the "messianic Torah" entails only or primarily the love command as a general principle of ethics, narratively summed up in Jesus' own example of obedience unto death or provides us beyond that with a framework in which the concrete contents of the Mosaic commandments and the pattern of Torah-obedience are the primary means of understanding the will of God for a community of disciples.

Such a path of redefinition might go against a well established opinion, reiterated also many times outside the arena of theological debate. It seems quite self-evident to some, that Christian ethics is not concerned with the 'realization of an imperative as an impersonal and transpersonal 'thou shalt', through which man could create for himself a secure status in the world and before God, but with a behaviour on the basis of a present promise of salvation.' Bultmann's vigorous opposition against the search for security through merit, and the self-centeredness of moral striving, was the paradigm for his estimate of the shape of Christian ethics. In this, Bultmann expressed a view that was held among (Christian) philosophers as well. In Europe, ethicists generally maintained the following characteristics of any Christian ethics:

1. Discipleship is focussed on Christ's suffering and cross, not so much on His teaching. Its shape in the gospels is therefore an heroic ethics for exceptional individuals or an "interim-ethics" (Schweitzer) or an utopian ethics (Goppelt).
2. The subject of moral action is the new creation, the spiritually reborn in the new community of the Church. But reborn or not, such a person would still be a citizen of the state and his regeneration led to an inner morality or an exceptional selflessness against the background of complete submission to the national state.
3. Moral action is not oriented backward toward the codices of revelation and tradition, but exclusively forward, in anticipatory openness for the situation in which the "neighbor" is encountered. In that manner, disagreement on basic principles could be relegated to differences in culture and situation. A simple picture of love for the neighbor could be used to exemplify exceptional degrees of civic duty. In short, Christian ethics could be swallowed up by society's need for moral values.
4. Specific Christian virtues are determined by the eschatological emphasis: sobriety, hope, steadfastness, readiness and the like. And of course, such values were universal in themselves and led to the kind of behaviour that was beneficial to society as a whole.

The problem of Christian ethics was not primarily debated in the arena of biblical exegesis, nor on the basis of an ecclesiology that knew about the principled status of the Christian congregation as a minority within society as large. The debate was philosophical more than biblical. The defining moment of the post-Enlightenment debate on the foundations of Christian ethics was the opposition between autonomy (freedom) and heteronomy, as an aspect of ethics that was constitutive for both the motivation and the understanding of Christian ethics as a religious ethics. Most often the solution to the tension between both defining elements was sought in a combination of both. If man e.g. could be understood to be oriented toward God by nature, then the autonomy of man is fulfilled when he directs himself to God. A theonomos heteronomy is then the last consequence of autonomy. Or autonomy could be understood as finding in its own depth the foundation for such a theonomy. The foundation figures of thought and speech were derived from the philosophical discours.

The specifically religious element in this debate about ethics can be located in a particular attempt to combine the viewpoints of autonomy and heteronomy. In other words, if man really
understood his own autonomy he must find it ultimately reasonable to assume a divine foundation for it. He might even opt for the Kantian solution, that Christianity, understood philosophically, expressed in the life of Christ the ultimate image of rational morality. A complete understanding of human autonomy would then lead to the discovery of (postulated) theonomy, or their equation in a rationalist ethics. In both cases, the tension between human liberty and divine transcendence was not denied, but mitigated by a theory about their intrinsic or logical interdependence. The question must be raised what this discussion had to do with the biblical sources for Christian ethics and the status of scripture. It seems as if modern philosophical notions and not the return to a renewed understanding of scripture set the agenda for the debate on Christian ethics. Of course, such a return to a biblical ethics in itself would imply at least a provisional decision about the need for theonomy. Nevertheless I would venture, that the specific character of Christian ethics can only be found, if we return to a rigorous discipline in Biblical theology in which we ground the particularity of the Christian concept of God’s commandments as the ultimate basis and decisive shape of all Christian ethics.

Turning to the area of exegesis now, the question underlying this study developed as follows. For years scholars have become more aware of the importance of the Mosaic law in the writings of Paul, especially since World War II. Before that Paul’s theology had most often been interpreted as a sustained attack on the Jewish religion. One of the milestones in the new assessment of Paul’s theology was W. D. Davies’ Paul and Rabbinic Judaism (1974, first edition 1948). It made ample use of rabbinic sources and provided arguments for the insight that a clear cut distinction between Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism could no longer be maintained, so that Paul could not be simply explained as part of a monolithic historic entity called “Hellenistic Judaism.” The classic interpretation saw Paul vehemently opposing what was called the Jewish commitment to “works-righteousness”. It had been presupposed that Hellenist Judaism provided the basic motives for a critique of such a works-oriented (Palestinian) and legalistic form of Judaism.

The second enriching insight was, that Paul’s relationship to contemporary Judaism was not simply that of anti-thesis, as the Reformation had claimed. It became clear that this interpretation of Paul derived from the anti-thesis between the Reformers and the Roman-Catholic Church, that became the model used to explain the New Testament references to the Mosaic law, oral tradition and the nature of the Pharisee movement. The result of Davies’ work and that of his student E.P. Sanders, was a better understanding of how Paul used contemporary Jewish moulds in which to shape his gospel, spec, his transformation of the attributes of the Torah into characteristics of Christ, what Davies called a “Christifying” of the Torah.

He also showed, that righteousness in connection with obedience was a keyconcept to Paul, implying that he was after a new understanding of what it meant to live from faith as obedience. But this renewal of the concept of obedience still centered around the meaning of Christ as the one who was to be obeyed, emphasized the messianic way of life as substituting and surpassing, and not reaffirming and enhancing the validity of the Torah. The embodied or messianically interpreted Torah could still be seen as an abrogation of the “old” version, as in opposition to the written Torah. So we still have the problem that a transposition of the characteristics of Torah to Christ in the Pauline letters might in fact imply a dismissal of the former in any concrete sense. Such a concept would then again be outside the general direction given by Matthew 5:17 and would instigate the hopeless effort of reconciling Matthew’s clear emphasis on a Christian Torah-obedience with a law-free Pauline gospel or a new dismissal of the former.

