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

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Chapter 5

The exhortation to the Romans: (dis-)continuity with Torah

Our goal in this chapter is to make clear how the two major sections of the letter, the first dealing with justification (1:16-11:36) and the second dealing with moral exhortations (12:1-15:13), are related to each other. As we stated before, the goal of this study is to find the relationship between the doctrine of justification and the practice of Christian life with regard to obedience. Since the law had had the function of “increasing trespass” (Rom. 5:20), it could be argued that Christians, by being dismissed from the observance of the law, were led into an immoral life. Being under grace, however, does not mean to live in sin (Rom. 6:15), but to live a life of holiness, of service to righteousness (Rom. 6:18). The main difference is then the attitude of obedience: it is not to be found in the condition of the “letter, but of the spirit” (Rom. 7:6). So Paul takes it upon himself to show how both are connected explicitly, as he had done more briefly and implicitly in the letter to the Galatians.

§ 25. Reading Romans

In the scope of this work we cannot deal with all the issues that confront us in reading Paul’s letter to the Romans. We will have to give some clarification of how we read the letter and provide some framework for our detailed analysis of key passages below. We will try to go over the argument of Paul’s letter again, without trying to deal in detail with all the existing literature on Romans. We will try to answer two questions in our preparation of understanding Paul’s ethics; first: what is the extent of Paul’s usage of the Greek root dikaio- in terms that were translated traditionally as justification, righteous(-ness), justified, etc., and second: what is the condition and the identity of the believer to which the exhortatory portion is addressed? In our approach we will try to use the confrontation between a selected number of traditional interpretations (Schlatter, Ridderbos) and representatives of the new approach to Paul (Sanders, Dunn, Stowers, Johnson). E. Käsemann and G. Kruse represent the effort to maintain basically traditional views on Paul while at the same time responding to elements of the new perspective on Paul that had been developing since Davies’s publication of Paul and Rabbinic Judaism in 1948.

The debate about the intent and structure of Romans 1-11, most often portrayed as the foundation of Paul’s ethics, has not yet been laid to rest. As late as 1994, Stanley K. Stowers published his A Rereading of Romans, which takes full advantage of new and old insights into the strongly Jewish-doctrinal and Hellenistic-rhetorical background of Paul’s thinking. One of its most essential conclusions is that the exhortatory part of Romans 12:1-15:14 is intended to give a specific moral and social content to the renewal of the gentiles as a community of faith.

One of the most important conclusions of his approach is that the traditional doctrinal framework that connects chapters 9-11, about Israel, to chapters 12-15:13 is very weak. The chapters on the role of Israel seem to have become an interlude, instead of a vital foundation for the specific ethics of Christians. In order to see Paul’s intent more clearly, there must be a reading of Romans that shows how chapters 9-11 make the necessary link between chapters 1-11 and 12-15.

Since we are not attempting to provide a comprehensive rereading of Paul’s letters in this study, we must give some insight into the general presuppositions of our more detailed exegesis of the passages that are vital to our line of inquiry. The following attempts to establish the major decisions we made to establish some consistent view of the general intent of the letter to the Romans.
The letter to the Galatians was written by Paul to a Church he had founded and knew, and in defense of both the contents of his gospel and his apostolic authority against a “Judaizing” faction and against the specific background of the Antioch incident. In it, Paul presented a clear dismissal of the Torah as principle and standard of the Christian life. In Romans, which deals largely with the same theological issues, the situation is decidedly different. In this letter Paul is preparing his visit to Rome on his way to Spain, where he had not been before. The main thrust of the letter seems to be a defense of his gospel of justification by faith and not by works of the law against gentiles in Rome who advocated acceptance of Jewish law, at the same time emphasizing that with respect to salvation the gentile has precedence over the Jew. The polemical thrust of the letter makes it clear that this was one single position: a justification of the gentile believer based upon some higher form of obedience to law, whereby the Church replaced Israel as the people of God. The polemic seems addressed to a particular brand of Judaizers as well as to those who rejected Israel altogether, which is probable, if the historical circumstance that Jews and Jewish Christians who had been expelled from Rome in the year 49 under Claudius “because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,” and were now returning after Claudius’s death in 54 to a Church that had become dominantly gentile, has any bearing on this matter. A part of this polemical situation is the continuing criticism that the returning Jewish Christians probably made against Paul: that with his gospel of lawlessness he in fact was preaching immorality. Verses like 3:31; 5:20; 6:15 would not have been possible in Galatians. There he had to fight against the charge that elsewhere he had preached the circumcision! Because of its literary character and the way it later became canonized, Paul’s letter to the Romans is traditionally seen as the closest we get to a theological discourse as such in the New Testament. But, as we will see, in it Paul changes his view on the role of the law as present in Galatians and adopts a far more favorable attitude to its provisions.

The doctrinal part of the letter opens by stating the core message of the gospel: that the righteousness of God is revealed in it (1:17). To many students of Paul, this has been without further consideration the core message of Paul’s theology as a whole (Luther, Calvin; of the moderns, e.g., Käsemann, Kruse) but not by all (e.g., J. Christiaan Beker [1980] who emphasizes the “Triumph of God in Life and Thought,” and Sanders, who sees Paul’s theology as deriving from two main emphases: (1) the Lordship of Christ and (2) the union of Jews and pagans within one Body of Christ). In Romans, the importance of justification is not in dispute, but its meaning and relative emphases are still not completely clear. Do we find in Romans the doctrine of justification by faith alone? Advocates will stress that the fundamental meaning of justification is expressed in Romans 3 to 5, and that the emphasis is on the legal, extrinsic character of the declaration of righteousness. Opponents will stress that Paul uses a whole range of expressions connected to the root “dika-” signifying various connected notions such as liberation and “enablement,” even perhaps to intrinsic righteousness. That interpretation also implies that the whole letter is Paul’s explanation of what his essential gospel is, and that the exhortatory part is not an addition to a completed gospel but an intrinsic part of the argument.

Paul opens his argument with a statement on the condition of the pagans, setting his “encoded” audience up for the first main issue: the use of the law as a means of judgment on others. The righteousness of God is first of all revealed in God’s wrath concerning ungodliness and unrighteousness. Though mankind could have known the truth that God is creator and therefore has a right to obedience (1:19, 21), mankind has fallen into idolatry, for which they were punished by being given up to harmful sexual and social vices that are a violation of God’s creation and will therefore result in death as judgment (cf. Rom. 1:28-31). This condition of mankind is universal; nobody can claim to remain unaffected by it, neither Jew nor pagan (2:3). The moralist audience of Paul has been tricked into agreeing with Paul too soon.
Certainly pagans live an immoral life, but nobody can claim to be completely free from sin. In principle, therefore, all will be held accountable for their actions on the basis of “law”; i.e., a generalized principle of obedience (2:6), and this goes for Jew and gentile alike, though in different ways with regard to how the “law” was concretely present for each one (2:10). The possession of the written law for Jews (2:12) or the effective presence of the law-as-principle in conscience for gentiles (2:15) will not in itself excuse anyone on the day of judgment; it will rather bring out the culpability of the offenders more sharply. To be a Jew and have knowledge of the written law will not suffice to provide escape from judgment based on that same law, and neither will being without a written law and living by conscience. All of this does not compromise God’s revelation in itself, since our injustice brings out the more clearly the righteousness of God’s demand as executed in judgment. The law of Moses in its secondary function does precisely that, by making sin more visible, and by showing in the inevitable judgment of the sinner that nobody will be justified by the effectivenes of (having and studying) the law or by keeping the commandments as “works” of the law (3:19, 20).

In contrast with the present revelation of God’s wrath, Paul opens a new chapter in 3:21 by stating that “now,” in the eschatological present, God’s righteousness has been revealed outside of this misunderstanding of the law. Christ has been made the propitiatory sacrifice in which God revealed His righteousness in such a way that God actually acts in accordance with it when He justifies the faithful. So man is justified through faith, without works of the law, which is the first major conclusion within Paul’s discourse (3:28). To be justified then obviously means several things, which are not all explained at once. In general it must mean here to escape the wrath of God and to remain free from punishment for idolatry and social vice. According to Paul, such a principle of justification, that man receives the status of acquittal for which God sovereignly provides the basis Himself, can be found in the Old Testament as well. Of Abraham it was said that “he believed God, and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, quoted in Rom. 4:3). Such righteousness obviously could not have been achieved through keeping the commandments, or by knowing and teaching the law, or by being a part of the community of Israel. In fact, circumcision, the commandment that signifies as no other the distinctiveness of Israel under the law, was given only after the episode of Gen. 15. Paul combines the statement about Abraham with a quote from Psalm 32:1-2, indicating that the judicial declaration of righteousness, which is based on Christ’s sacrifice, implies a total amnesty, a not accounting of sin to man. In fact, God justifies the “ungodly,” so completely sovereign is He in this justifying act of grace (4:5). In all of this judicial metaphor a cultic image of Christ as the mercy seat (cf. Lev. 16) and atoning sacrifice is operative, making the declaration at once extrinsic to the effort of man (imputation), but also making it a “real” declaration because of

- the effective revelation of God’s righteousness in Christ’s death and resurrection, and
- through the identification of the believer with Christ, making him righteous as a condition he is in. Acquittal from future judgment implies liberation from the power of sin and from a view of the law that can only condemn. The priestly declaration is not extrinsic, though it originates in the sovereign will of God alone. The particular characteristic of Abraham’s faith is explained in 4:17 as the faith in God’s promise to give him a son, which is taken as analogous to faith in Christ’s resurrection (4:25).

The fruit or the accompaniment of God’s declaration of righteousness is reconciliation, peace with God (5:1, 10), and it is again stated as based upon Christ’s death, now expressed as a loving self-sacrifice (5:8). In a typological passage, the cosmic scale of Christ’s sacrifice is made clear: mankind has been in submission to the power of death, sin and an accusing law, but now grace has intervened to procure the righteousness that the law was unable to produce. All of mankind is included in the justification unto life because God’s grace is offered to all (5:18), even while only those who are identified with Christ’s obedience will be made right-
eous (5:19).

Objections that can be made to such statements about the conditions of receiving amnesty and righteousness are dealt with in Rom. 6:1-8:39. If there is total amnesty for sin, then it would seem possible that man remains a sinner in all respects, trusting in God to pardon him for all his offences. It becomes clear, however, that atonement through Christ means “dying to sin” (6:2). The imputation of righteousness is based on the identification of the believer with Christ in His death and His resurrection to a newness of life (6:4). Being “righteoused” means being set free from the power of sin (6:7; through death) and becoming alive again through the power of grace (through the resurrection). The objection to Paul’s teaching that it allows man to remain a sinner because he is set free from judgment does not hold up: the righteousness of Christ imputed to man implies his death to sin and becoming alive again in Christ. Being liberated from sin, man has become obedient to righteousness (6:18).

A second objection directs itself to the function of the law in all of this. If justification implies having died with Christ, the law is no longer in effect, since it can rule only over the living (7:4). The newness of life beyond the law implies bearing fruit before God and being freed from the effect that the law has in inciting rebellion against God’s will. (7:5) This does not imply that the law actually effects sin (7:7), but it makes known what sin is, and it turns out that in our normal state such knowledge actually makes us desire it. More precisely: the power of sin is such that it abuses the law and knowledge of sin to enslave people under its power (7:8). The law in itself is good and righteous, but its abuse by sin turns its effect into the opposite. Finally, Paul grounds this perspective in a passage which deals with the nature of mankind and can be called an anthropology (Bultmann), though this is disputed by Stowers, Dunn, Sanders, and others who see in this passage a reference to Israel before Sinai. In both cases the passage is not to be taken as a reference to Paul’s individual biography. In my flesh, my life under the law, before my being renewed through Christ, there is no good. Sin makes me do things that I do not want. I am divided within myself and unable to comply with the law through my own power. That dichotomy is not alleviated by the law, which only expresses God’s demand that leads to condemnation but does not give me the power to do good, since it allows sin to reign over my life. So I need the life of resurrection to escape this problem.