Nevertheless a lot was gained here. At least Davies had shown that Paul’s theology was that of a 1st century Jew, and not that of a 16th century reformer. There was no clear break be-
tween 1st century Judaism and Paul’s theology apart from the identity of the Messiah and certainly not along the lines of an opposition between Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism. But if Paul was then closer to his Jewish contemporaries in thought and even in his central theological statements, the question must arise what his “polemic” with the judaizers was all about. How did Paul actually understood the role of the law now that Christ had come, if we could not simply state that he transferred the properties of the Torah to Christ? In this area new insights arose in the last two decades.

E. P. Sanders wrote a summary of his position on Paul in 1991, in the past masters series of Oxford University Press. (Summarizing his Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 1977, and Paul, the law, and the Jewish People (1983).) Sanders argued that Judaism was not and never had been a religion of works-righteousness. It was rather a religion of covenantal nomism, that granted salvation to all those within the Covenant-community and even beyond that by a free act of God’s grace. All Jews were saved by this grace unless their behavior indicated that they had fully renounced the Covenant. The proper response to this Covenant of grace was obedience to its regulations. Against the background of this covenantal nomism of Palestinian Judaism, Paul would best be described as producing a participationist eschatology. His theology was centered in the notion of dying with Christ and obtaining the new life of complete immersion in the mystic “body of Christ” which finally leads to an ultimate transformation when Christ would return. But that position did not qualify Paul as an anti-nomian. The covenant was only replaced or reinterpreted as participation in Christ’s life and the obedient response to it was explained with reference to the Spirit of Christ working within the community. On a passing note, we can infer that Paul’s approach hardly qualifies as being more universalist in outlook. Membership in Israel is as particularistic as Paul’s claim that only faith can give access to redemption.

Nevertheless Sanders continued to affirm the image of a pauline break with the Torah, by his assessment that justification in Paul meant to be saved by Christ, and did not mean (not primarily at least) to obey the Torah and to repent of transgression. As Sanders explained, Paul’s interest was focussed on the eschatology of Christ’s imminent return that gave rise to the question who are they that belong to Christ, which in turn led to the concept of the union of the believers with Christ in and as Christ’s body. Paul, approached in this way, seemed to argue backwards. Christ’s coming into this world brought a righteousness for the believer in the coming judgment. That righteousness could not have been available before. The positive statement about the work of Christ must then necessarily evolve into a negative statement with regard to the function of the Mosaic law as written standard of behavior. To Paul, Sanders explained, the only thing wrong with the Jewish understanding of the law was, that it could not save gentiles.

Despite the enormous importance of the new paradigm that Sanders has provided, and especially his intuitive grasp for the inner logic of Paul’s position, there are various problems in his approach. Sanders’ views for one thing lead to a rift between Jesus and Paul. The opposition between Jesus’ own Pharisaic teachings and Paul’s eschatological and mystical ethics could hardly have been imagined greater than in Sanders’ view. Coming from the incorrect dualism of a purely Hellenist versus a purely Palestinian Judaism, it must be disappointing to find that Sanders has in fact replaced the former dichotomy with a new one. Both James Dunn, who followed Sanders’ lead in focussing on the social identity of the Church, and Sanders himself, concur in their estimate that Paul’s Christology leads him to address the issue of justification and Christian ethics in terms of the believing community as a whole.

In the perspective that was opened up by Sanders and Dunn, the sources of social ethics might remain the same as in Judaism. The function of the Torah might still have been affirmed. Different views as to the function of the Torah emerged in the context of this new image of Paul. The Mosaic law is surpassed as boundary marker but left in place as parentic
source in Dunn's view or surpassed by the life in the Spirit, in communion with the exalted Christ in Sanders' view. But despite these minor differences on what can only be characterized as a "low" view on the role of the Torah, one basic issue has been made clear by both: the ongoing validity of the Mosaic law, if there is any, in Paul's theology, was now shown to be effective in the domain of ecclesiology and ethics, and not in his soteriology. Not redemption as such, but the concrete way of life of the redeemed community was at stake in Paul's debate with the Judaizers. The law remained a vital source of insight for ethics, precisely because Paul held that the immanent principle of Torah-obedience was faith, and that faith had received its fulfilling focal point in Christ.

Does that mean that we should now treat the doctrine of justification as merely an issue of the social identity of the Church? Is justification a concept that addresses only the status of the community and not the salvation of individual believers? That would be a decisive break with the Reformation's insistence on the individual nature of salvation. Apart from the role of the law as such, there is the question who is addressed by New Testament paraenesis: the individual in the 16th century sense, or the community of the faithful?

It seems our century has moved towards an "objective" and "social" gospel, where faith is an extrinsic power that motivates people from the outside and social justice is the first goal of all works of faith. The new image of Paul seems congruous with our 20th century predilection to treat ethics as a social and political issue. Is there then no room any longer for the individual's experience of guilt and redemption? It may be true that the "new creature" of 2 Cor. 5:17, to name just one exegetical issue that showed this new emphasis, is not an individual and the text should actually read: "if anyone be in Christ: a new creation. The transformation spoken of therefore does not concern primarily the individual reality. But it is ironic to note against this tendency in exegesis that the same verse opens with "anyone" in the singular. It is to me nearly impossible to make the theology of Paul fit the position that redemption is only intended for collectives. The individualistic emphasis must certainly be dealt with in a critical fashion where it bars us from seeing the social implications of the gospel. But I would contend that we should be careful in falling yet again from one bias into another. For one thing, the imagery of the "body" is not identical to the social category of a "group", notwithstanding all the elements of group dynamics that we would wish to include. All of this will have to be dealt with in some detail later. For now it may suffice to point to the problem, that Paul's theology must be read as essentially referring to a peoplehood but cannot be reduced to that perspective.