In the next passage (8:1-8:39), the consequences of life under grace are dealt with. There is no judgment for those who are “in” Christ, who have been identified with Christ on the basis of His sacrifice. Christ does what the law was unable to do: make it possible for the demand of the law to be fulfilled in those who walk according to a new principle of life, that of the Spirit, i.e., of a life being determined by the “mind of Christ.” It does not state that Christ made it possible for them to fulfill that demand themselves, so it is obvious we are not talking about a renewed obedience analogous to the obedience under law, i.e., the obedience to the law that is developed in the teachings of the gentile majority in Romans or was taught to them by the returning Jewish-Christians. Yet it is possible to ignore the newness of life in Christ and live according to the flesh (8:13), indicating that the believer is able to respond to exhortation. The imperative can be addressed to him as in 6:12-13: “Do not yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness,” “reckon yourselves dead,” etc. But this reckoning and yielding is in its essence a being aware of the actual condition of the renewed life and not a surrender of freedom under a demand that comes from the outside, as is expressed by the concept of slavery.

But of course our present lives do not completely express the actual condition we are in. We have been redeemed in hope and expectation; we are heirs to the promise (8:24). All the circumstances of our life are, however, in accordance with our calling, though that knowledge is hidden from us (8:28). God has sovereignly justified us, so will He grant us also the triumph over the powers that endanger us (8:38).
After the doxology of the love of Christ in 8:37-39, Paul turns to a second major question, that of the place of Israel in God’s revelation of salvation (9:1-11:36). The issue seems to be that if pagans receive justification while remaining outside of Israel, the promises to Israel would seem to have been revoked. But Paul states as his major premise that it is impossible that the word of God is without effect or made void (9:6). So it must be shown that justification through Christ remains congruous with the election of Israel and the privileges given them. Paul begins by making a distinction between the natural descent of Israel and the progeny of Isaac. The children of the promise made to Abraham are the Israel that receive the promises made to Israel. If Israel is based upon Abraham’s faith and his exemplary act of faith in the offering of Isaac, then the existence of Israel is actually based upon faith and promise, and not on law and works. It is therefore based on the sovereign will of God that revealed itself in Abraham’s election before circumcision, his being made righteous based on faith, the election of Isaac, and the rejection of Ishmael as the son according to the flesh. And again, the role of Jacob is expressed as a result of sovereign election, not of Jacob’s merit. So the fact that gentiles have received righteousness out of faith (9:30) is in accordance with the very principle of righteousness as revealed in the history of Israel before Sinai. Israel that tried to achieve righteousness under the law did not achieve the law because it interpreted it as a matter of single commandments, works of the law (9:31). Such works of the law count as inherent righteousness, as opposed to the righteousness of God that was unknown to them. But there is an opposition between the principle of the Sinaitic law that makes righteousness according to the law a condition of life, and Christ, who gives renewed life in order to fulfill the requirements of the law in the life of the believers (6:11, 8:4).

This does not mean that Israel itself has been rejected. There is a remnant, elected by God’s grace, that has received redemption together with the gentile Christians (11:5). However, the rejection of Christ by Israel as a whole has a function within salvation history. It meant that the gospel could reach the gentiles, who were made part of the olive tree that is Israel, so that the gentile Church receives continuous instruction from that source. Paul apparently expected this condition to be temporary when he wrote that after the gentiles have been accepted in full number within the new community of Christ, Israel will also be redeemed (11:25).

After all of this is said, Paul can offer exhortation based on of God’s mercy, displayed so totally in this gospel of justification by faith and sovereign grace (12:1). The basic principles of Christian ethics are congruous with what Paul developed earlier as the basis of salvation. The spirit of Christ in us (8:9) effects conformity to Christ: the living, holy, and God-pleasing sacrifice of our lives (12:1). Because of this insistence on our being united and identified with Christ, the metaphor of the body of Christ can come to the foreground in 12:4, and the specific exhortations of 12:9-21 seem to reflect the character of Christ’s life as it is working in the life of the believer.

From this perspective of a community that imitates the character of Christ (12:1) and takes on His position in the world as Body of Christ (12:4), the role of government is mentioned in chapter 13. Submission to authority is meant to show the virtues of Christ incarnate in the Church, and it can be said that even without their knowing, the governments of the world serve God by creating an orderly society in which the Church can show its character. Because Christ has conquered the forces of sin, death, and law, no rebellion against government is needed or useful.

It is enough to show the effective presence of mutual love in which all the commandments have their summary and in which the law is fulfilled (13:9). So chapter 13 deals with the relationship of the Church to government and the general demands of law, and chapter 12 deals with the inner nature of the Body of Christ in this world. Chapter 14 deals with matters of Christian life within the community: there should be tolerance with regard to religious matters, apparently referring to the ongoing presence within the Church of observant Jews and
non-observant gentiles. Dietary laws and religious festivals may have been invalidated as a means of acquiring salvation or as conditions of being righteous, but they might be a useful part of the Christian life. The standard is Christ (14:6), and not a law-like rule, but faith (14:23).

We must first of all come to an understanding of the principal basis of Pauline ethics by discussing the meaning of righteousness and justification in the doctrinal part of the letter. Only by having a clear view of this major principle can we understand what life in Christ means to Paul and how it is effective in the Christian life in the practical circumstances that are described in the exhortatory part of the letter from chapter 12 on. Let us turn then to the major proposition with which Paul opens his discourse.

§ 26. The condition of Jew and Greek before God (Rom 1:1-2:27)

The thesis of the theological part of the letter is stated in 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous shall live by faith.”

The gospel is a divine power that has visible effects because of the work of the Spirit in the lives of men. It is here seen as restricted in its effect to those who have faith, at least in as far as salvation is concerned. In that respect there is no difference between Jew and Greek, as Peter had stated in Acts 15. The reason the gospel can be that power is that something else is revealed in it: the righteousness of God becomes effective through the gospel as a power to salvation. (We will go into the nature of “righteousness” in the next paragraph.) Following Dunn, among others, we read it like this: Righteousness springs from faith, which may refer to the faithfulness of God, and is accepted by faith.

The quote from Habakkuk 2 has this same ambiguity of the Greek rendering, implicitly, where it states ἐκ πίστεως ἢ ἐμυνατο, and it is not directly clear whether ἐμυνατο (‘emunato) refers to His faithfulness, i.e., God’s, or the faithfulness of the righteous himself. So in effect Paul’s phrase “from faith to faith” can be read as a small midrash on ‘emunato (or more directly on the: ἐκ πίστεως μοι in LXX), both exploring linguistic possibilities and making it serve his own purpose.

Others have read differently and state that every act of faith makes the next one come to life, so it would refer to a life of faith in which righteousness is revealed in a practical sense, i.e., from one act of faith to the next. Schlatter has argued himself that the phrase “from faith to faith” is meant to exclude any interference from merit or works in the salvation of man, so in effect it refers to the sola in sola fide. There is also the possibility that two separate kinds or moments of faith are meant, e.g., that ἐκ πίστεως (ek pisteos) refers to the believing acceptance of the gospel as the condition of the revelation of righteousness toward anyone that believes (verse 16), leading to faith as saving reliance on Christ. But then the passage is construed with the aid of the doctrinal distinctions of faith as assensus and fiducia, which are not to be found elsewhere in Paul.

The quotation from Habakkuk presents some problems too. Käsemann has translated the quotation as saying: he that is righteous out of faith, will live. By faith is linked to righteous and not taken as the principle of the life of the righteous. Käsemann argues in his commentary on the verse that we have, not a quotation from the LXX, but a free rendering of the MT that transforms the meaning of be’emunato to fit the context of the Church. Anders Nygren read along these lines in his commentary in 1954. Schlatter argued along these lines as well in 1935, but added an emphasis on the divine righteousness working to bring people into the right relationship with God, thereby stressing the (social) concept of covenant that turned out
to be so vital in contemporary scholarship. These emphases are still there in Luke Timothy Johnson’s Reading Romans, where he states that righteousness first of all means God’s virtue of being “just,” that is, to stand in and to act from a proper relationship to mankind. God is fair and impartial. From the LXX the readers could understand that this righteousness also implied God’s intervention on behalf of the weak and the poor. It signified God’s establishing right relationships where they did not exist before.

After having stated the general thesis of his letter, Paul addresses the issue mentioned first: “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” This second section runs from 1:18-3:20. Paul explains that all have failed to respond properly to God’s revelation, so the wrath of God is revealed to be over the gentiles in particular. The fictitious reader is supposed to affirm this depiction of pagan folly and crime with relish. That was exactly the basic argument for seeking a righteousness under law to augment their gentile status as Christians. Paul’s argument in itself runs like this: The unrighteousness of man does not result from lack of knowledge, since mankind knew God as creator (1:20), a very slight hint pointing toward his larger thesis: that knowledge of the law will not help either. But mankind has not acknowledged God and has fallen into idolatry. On account of this idolatry, God has allowed them to act without righteousness in their relationships, particularly sexual vices in connection with idolatrous cults (1:24-27), which constitutes punishment in itself (1:27b). To “dishonor the body” is mentioned as the result of sexual vice over against the social vices and violence listed from verse 28 onwards. These other vices are mentioned in connection with a wrong way of thinking in 1:28, a way of thinking that was modified in chapter 12 to form the basis of a new ethic. All of these are connected with the righteous dictum of God: that those who perpetrate these things deserve death as punishment (1:32), not in the sense that they should be executed for it, but that death as part of the condition of mankind is proper for a humanity in the power of such vices.

Having developed the notion of man’s sinfulness on the basis of his idolatrous rejection of God as creator, now Paul needs to address a first possible counter-argument in the beginning of chapter 2. You might say that you do not perpetrate the things mentioned in 1:23-31, that you do recognize God as creator and have not fallen into idolatry. That such an argument might be perfectly acceptable if individuals are concerned is highly likely. Paul himself states that he was blameless with regard to the demands of the law. Paul’s rhetorical opponent here is not an individual person, but a representative of either Jews or Greeks who might state: “we” do not do such things. It is necessary to see this before trying to make sense of Paul’s statement in 2:1

Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, every one who judgest, for in that in which thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things.

If the argument were directed at concrete individuals, the response might very well be: I myself do not “do the same things!” But if the argument is directed at types of humanity, or rather immediately against the Jewish condemnation of pagan vices, it actually states: although you as a Jew might argue generally that these things are not done by some or most of you, being a Jew does not in itself mean that such sins do not occur. If Stowers is right, we find here in actual fact not a Jew as intended audience, but a gentile (“O man”) and fictitious interlocutor. Instead of dealing with the “hypocrisy of the Jew,” as traditional exegesis would have it, Paul deals with a reconstructed ideal gentile, as he is seen from the perspective of his gentile readers. And so the argument can be construed as follows: the sins might not be the same, and not all of you have incurred guilt for them, but there is sin nonetheless. The “ideal” Jew that you gentiles would like to be is not a reality at all. Being circumcised and having the law does not imply that the “wrath of God” (1:18) cannot be directed at you, because it still
depends on what you do. To condemn the sins of others will not lead to righteousness that can stand up in the day of judgment (verse 3).