Nevertheless it is undeniable that part of Paul's polemics does have its center in the issue of the shape of the people of God. James Dunn, perhaps the most influential writer at the moment with regard to these issues, has followed the specific leads concerning the law and the identity of Israel that Sanders had established before him. He deeply agrees with Sanders that any description of Judaism must be based on Jewish texts and not on Paul himself—precisely in order to come to a real understanding of Paul, the Judaism that Paul responds to should not be reconstructed from his own texts. Yet, Dunn argues that Paul does indeed have a quarrel with a real Judaism of his own era when both are viewed as contrary definitions of the social identity of God's people. Dunn's main thesis is threefold:

1. that Paul's opposition to the law is concerned primarily with the inclusion of gentiles and not with the law itself;
2. that the "works of the law" are the boundary-markers of 1st century (Temple-) Judaism, and
3. that Paul's doctrine of the justification of the ungodly refers to the believer being taken up and maintained within the covenant-community for the sinners in the sense of gentiles.

Such a view does not slander Judaism. The problem of the relationship between Israel and
the nations was a real problem within 1st century Judaism. Paul's solution to that problem differs from that of mainstream Judaism, but without misrepresenting the latter. And that in itself is an important gain in comparison to the theological construction of a Jewish-Christian conflict in the 1st century about salvation - as it had been reconstructed so many times.

Dunn's treatment of the evidence for his thesis is impressive. Of great importance to my investigation is the view he propagated both in his The Partings of the Ways (London, 1991) and the earlier essay on Mark 2:1 - 3:6, that Jesus' rejection of the Pharisaic distinction between righteous and sinner in accordance with covenantal (and ritual) issues of separation and exclusion, was developed further in the early Church to include the gentile 'sinners.' That meant both a distinction and a continuity between Jesus' teachings and the response from the early Church, depending on the social issue confronting whatever faction had arisen. Theology followed the gospel of Christ by the dynamics of the supremely practical question who was in and who was out.

And so we can reconstruct a general position toward the Mosaic Law in Paul. If Paul understood the negative function of the law first of all as a hindrance to the table-communion between Christians of Jewish and pagan descent, then the polemic in Romans and Galatians has to be read primarily as a defense of the social shape of the Church. Furthermore, it would be obvious why the Mosaic law could be a secondary source for moral exhortation only, and not the primary legal code for the Church. Paul could not have accepted a validity of the Mosaic law if that validity implied a primacy of the Torah over the Messiah and of Israel over the righteous of the gentiles. Dunn's argument amounts to a social re-evaluation of the function of the law within the Church and he therefore rejects any Pauline polemics with the law as such. The law of Moses had secondary and parenetic value for Christians, because they were not "under" the law, but were "in Christ."

But Dunn's expanded thesis is not without its own problems. For one thing, an assessment of Paul's theology as a whole might indicate that the function of the Mosaic law is completely embedded in a Christology that leaves little or no room for Torah-obedience as an independent standard of Christian behaviour. In other words, Paul may have targeted the "works of the law" in their function as identity-markers, but could not prevent that the moral function of the law diminished equally. It may have been a characteristic of Paul's method of polemics, that a negative position becomes exaggerated in his attempt to impress upon his readers the necessity of the path he wanted them to take. As I will try to show, this seems most clearly the case in Galatians where the denial of any need for gentiles to become Jews before they became Christians leads him to oppose the view of the law he himself expressed in Romans: the Torah would not even be of value to Jews according to that letter. But, if we take the Matthew 5 quote as our criterion, the proposed interpretation of Paul leaves little doubt that he would flatly contradict the Matthean gospel, even more so if the law would thereby be robbed of some or all of its parenetic function. The question we will examine later is, whether this antithesis is necessary. If Paul's theology in Romans is not only directed against the law in its function as boundary marker, but more precisely against its independent use as a written standard for behavior, his theology would emphasize a different relationship to the Mosaic law than was (is) necessary for the Jewish people, while keeping its (messianically reinterpreted) contents fully in tact. Paul's argument would then not only deal with the social implications of the Torah, but also with a specific view of the effect of the Torah as a legal code. Dunn's argument that the law, understood in terms of faith, deals with the expression of love in works, involves a change in the way people deal with the law as a code of rules, yet preserves its capacity to express God's intent. But that can be argued as well for the Sermon on the Mount! The question must then be asked how Matthew and Paul tried to reshape the concept of obedience to the law in their Christology without denying the priority of the Mosaic law for knowing the will of God.
This question must now be raised, whether we ought to choose between Paul and Matthew in this respect and how we can find a solution that does justice to both. Here the issue is no longer exegetical only but directly part of systematic theology. What weight should we give to the reports on Jesus’ teaching and the Pauline corpus? Some have defended the thesis, already defended by Bultmann in his Theologie, that Paul’s gospel was an independent theology, a reflection on the kerygma not based directly on Jesus’ teachings. But some have evaluated this fact in different ways. Especially in the Jewish search for the “real” Jesus the Jewishness of Jesus is emphasized to such an extent, that there is no room for a gentile Church any longer. Many a theologian in the West has been critical of this view and has argued that Paul’s theology emerges as the real and quite distinct foundation of a gentile Church, against the dominant Jewish-Christian witness in Matthew. Such a secondary status attributed to Paul’s writings, might remove the antithesis found between Matthew and Paul but it would also set us into the impossible situation that there is no gospel left for the gentiles. Matthew’s Jesus would come out supreme because it would be historically more plausible that Jesus’ teaching was closer to Judaism. Between such a historical reconstructed Jesus as pious 1st century Jewish martyr, and the Christology of the gentile Church, there would be no continuity whatsoever.