Verse 11 then reaches the first conclusion: there is no “acceptance of persons” with God; all will be dealt with according to their works and according to the covenant that is valid for them: those under the law will be condemned by the law, those outside of the law will be judged according to the truth that can be known without the revelation in Torah (cf. 1:18-19). Both will be judged according to their effective obedience. If in that sense Jew and gentile are alike, there is no need to become “Judaized” and adopt the position of the Jewish judge of gentile vices.

But there still is a difference between Jews and gentiles. Paul explains it as follows:

2:14. For when nations, who have no law by nature, do the things of the [mosaic] law, [then] these, having no [written] law, are a law to themselves; 15. who show the work of the law written in their hearts, [in the fact that] their conscience bears witness, and their thoughts accuse or else excuse themselves between themselves; 16. on the day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to my gospel, by Jesus Christ.

In 2:14 Paul mentions non-Jews who “have no law, [but] practice by nature the things of the law.” The decision to translate “by nature” as an opposition to “practice,” as, e.g., in Darby’s translation, is no doubt connected to the interpretation of verse 15, where we read that they "showed the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness,” etc. But is that perhaps a premature judgment? Schlatter states in his commentary on this verse: “Fusei [by nature – RAV] means that the pagans can show this behavior because of what they find in themselves and have received because of the history of their lives.”

It makes it possible for Schlatter to use this as a paradigm of the kind of obedience that God demands from humanity later on in his analysis of the work of the spirit. “Where there are only words (note: this takes up Paul’s deconstruction of the law in terms of the letter vs. spirit dichotomy in 7:6, and the way Paul in Galatians changed the ‘words of Torah’ to the ‘written words’, the merely written word – (Gal. 3:10) the law as such is rejected. This makes perfect sense if Paul’s opponent is a modern legalist, who would value the possession of the written law over the obedience that is commanded by it. Such an opposition would entail an inner morality over against a merely outward legalist compliance with rules, as in the Kantian (and probably Lutheran) opposition between morality and legality. After all, it was not the possession of the written Torah in itself that was at stake, but the Torah’s dual role in the promise to Abraham as the father of many peoples and as boundary marker for Israel.

But does the text state that these gentiles (ethne of course does not refer to pagans, but to non-Jews, it does not refer to “states” or “nations” because the definite article is missing) obey the law “by nature” in the sense of “according to their individual nature,” i.e., with the same force as “according to their nature?” Paul uses fusei only 3 times, if we disregard Eph. 2:3, whose sense is not different from the usage in Gal. 2:15. It refers, e.g., to those who are not gods by nature, i.e., the idols (Gal. 4:8), to being Jews “by nature,” i.e., through birth (Gal. 2:15), and then we have the expression in our verse.

The problem is to what part of the sentence fusei belongs here. It may state: If gentiles, who do not have the law by nature, do what the law commands, etc. Then we have fusei connected with the first part of the verse, which makes perfect sense. The other option would connect fusei with “acting,” as a mode of behavior and not as a mode of being. But this presents a problem. Nowhere does Paul use fusei in connection with a behavior. In the other two instances, fusei is connected with the origin of a way of being. It makes no sense, however, to state that someone acts according to his nature what the law commands, unless we construe that law to be a “natural law” or if we understand it to be a reference to pagan Christians in
whom the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 had been fulfilled. I will discuss the Jeremiah 31 prophecy later so I will address the natural law option here first. I fail to see how such a concept of natural law can be part of Paul’s understanding of things, and the only other place where we might construe this is Rom. 1:26, where we have the change of natural (fusiken) to the unnatural (para ten fusin) use. Here, though, it is not a matter of acting “against nature,” but of acting against the “honor of the body” (Rom. 1:24). It therefore refers to a way of behavior, in this case, one that is incongruous with God’s intentions in His creation. But this behavior is expressed as the opposite of fusikos (in the derived sense of “natural,” according to its own original intent as immanent in its being) and not constructed with fusei, which would introduce a concept of “natural order” as a standard. (So I contend that “against its nature” must be distinguished from either against, or in accordance with, nature as such.)

Consequently we read as follows: Rom. 2:14 must mean that the nations do not have the law because of their origin, and so we read fusei as the opposite of the phrase “that do not have the law” (mé nomon echonta). What does the second expression, “to be law unto themselves,” then mean? Paul states that if they happen to do what the law prescribes for them, they turn out to be a law unto themselves, that is, their acting in conformity to what the law commanded Israel is not a matter of standing under any written law, because as gentiles they do not “have” the law. It is a matter of responding to “a” will of God, not to what the known will of God in the Torah is. Again, the crux of the argument is against the gentile audience’s pro-Jewish assumption that obedience to God must imply direct obedience to the written law. There can be obedience to God without the law. All of this is in harmony with minor Jewish teachings in pseudepigrapha like 4 Ezra, where it states, in 3:33ff., that some among the nations have “fulfilled Thy commandments.” It is obviously not meant to state that miraculously they have obeyed the Torah without knowing it, since that would weaken the argument Paul is seeking to make here against his gentile readers.

It also seems to correspond with the more general notion that non-Jews who keep the Noachide commandments can be deemed “righteous amongst the nations.” This is unlikely, however. The problem is that the Noachide commandments were considered a written code that was based on oral tradition after the time of Noah. The status of that code was still under development within 1st-century Judaism, so it is hardly likely to have been thought of as “known” amongst the nations at the time of Paul’s writing. Besides, the code as it developed in its early stage turned out to be more of a standard for the gentiles, which defined conditions for Jewish-gentile communion, than what it became in the Babylonian Talmud: a code of behavior of the gentiles as their version of Torah. So, on the basis of this verse, it can only be said that the gentiles sometimes acted in apparent accord with rules of behavior that the Jews had as written commandments, even though these gentiles had no such written source. The argument is that the acceptance of a written law code as such does not make a person righteous, it still is only a matter of what you do.

But having said that, it is obvious also that Paul exceeds the statement of Rom. 2:14 in the next verse, where the words of Jeremiah 31:31-32 are seemingly applied to nations outside of the law.

14 When gentiles who have not the law by nature, do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.
15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.

on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

The notion that the nations have the work of the law “written on their hearts” is puzzling when we consider that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 refers to a future state of affairs in Israel
and is taken in the New Testament to refer to the reality of Christian life in the Spirit. The other reference to this future state in Hebrews 10:15-18 obviously refers to Christians. A little later we find Paul in chapter 7 explaining the ineffectiveness of life under the law by expressing the position of the proselyte under the covenant with Israel like this: "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man." With this statement, the attitude of, e.g., Psalm 37:31: "The mouth of the righteous proferreth wisdom and his tongue speaketh judgment; the law of his God is in his heart; his goings shall not slide," and Psalm 40:8: "To do thy good pleasure, my God, is my delight, and thy law is within my heart" is both reflected and surpassed. For we read elsewhere that "the love of Christ is poured out in our hearts" (5:5) and that we "believe with our hearts unto righteousness" (10:10). Both Ezekiel 11:19 and Isaiah 51:7, on the contrary, refer to the restoration of Israel. Is Paul saying that the hope for the future as expressed by the prophets is nothing but an illusion, since the nations already had the law written on their hearts? Hardly.

We must remember that Paul is not referring to the law as such, but to the work (or effectiveness) of the law, which is what the law had commanded them but which they did not receive through tradition in a written form. It is not the law that is written on their hearts, but the work of the law. What the law requires, in 2:14, refers to the claim of the law as specifically applied to them. That’s why it does not say τα έργα του νόμου (ta erga tou nomou, the works (mizvoth) of the law), since a totality of separate commandments is not what Paul had in mind. Neither the mizvoth, nor the Noachide commandments, which are a written law for the non-Jews, but acting lawfully in general on the basis of their required acknowledgment of the Creator, was what he claimed for the non-Jews. To claim that all of the Mosaic law would be fulfilled by non-Jews would be untenable. It would imply that Paul had first reduced the law to a minor portion of the ethical prescriptions, say the ten commandments. But the intent of the passage is not to excuse gentiles, nor to put their understanding of the law on a par with that of the Jewish nation; the conscience of the nations would also accuse them on the day of judgment. So Paul’s argument is directed at two things: (1) there is a kind of obedience which is without the written form of God’s commandment that is still discernible even amongst non-Jews, and (2) even if man has the Torah to guide him in these matters, only the factual obedience, the deeds, will mean anything in the day of judgment. And both those who are and those who are not in possession of a written law stand accused of failing to meet its requirements.

If there are non-Jews who do what God requires without having a written statute, then having the law would not make any difference. It is all about the "works" (but the "works" in 2:6 are not those of the law, and in 2:15 "the work," in the singular, means the general effective reality of law), the actual deeds, that will be judged in the day of judgment. Paul is not stating that they have their conscience instead of a written law that informs them of this requirement, for in so far as there is a demand, it was revealed by God in his Torah. A strictly oral tradition was affirmed in Jewish tradition starting with Noah, but this tradition was in accordance with and derived from scripture. There is therefore no basis to think that Paul is referring to Noachide law. He is actually only referring to the fact that gentiles have a conscience, that they actually have a knowledge of the difference between good and bad without a written instruction, which he takes to be a mode of the presence of "law," even if it cannot be the law as the written and studied Torah of Jewish experience. So it does not mean that gentiles on their own accord could find what is right and what is wrong, as Schlatter explains, but that they made such a distinction at all without written law! The principle of obedience to law as obedience to and recognition of God as their creator, the argument from chapter 1, is present with them in the way Paul describes in 2:14: they are a law unto themselves; in the inner dialogue of their conscience it is expressed what Torah is as instruction of law, rather than specifically what the law commands, since that can only be understood from God’s revelation. Of course one might object that surely some understanding of the prohibition of murder and theft and
the like are meant here. But even then the principle would not be compromised that Paul is thinking about an analogue of the law for gentiles as distinct from the possession of a written and oral tradition as a mark of divine election.

The Greek word for conscience, συνειδησίας, needs some attention here, because its interpretation might decide the question of the precise nature of this obedience without the (written) law that Paul introduces here (and enhances considerably later). It is part of a three-fold explication of what it means that the non-Jews are a law unto themselves. The demand of the law is

written on their hearts, i.e., known without formal instruction, and

their conscience (this knowledge accompanying all actions with the judgment of right and wrong: συνειδησίας [suneidesis]) acts like a witness that testifies to that fact, and finally

their thoughts accuse or excuse each other.