But whatever our assessment of the road that Paul took or his distance to Matthew, no matter how Jewish we deem Jesus, we cannot escape the question that dominated Paul’s mind: how can Jews and gentiles both share in the blessings of the messianic Age? It is difficult to see how we could answer that question on the basis of Matthew’s gospel alone. If we cannot find identity between Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s theology it may and must suffice to establish continuity within the dimension of the Church’s theology between the recorded life and sayings of Jesus and the theology of Paul.

There is however also reason enough to review at least some of the arguments for this new image of Paul. Both E.P. Sanders and James Dunn have been challenged by Colin G. Kruse on the issues of the law and the primacy of the social function of the gospel. Kruse made a convincing exposition on these issues in his Paul, the law and Justification. In his view the Reformation was right to teach that Paul has argued that the law had a limited function as a custodian and has now faded away. It has become obsolete not only as the condition for entry into the covenant-community but also as the standard of righteousness. Justification is apart from the law. Justification is not only and not even primarily about entry into the covenant as Dunn had emphasized, it is also God’s decision not to take the sins of the people into account, because Christ has died for them and this fact establishes the paradox that in order to live in obedience to God, one must “flee from the law.” Both covenantal nomism and legalism are thereby excluded and he can argue then, that there is no special way of salvation for the Jewish people, apart from Christ. So it is obvious that although Kruse belongs to those, who have absorbed the points that Sanders and Dunn have been making and have come to regard them as meaningful emphases he at the same time remains adamant in his assessment of Paul as teaching justification by faith in a traditional sense. At least in experience, Kruse argues, justification is about an individual finding himself at peace with God and being freed from the Mosaic law.

The conclusion that Kruse draws from his re-evaluation of Dunn’s work is motivated clearly by a Lutheran perspective, but the arguments that Kruse has brought into the dialogue are important to note nonetheless. Dunn’s thesis can only be affirmed partially in Kruse’s view: Paul did emphasize the abrogation of any application of the Mosaic law that hindered the social shape of the Church as a communion of Jews and gentiles. Many of Paul’s statements that are negative with regard to the law must be understood from that perspective. Nevertheless, Paul does indeed also reject a particular Jewish-Christian use of the Mosaic law as written standard to discern the will of God and consciously replaces that by the “focal image” of the Messiah as the embodiment of the divine will. Kruse is right in this last respect: in Paul,
there is hardly room left for the Torah as independent standard. In my assessment however, Sanders, Dunn and Kruse are wrong in their common failure to bring out, that Paul nevertheless proposed a life in obedience in an ongoing process of ethical discernment (life in the Spirit) in which neither conscience nor freedom can act as moral principles that effectively abrogate the contents of the Mosaic law.

It seems to me that there are three possible avenues for the translation of the new found insights in the area of New Testament-exegesis, through systematic theology into the field of Christian ethics.

(1) the renewal of Paul’s position trying to find the continuity with Jesus’ original teaching, exemplified by James Dunn. His main thesis is, that justification of the ungodly gentiles implies the acceptance of non-Jews in the new covenant without the boundary markers of circumcision and dietary laws that belong to the nationalist use of the law as a mark of righteousness for Israel. The Mosaic law is then a secondary source of paraenesis because the ‘righteous demand of the law’ must be read in terms of Christ’s commandment to love the neighbor. “Walking in the Spirit” replaces the Jewish Halakah as an incomplete analogue.

(2) the appreciation of Paul’s reflective theology as secondary to Jesus’ own teachings but fundamental to the gospel of the Christian Church along the classic lines of Bultmann in which the law-free anti-Jewish gospel is the fundament of all Christian theology, implying the abrogation of the Mosaic law and

(3) the re-establishment of Paul’s theology as the first and adequate explanation of the gospel of Christ even against the implicit theology of the gospelwriters as we find e.g. in Colin Kruses’ work, in which the condemnatory function of the law is reasserted.

In whatever direction we would want to find the answer, this at least is clear: the function of the Mosaic law (and thereby the concrete shape of Christian ethics) in Christianity depends on the interpretation of its status now that Christ had come. The individual and social reading of Paul’s position must waver between two positions with regard to the Mosaic law: either it is exclusively the constitution of Israel, including at the most a minority of Jewish Christians. In that case Christ abolished the law at least for His disciples. Or – and this is in fact a fourth option that I will try to defend - it is addressed to both Jew and gentile through the coming of the messianic Age, constituting a new community in which the Mosaic law continues to function though in a different manner for Jew and gentile. In that case Jesus fulfilled the law by bringing it to eschatological completion and upheld its formal validity. The question then remains in what manner the Mosaic law has validity for non-Jewish Christians.

To ascertain that, we must answer the secondary question of how the Mosaic law addresses people. First of all: which people? Israel or the Church? An emphasis on the Mosaic covenant and its social boundary markers of circumcision, kashrut and levitical purity limits the function of the law severely. It becomes the basic charter of Israel alone. The moral function of the law, so appealing to the godfearers that were attracted to Judaism in the 1st century, seems to transform the constitution of a people into the universal moral guidebook for individuals. Most common indeed is the Reformation’s view, more than 15 centuries later, of the law addressing primarily individuals and not communities in order to prepare them for the reception of the gospel. James Dunn on the contrary had shown that Paul at least had communities in mind when he addressed these issues in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. So it could not be held that the law addresses the Jewish nation first and foremost and gentile individuals in a secondary sense only. In Paul’s mind, the formal validity of the law was restricted to Israel and it made no sense to him to adopt the law as an individual believer. But is there a necessary disjunction between a validity of the Mosaic law for Israel first and for the Church in a modified sense as well? After all, the teachers of Israel did envision the rule of Torah for all peo-
pleas in the era of the Messiah. It can be maintained that the Mosaic law addresses both Israel and the Church, but does so in a different manner and through different historic channels.