If we take it this way, we derive the plain meaning from classical Greek, where συνειδησίας is used non-reflexively according to the expression: σύνοιδα τίνι τί (sunoida tini ti): to share knowledge of something with someone else. Their knowledge of (the fact), then testifies with others, and is a sign of their shame and their awareness of being set under judgment (συνειδησίας - συμμαρτύρειν, suneidesis, summarturein). Such a witness (which obviously could be the same person who knew his own deed) could then either be for the prosecution or for the defense, depending on what he knows. The sequel that speaks of their accusing or excusing each other in thought makes a logical follow-up. As each person, in his own conscience, with perfect knowledge of the facts, accuses or excuses himself, so the judgment which they fear is a perfectly right and true judgment, their thoughts bringing the verdict. In its reflexive sense it would refer simply to being aware of one’s own actions, which leads to a tension since actions can be viewed from different and opposite viewpoints, and that allows for the kind of tension between good and bad that is characteristic of moral self-awareness. Now this we take to mean that to Paul the fact that the gentiles have a conscience is in itself a testimony to the fact that they are sensitive to the distinction between good and bad and therefore are in general subject to requirements that are analogous to those of the written law. The (written) law is effective, has an ergon, in so far as non-Jews make moral distinctions at all. Having a conscience means being divided in oneself; the ethical dimension shows itself as a tension. And it is in this tension that the reality of the law can be seen.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that there is no direct equivalent for this concept of conscience in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. In Psalm 139:23 it is actually God who is called upon to be a witness to the inner thoughts, where it states: “search me, O God, and know my heart; prove me, and know my thoughts.” If God is the inner witness of my thoughts, then connected to this is His word as the standard of my behavior and the source of knowledge of good and bad. God’s word is close to man, in his mind and heart (Deut. 30:14), so that the Torah, and not an inner faculty of man, performs the function that is ascribed to the inner (reflexive) conscience in Greek thought. Might this be the actual context of Paul’s passage? His first step is to affirm that it can be said that, even without the written law, the non-Jews make a distinction between right and wrong and have a conscience, in the sense that they too live in the tension between right and wrong. If that is the case, then it is not only the actual possession of the (written) law that allows people to have the work of the law, that which makes man stand accused or excused, actually within themselves. Their very being testifies to an effective presence of the law, analogous to the memorized and studied law that conveys God’s word as a non-reflexive, “outer” witness of our inner thoughts and acts. Apparently Paul is disputing the contention that the possession of the written law is to be identified with standing under the efficacy of law, taken as expression of God’s will. He is denying that the law’s only effectiveness is through the possession of a written Torah. And of course he must do so, if he is to contend that faith in Christ actually fulfills the same function.
Paul has prepared the way by arguing that gentile idolaters show evidence of the presence of the law in their consciences and experience the tension of right and wrong. He has established that no general status under law, but only actual deeds, are the proper subject of final judgment. Now Paul can return to the main line of his argument, started in 2:1. There is no excuse for those who judge others but do not comply with the law themselves. So if this “man” calls himself a Jew, no matter whether such a person is a Jew by birth or by conversion, or a Christian semi-prostrate or Judaizer, he has many things to boast of. Knowledge of God’s will, discernment, instruction in the law are all his. On that basis he can be a leader of the blind gentiles and new Christians who know nothing about the law. There is profound truth to this in the expectation of his audience, since the law really is the embodiment of knowledge and truth. But the criterion of righteousness cannot be the knowledge of the law, but must be the effectiveness of that knowledge. If sin is still present and death still reigns in such a life under the law, then the law will be shown to be ineffective. And since the argument can be made that both Jews and gentiles, with or without law, do sin and are under judgment of death, the gentle Christian who intends to adopt Jewish law after the Pharisee fashion as an enhancement to his faith is severely misguided.

Therefore it must be said as a matter of principle: circumcision, the sign of this being under the law, only has meaning in the doing of the law (2:25). If those who have not been circumcised, the non-Jews who do not have the law by nature from 2:14 and the not circumcised “by nature” in Rom. 2:27-- can achieve the requirements of the law, it is shown that the possession of the law is ineffective. The judging man of 2:1 will then be judged himself by the uncircumcised who does the law. Paul is setting up a moral standard that overrides being circumcised or being in possession of the law. And by that standard, though secondary to what the law is demanding differently from gentiles and Jews, there is absolute equality between the two. “The single most important theme of Romans is equality of Jew and gentile.”

§ 27. Justification (3:21-3:30)

The judging of the sins of others, setting up the standard of the law to reveal unrighteousness in others, does not lead to an improvement in behavior. Teaching gentiles the law would therefore only lead to an increase in guilt. So how then can righteousness be achieved?

We come now to a major element of our argument, which is Paul’s treatment of imputed and/or infused righteousness.

But now apart from [a] law righteousness of God is manifested, borne witness to by the law and the prophets; 22 righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ towards all, and upon all those who believe: for there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; 24 being justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God has set forth as a mercy-seat, through faith in his blood, for shewing forth of his righteousness, in respect of the passing by the sins that had taken place before, through the forbearance of God; 26 for shewing forth of his righteousness in the present time, so that he should be just, and justify him that is of faith of Jesus. 27 Where then boasting? It has been excluded. By what law? of works? Nay, but by law of faith; 28 for we reckon that a man is justified by faith, without works of law. 29 Is the God of Jews only? is he not of nations also? Yea, of nations also: 30 since indeed there is one God, who shall justify circumcision on the principle of faith, and uncircumcision by faith. 31 Do we then make void law by faith? Perish the thought: rather we establish law.

This second part of Paul’s theological argument runs from 3:21-5:20. The subject of the whole passage seems to be that there is no distinction between Jew and gentile in the matter of salvation. 3:21-3:30 is devoted to the question of how righteousness was revealed in Christ
and its relationship to the law. Though crucial for Paul’s argument, it is also the most difficult and obscure passage in the letter. Some have argued that Paul uses earlier confessional material, which could account for the density of the passage. Justification by faith is mentioned for the second time as a principle in 3:28. Chapter 4 contains the midrash on Abraham, where Paul uses the second quote (after Habakkuk 2:4 in Rom. 1) that affirms justification by faith on the basis of Gen. 15:6 (Rom. 4:3). Finally, chapter 5 expounds on the consequences of justification by faith, and is therefore our main focus later on.

In the opening verse of our passage, a principle is introduced that refers back to 1:16-17, where Paul states that the righteousness of God was revealed in the gospel. It was outside of the gospel where God’s wrath was revealed through law and conscience and was exercised in His judgment upon all sinners, Jews and gentiles. So what is the meaning of this concept of righteousness? In 1:16-17 the essence of the gospel was explained as the righteousness of God revealed on the basis of faith.