Neither is it necessary to limit the function of the Mosaic law for gentile individuals if Israel in its own prophetic tradition expects the entrance of peoples into the Mosaic covenant, while accepting a joining of individuals into Israel in the present era. There is also no theological reason for Christians to suppose that the opposite emphasis on the social dimension of justification as a “setting the relationship right” or “enabling humans to comply with the known will of God” cannot be combined with an understanding of an “imputation of righteousness” to the individual as such. John Howard Yoder has argued in his “Justification by Grace Alone” that we need to object to a doctrine of justification that would exclude the social and ethical dimension. But the correct inference from that position must be that both dimensions need to be addressed. The social emphasis cannot replace the Reformation’s insistence on the individuality of faith, but may deepen its meaning and widen its horizon. In short, the acceptance of a validity of the law for Israel does not mean the Church cannot in its own way, on the basis of the authority of its Teacher and Lord, accept that validity for itself, nor does that mean, that such a validity addresses only individuals and not the Church as such.

So how could such a merger between the individualistic and social dimension of justification come about? And what function if any would the Mosaic law have in this connection? The doctrine of “justification by faith alone” in its 16th century Reformation shape, was up to a point individualistic. But there is a possible exception to be made for the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on the “pure” Church and its insistence on holiness and moral purity for the congregation as such. Between the “magisterial” and the Radical Reformation this social and ethical dimension of the gospel was one of the main areas of dispute. Because of this, Mennonite theology has had a strong if not exclusive emphasis on the moral way of life of a community that is the result of and contemporaneous with redemption. It is therefore an intuition that we derive from our understanding of the 16th century Anabaptist-Mennonite movement, that we translate into a question that we address to the biblical texts: is there a function for a written code of behavior (a concrete social ethics) in the community of the redeemed?

John Howard Yoder expressed the primacy of doing concrete ethics in the concept of Nachfolge forcefully in his Politics of Jesus. Taking as his starting point the conviction that Paul’s polemics was aimed at the exclusion of gentiles from the Church that was the result of a specific way of incorporating Jewish law, he finds that social ethics is the main form of faith-obedience in the gospel. Jesus Christ is the norm for the ethics of the Church, which means that for Yoder too, Christian ethics is Christologically defined. The Sermon on the Mount is a way of life, not part of an indictment to be overcome through the general amnesty of justification by grace. The key to understanding Paul’s doctrine of justification is to Yoder not so much Romans and Galatians but Ephesians 2:14. The law that has been set “out of order” is here epitomized in the boundary markers for Israel. The “removal” of the law not so much indicates a change in the will of God, but a change in the social status of God’s people. The ethics that may develop on the basis of the social and moral re-evaluation of justification by faith, emphasizes the this-worldly elements of Jubilee, the practice of reconciliation, peacewitness and the like. Part of our investigation will focus on this possibility of combining what seemed impossible to combine before: the Mosaic law as source for the understanding of the will of God in its messianic shape for the Church and Israel in different manners and the dual perspective of the validity of law and gospel to individuals and the ‘redeemed community’ alike.

So how could one hope to answer the questions outlined above? It seemed necessary to me to combine the different dimensions of the question, history of theology, exegesis and philosophy, in the following investigation. The concept of faith as obedience, the role of the law in the life of faith, the sources of ethical rules for the Christian both as individual and as
community, need to be found within Scripture, and with an open mind for the Jewish background in which they developed. That defines this inquiry as an exercise in biblical theology. But these questions are not purely exegetical. The dimension of the debate in which they are to be set is the development of the doctrinal core of Christian ethics in the post-Reformation era: the doctrine of justification and its corollary in sanctification. I hope to show here, that Mennonite doctrine is centered around an experiential emphasis within the doctrine of justification by faith that allows no rift between justification and sanctification. (But it has tended sometimes to obscure this core element of the gospel, by teaching an independent emphasis on sanctification as a human effort to comply with evangelical law.) That defines this inquiry as an exercise in (the history of) systematic theology.

One last dimension needs to be introduced. The tension between the social and individual dimension of Christian ethics, between grace and obedience, gospel and law and the like, require also an understanding of the philosophical presuppositions involved. The theological appreciation of Paul’s “major” doctrine has been influenced in its various stages by dominating strands of general thought. The 16th century discovery e.g. of the inwardness of human self-consciousness in moral introspection as exemplified paradigmatically in the work of Descartes paved the way for the concept of cognitive autonomy in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Lutheranism, Wesleyanism and modern forms of evangelical conservatism with their strong emphasis on the inner nature of faith, all emphasize the personal and experiential nature of guilt and the imputation of righteousness. Though equally centered on the self and inwardness, they do not accept the modern claim of moral and cognitive autonomy that found its proponent in the philosophy of Kant and the like. The doctrine of justification in its secular counterpart from the late 18th century Socinians up to the late 19th century Modernists re-interpreted it to refer to that same moral autonomy, using the philosophical paradigm of moral autonomy as the foundation of theology. Nearly all 19th century forms of modernism and 20th century shades of liberalism followed that direction of trying to find a foundation for religion in human reason. The evangelical insistence on individual guilt and redemption made ethics into a secondary corollary of the gospel whereas modernism and liberalism tended to emphasize autonomous ethics without a basis in divine authority.

It is obvious that within the confines of this dissertation no full philosophical line of questioning could be developed. But some elements of this philosophical dimension were dealt with. The importance of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant both for ethical issues as such and as source for our understanding of modern liberal theologies cannot be overstated. The concept of moral and cognitive autonomy found in his work a well reasoned defense. In our time, the most prominent philosophy that opposes the Kantian (and Lutheran) paradigm of autonomy, is to be found in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. The importance of both with respect to this study lies in the fact that Kant is the proponent of that form of secular “justification” that shows the inner logic of that doctrine combined with the presuppositions of the 16th century Lutheran Reformation: its insistence on human self-consciousness as the medium and maybe even source of truth. In the field of ethics, the universality of the Good, the insistence that outward duty and legalism are to be distinguished from the inner free resolve to do the Good out of deference for human reason as such, are principles that cast their shadow in many commentaries on Paul’s writings – up to and including Adolf Schlatter and Rudolf Bultmann.

The contribution of Emmanuel Levinas to this discussion lies primarily in his apology for the fundamental heteronomy of ethics and his contention that this does not constitute the legalist outwardness that was the foe of Kantianism, but describes the original dimension of the primacy of the Other, on which all ethics (including the social morality of the state) ultimately rests – and by which the latter is judged. In dealing with the key texts in the New Testament it became clear to me that there is an inner “resonance” between its messianically explained Torah
and basic motives that undergird Levinas’ Jewish philosophy.

The benefits of combining these perspectives are numerous. One specific element of our exegetical discussion e.g. has benefitted greatly by this philosophical re-evaluation of heteronomy. In the reading of Romans and Galatians I have had to show what Paul intended to convey by the key concepts of justification and life in the Spirit. The formal and material status of the Mosaic law in Christian paraenesis must be explained. I hope to show, that Paul intended justification to include the notion of enablement and (objective) sanctification but excluded the return to an ethics-as-usual. The life in the spirit contains the proper key for understanding the ongoing role of the Mosaic law in ethical discernment. Nevertheless, in this emphasis on the spiritual mode of ethical life, Paul did not in fact move away from the teachings of Christ as recorded in the gospel of Matthew as one might have thought by reading “spirit” along the lines of Kantian ‘inwardness.” The element of the Spirit in Pauline theology seems concerned with safeguarding the heteronomy of Christian ethics, not establishing a new autonomy of freedom – understood in a modern sense – over against the letter of the law.

The notions of autonomy and heteronomy also served as a research tool within the exegesis. One of the problems I faced was the relationship between the gospel of Paul and the letter of James. It seemed at first as if James could only be seen as a deviation from the pauline gospel and a return from the Christian freedom of Paul to the heteronomy of the law in James. But there is no need to affirm a dichotomy between Paul’s and James’ gospel. It has become highly probable to me, that if the writer of James did know about the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith he would have rejected it as inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus in so far as it implied a separation of justification and sanctification. (But of course as I will show, Paul did not actually teach that.) Without the application of an apriori Pauline primacy, without a reading of justification as a separate and complete act of God and without a bias in favor of a spiritualized ethics, this can be more easily detected. James can provide us with a necessary corrective in our understanding of Paul. The same goes for our reading of passages in Matthew that outright defend an ongoing validity of the Mosaic law in its messianic shape. Here the interpretation has found another barrier to its inclination to read antinomism in Paul. In evaluating these exegetical ways of approach philosophy may aid us. Kant and Levinas can provide us with two different paradigms that place the reading of the texts in a new and different light. Kantian autonomy and Levinas’ heteronomy are conflicting perspectives in modern culture through which different models of Christian ethics can be construed. For the great hindrance in the reading of Paul since the 17th century has been the collision between the self-evident principles of human autonomy and the life under obligation.

Finally, as to the result I think might be achieved, I hope to show that the center of the New Testament ethics lies in the concept of faith as active and concrete obedience to the commandments of Christ, which include the messianically interpreted Torah, in the context of the redeemed community, on the sole basis of justification by God’s grace—a grace that is external and imputative as well as intrinsic and active. God’s act in calling humans to faith, restoring the relationship with them through the Cross and resurrection of Christ is the full foundation of ethics. Without the Cross there is no possibility for Christian ethics. But the Cross becomes effective in the resurrection. The continuity between Jesus’ messianic halakah, Paul’s law-free gospel and James’ Torah-obedience is the notion that God calls people to become obedient to Him through Jesus Christ who is the appointed Sovereign of the world and enables them to do so by giving them an “amnesty” for their sins as well as regeneration and the new life. The ekklesia is called to display now in obedient witness and suffering, the character of the new humanity, that God will ultimately establish on Christ’s return but gives already to the faithful as an inner and outer transformation of their lives.

I contend that this view on the particular nature of Christian ethics, is consistent with a fair reading of Paul, the gospels and basic tenets of Mennonite tradition. It leads us to a renewal of
Mennonite theology, where it becomes clear that a reappraisal of the function of the Mosaic law and Christian halakha is now in order. But I must make clear from the start, that I do not mean by this renewed emphasis on sanctification any sort of appeal to do good works. Justification by faith and sanctification are both divine works in man, and we should beware of any return to the kind of moralism that has obscured the central meaning of justification by faith in Mennonite theology.  

§ 2. Methods of investigation and presuppositions

The exegetical questions that I have set myself to answer arise primarily from the observation that in protestant theology the issue of ethics has been dealt with as a corollary of the doctrine of justification, and that this doctrine is strongly dependent upon a specific way to read Paul, esp. his letters to the Galatians and Romans. If the goal of ethics is to understand what makes a man righteous or what righteousness is, then the doctrine of justification can be seen as the foundational response to that question. Our specific exegetical inquiry is therefore after the formulation of the doctrine of justification in the letters of Paul to the Galatians and to the Romans as the foundation for ethics in comparison with differing traditions in the New Testament itself. I start from the possibility that justification is an ambiguous term, referring both to a divine initiating act of salvation and a process of transformation in man that is usually called sanctification. Is it about man’s individual behavior, the status of redemption before God in a divine amnesty, the condition of a community, or combinations of these? If we accept the basic outlines of the discourse on justification in Mennonite theology, what type of Christian ethics would then be its result?

It must be asked what the primary sources of a specific understanding of the role of justification in Paul (Romans and Galatians) actually have to say about our subject. And what about the letter of James, which contains statements about justification and the role of the law that seem to diverge from the path shown by Paul? A biblical theology should take such diversity into account without stooping to easy harmonization. And finally, what kind of continuity is there between the early material contained in the gospels (reaching back before the Pauline letters), and the stage of its redaction that is obviously later than Paul? Can we reconstruct strands of a dialogue about justification and ethics coming from Jesus and continued in the various congregations that were taught by Paul and James?

In particular my exegetical aims are the following:

(1) I will attempt a presentation of Paul’s doctrine of justification that will bring out the intrinsic connection between God’s redeeming act as justification and the transformation of human ethics both in the individual believer and in the Church. I will make extensive use of E. P. Sanders and J. D. G. Dunn and a major critique of this reappraisal: G. Kruse, to formulate the doctrine and its consequences for the foundations of Christian ethics.

(2) I will try to establish to what degree and in what sense the New Testament allows for the concept of obedience in faith. Can it rank equally with Paul’s concept of transformation through the Spirit? My intent was to test the position provided e.g. by R. Zuurmond that the rejection of “salvation by works of the law” precludes all heteronomous obedience and morality, and that Paul in fact transforms all ethics into a spirit-driven inner attitude. Contrariwise, if it could be shown that Paul lends support to the concept of a Christian halakah, specifically in his parenetical address to the Romans, things would look different. Paul’s concept of life in the spirit might then be taken as a metaphor for the renewal of the condition of human beings within a fundamentally transformed community that is consistent with such obedience, and not as a possible basis for the “inner” morality of modernity.

(3) I will attempt to show that the New Testament vision of ethics, as exemplified by the gospel of Matthew, is patterned more on obedience to concrete and specific commandments
than on either an "enthusiast" spirit-driven life or an inner morality of conscience. In general, my aim is to find the biblical basis for the concept of heteronomous obedience as the grounding concept for Christian ethics.

Furthermore, the issue of justification is intrinsically linked to the issue of the status of the Mosaic law, as a cursory glance at the context of the term in Romans will show. To be justified does not mean to live righteously according to the precepts of the law, but still the demands of the law need to be met in some fashion. Even in the argument that justification is a divine act of grace to which we respond in faith, the law might still be construed as a primary source for our understanding of the ethical life. This role of the law in the argument for justification by faith and its expression in the gospels needs to be distinguished and brought into a correlative and synoptic view. In the chapters on Jesus' attitude toward the Mosaic law I will try to show both the continuity and the discrepancy between the gospel account of the law and Paul's theological reflection on its purpose and function.

I have made use of several methodological insights that have been developed over the past decades in what might be called a synoptic approach, in which the various methods are complementary to each other. My perspective on scripture has been defined in various extents by the following methodological viewpoints.

1. **In my estimate the primacy of the canon-historical approach**(in combination with the "narrative" hermeneutics of the Amsterdam School) gives us both a view on the final redaction stage as the basis for all exegesis and a perspective on the relative weight of its various parts based on the reception of the New Testament in early Church history. We need such a reflection on the canonicity of the New Testament to establish the relative weight we must give to James and Paul, e.g., with regard to the issues over which they seem divided, if we are to proceed from the domain of exegesis into the area of systematic theology. The history of the canon may provide a basis for an integral reading of the entire New Testament and allow us to determine the relative weight of its parts, assuming that inclusion in the canon does not in itself imply an intentional doctrinal harmony or establish that a meta-narrative of revelational history separates Christ's teachings from post-resurrection theology, affirming one or the other as decisive.

2. **The narrative approach.** Basic methodological viewpoints and techniques of the Amsterdam School of Biblical Hermeneutics are used, in particular its insistence that the text itself must give us the data on which we base structural divisions and decide on context and meaning. The notion that the final redactor effectively functions as the author and intends the whole of the text to be precisely "as is" provides a major counterweight to the cutting up of texts into components and the need to hypothesize about their possible separate contexts. For a review of these principles I refer to *Voices in Amsterdam: A modern Tradition of reading Biblical Narrative* (Atlanta, 1994).

3. **Critical-historical method** can and should still be used to find the patterns of genesis in the text, indicators of stages in the development of the final position arrived at and its basis in the history of Church life. We should interpret such textual layers not as divisions, or as marks of redactional cut and paste, but as patterns of dialogue that have been combined into the one view of the final redactor and to be taken as "intentional structural markers"; not as pointers to stylistic or theological hesitation or lack of editorial freedom.

4. **Jewish background - Knowledge of the thought patterns of 1st-century Palestinian Judaism** may provide us with insight into the probable historical and possible systematic context of the received saying of Jesus, and the understanding of the logic of Paul's argument, so that we may infer how interpretations altered (without denying the continuity that can be ascertained in many cases), how arguments were born out of a specific conflict or were reapplied to different circumstances by different spokesmen for different communities.
In this manner, the text as we have it becomes a dynamic and fluid pattern of thoughts and movements of interpretation constituting the theological discourse that underlies the New Testament as a whole. A basic result is the insight that in the gospels we still have more or less unaltered materials, some of which are shared by two or more of them; we have a common narrative framework which sets these gospels apart from others like the gospel of Thomas; we have a narrative reflection on the meaning and/or context of the material that was handed down in early tradition, i.e., we have a specific theology working implicitly and explicitly in the arrangement of the text and the redactional additions.

Still, having said this, what we must look for is the continuity between the intentions behind the traditional material, the reflective/narrative context, the gospel theology, and the canonical framework. The imagery of ‘layers’ in a text seems to put too much emphasis on the archeological simile of this kind of textual analysis, as if what we have here is not a choir of voices but a load of debris. The text is not an object under dispassionate scrutiny, but an invitation to join a dialogue. The so-called ‘layers’ in the text are the recordings of voices that talked to one another about the meaning of Christ. They are different, and they do not sound completely in unison in the final stage; so what we need is a careful attention to the single voices in the whole choir, in order to better understand what the whole means. In other words, the analytical approaches of the history of form and history of redaction are effective only if they are combined as tools of narrative structural analysis, toward an understanding of how the theology of the gospel as a whole relates to the sayings and traditions. These elements not only evoked the canonical whole through their independent existence, influencing the ongoing dialogue in various ways but also became in their dependent existence as part of the literature of the early Church. In their latter function they became the building blocks of the final composition. And beyond that, we must move toward understanding of the intent of the whole of the New Testament as it has been handed down to us through the instrument of the canonical process.

It is important to note that the actual shape of the text as we have it is the permanent basis for all possible explanations, including hypotheses concerning its genesis and origin. We should therefore grant to the actual existence of the text a high priority above all our theorizing about its production, even if we would not simply turn to dogmatics to affirm the principle that the Bible is after all a book of the Church and has been accepted by the Church as the witness of prophets and apostles to God’s revelation.

It is particularly the fourth element of this outline of my approach (the Jewish background) that may present us with an important new image of the background of the texts. What E. P. Sanders called a ‘pattern of religion’ - in his case that of early Rabbinic Judaism, which was the recipient of Pharisaic tradition - is the closest we can get from the rabbinic material to the actual statements of Pharisaism that the text refers us to. The contextual implications of Jesus’ own sayings, their original intent discernible to some degree within the synoptic redaction, can be reconstructed with the aid of such a “pattern of religion” and can be studied, to a degree, independently of the context that the gospels themselves have provided. All we need to do is to ask the question how a particular concept or behavior would be perceived to function as to the issue of the identity of a given community.

Such a synthetic methodology with the aid of rabbinic material might be better equipped to deal with the sayings of Jesus than those New Testament studies that take Jesus’ position towards Judaism and the law as amounting a priori to the complete rejection of Pharisaism and the abolition of the law. That position too simply equates the 2nd- or 16th-century understanding of the gospel with the context and intent behind the particular sayings. It presupposes an identity between that theology, the theology of the gospel writers, and the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus, or it proclaims that Jesus’ teachings were only the presupposition of
that theology and not part of its contents and dynamic development, instead of applying the less stringent concepts of dynamic continuity and reflective stages that allows for greater differences and more complex relations between the voices heard.

Our inquiry can be divided into three distinct parts. First, under the title of “Justification by Faith as Biblical Foundation of Christian Ethics” I will try to develop an understanding of the specific shape of the Mennonite understanding of the doctrine of justification, arguing that it is this doctrine, more than anything else, that defines the foundation of Christian ethics. I will try to show in particular why the Mennonite understanding of this key doctrine is “neither Catholic nor Protestant” because its major concept of “living faith” or “repentance” implies an experiential unity of justification and sanctification. I will show that the result of this approach to justification brings with it an emphasis on the congregational shape of ethics within the redeemed community. I will try to show that the Reformed doctrine of “justification of the ungodly,” with its emphasis on cognitive autonomy and its separation from moral demand, has unwittingly provided a basis for a secularized version of itself, which added moral autonomy and redefined the contents of Christian ethics in terms of secular values. This “modernism” or “liberalism” can be seen as the illegitimate child of the Reformation.

The second section, called “Exegetical Foundations for a Biblical Ethics,” is devoted to a study of the key texts that provide a view of the diversity of the issue and the range of its status in the 1st-century Church. Starting with the letter of James that exercised such a powerful influence on Mennonite doctrine and practice, I will try to reassess Paul’s teachings on the subject of justification and Christian ethics, and I will introduce the issue of the meaning of the Mosaic law for the Church. In the same section I will discuss key elements of Matthew’s and Mark’s teachings that may show us to what extent Jesus taught an ethics, and most importantly in what sense the Mosaic law was a vital constituent of that ethics.

Finally, I will return to a more systematic treatment of the issue of the foundation of Christian ethics in a third section called “Christian Ethics as Theonomous Obedience.” I will try to show that the divine imperative comes to us through the messianic hermeneutics of the Mosaic law and its embodiment in Christ. It is on this heteronomous foundation that Christian ethics must stand, and it has its sources both in the reflection on the day to day relevance of the (written) Torah and the messianic hermeneutic that Jesus brought to the Church.

This dissertation is not simply an attempt to validate a Mennonite ethics, even though I stand in that tradition. In my view, it goes beyond it by advocating basically that the written shape of the will of God as revealed in the law of Moses must be considered part of the “law of Christ”. In my estimate, Christian ethics can only attain its relevance as a critical alternative to morality-as-usual, its community-building power and its particular biblical shape by re-adopting its original “legal” hermeneutics, addressing the issues of obedience not through narrative modelling but by careful casuistic and paradigmatic reflection on the application of the divine commandments. Our renewed understanding, both of the way that law functions in Jewish practice, and of Paul’s (and Jesus’) attitude towards it, warrants such a return to the Jewish roots of Christian ethics. In substance and in formal mode of reflection, the Church should become pupil to the Scribes and Pharisees again. (Matthews 23:3a) I do believe however, that the traditional Mennonite insistence that faith and obedience to the law of Christ ought to go hand in hand or rather, cannot be distinguished, provides us with an invaluable foundation to regain the proper perspective on the concrete contents and formal structure of Christian ethics.