With the “now” of 3:21, Paul turns to the major thesis of his letter. Righteousness is now revealed beyond and outside [the principle of] law, while the law [of Moses] and the prophets testified unto its ultimate revelation. The first mention of law is without the definite article, and refers back to the statement in 3:20. The new righteousness, revealed in this new epoch, is different from the righteousness under the law that followed the works of the law. The “now” might be taken as both a logical and an eschatological antithesis and is opposed to the present of Rom. 1:18. The reality of the next verses is already present and working within the present world, though its fulfillment still lies in the future. That righteousness must mean here: a righteousness of God (i.e., gen. subj. with the explicative genitive in verse 22: δικαιοσύνη του θεου), “a righteousness of God then”), i.e., a way of being righteous that God has given. It has no reference to God’s being inherently righteous nor does it mean a righteousness of man before God or a “divine” righteousness that would be a human achievement. The emphasis is on God’s effective exercise of justice in the midst of human failure. The forensic nature of the expression is not by accident and cannot be replaced by stating that Paul meant that God’s grace has been revealed. That means that justification is here seen as extrinsic to the anthropological condition of man; it is extra nos. Paul goes on to state the basis for this: the revelation of God’s righteousness in Christ is not in contradiction to God’s standard of justice, for it is based upon an atoning sacrifice.

To further emphasize that God’s being is not compromised by this way of showing His righteousness, verse 21b states that the law and the prophets bear witness to this righteousness. There is no total breach with the prior history of salvation. Still, it is not the law as is understood by Judaism that bears this witness, nor is it merely a reference to those citations within the Old Testament that are taken as prophetic with regard to Christ. So it might refer to the whole of the OT, understood as promise which aspect of the Old Testament is restored by Christian faith, since the OT, according to him, confronts us so far only within the religious perversion of salvation by works, or to the center of Torah: the Day of Atonement, or more specifically to the story of Abraham (Kruse, p. 189).

Such righteousness of God is achieved by the “faith-obedience” of Christ and is intended (effective) for all who have faith, who believe. The ground of our justification, which because of the forensic language that Paul uses here (judgment in 2:16, 3:8, 20; accused in 3:9) is first of all a declaration of being set free from judgment (cf. 5:1), is a sacrifice. (We will however examine the implications of the so-called forensic language later in this paragraph.) Verse 25 is crucial here. God has made Christ into a mercy seat (language of the Day of Atonement, Lev. 16:15-16) through faithfulness [shown] in his blood [death]. We again take “faith” here as a reference to the obedience of Christ and not as reference to the subjective faith of the believer. So in fact Paul has a basis for his statement that God revealed His righteousness by accepting believers into a renewed relationship with him, since the sins that
would require Him to pronounce a verdict [of death, 1:32] on Jew and gentile are now atoned
for by Christ. God does not condone sin, but atones for it through Christ.

We have repeated here the common statement that Paul’s language of the courtroom in
chapter 2 implies that justification here means a declaration of being set free from judg­
ment. In opposition to that Sanders has stated:

“This [the occurrence of \( \text{λογίζω, logizomai, to “reckon”} \) 11 times in chapter 4 and
in 3:28 - RAV] does not mean, however, that Paul thinks of righteousness as being fictitiously
imputed to those who have faith, while they remain sinners in fact.”

Now it may certainly be true that it is not correct to say that righteousness is merely or fic­
titiously imputed, and it may be true also that Paul does not always refer to righteousness in
this sense. Sanders showed in his discussion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians that the Greek
verb \( \text{διακαίω, diakaiō} \) means “to regard someone who is right as being in the right.” It in­
volves a declaration or acknowledgment of innocence. Wherever this verb is used in distinc­
tion to condemnation, in a specific judicial context, this is the meaning that we should assume
(e.g. Rom. 5:18). It then becomes the equivalent of acquittal with a basis in reality. And this
is true in all cases of the usage of the verb in the active moods. But Sanders argues forcefully
for a difference in the meaning of righteousness when used in passive moods. With the ex­
ception of Rom. 2:13; 1 Cor. 4:4, 6:11, “being rightoused” means the same as being set free
from (the power of) sin and not merely being declared free from guilt. It has the connotation
of something that actually happens to a person and not merely a declaration extra eum. This
is particularly helpful in restoring some balance in the discussion about justification that has
been obscured so much by the emphasis on a believer’s being simul justus et peccator, for
such an approach does not imply any transformation of the Christian and makes God’s decla­
ration ineffective in the present world. When Paul states in 4:5 that God justifies the ungodly,
this certainly does not mean that the ungodly remains what he is or that he will only be trans­
formed into his real condition in the future.

This other meaning of the passive mood of \( \text{διακαίω} \) is most often passed by in the
translations. In Rom. 6:7 we read: for he that has died is justified from sin (DT), He that is
dead is freed from sin (KJV), Denn wer gestorben ist, der ist gerecht fertigt und frei von der
Stünde (Luther, ...justified and freed from sin, combining the choices of DT and KJV). But
from Sanders’s perspective, the point gets lost that having been justified \( \text{διακαίω} \) is equivalent to what is stated in 6:6b: “no longer slaves of sin.” And this last
expression prompted KJV to choose and Luther to add the concept of being freed.

But even in our passage, where the active sense of \( \text{διακαίω} \) (diakaiomai) is dominant
(the passive in 3:24 is probably equal in meaning to the active mode in 3:26) and the judicial
language is obvious, there is also reference to the mercy seat and the day of Atonement. Could
it be that what we call judicial language is usually distinguished too strictly from the priestly
language of atonement and sacrifice? The blood that is brought into the Holy of Holies not
only atones for the sins of the people, and sets them free from judgment, but it also purifies
them. (Cf. Lev. 16:16, 30. The scapegoat of the day of Atonement also seems to refer to
spiritual purification, a strengthening of moral attitudes and vigor.) The declaration could be
also priestly and not judicial alone. Furthermore, in Rom. 8:4 Paul explains that Christ’s sacri­
fice involved the condemnation of sin in the flesh, “in order that the righteous requirement of
the law should be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to flesh, but according to Spirit.”
This can surely be read as a description of the reality of justification: being freed from sin,
being united with Christ, having God’s Spirit dwell in us, implies walking according to the
Spirit, so all of it refers to one and the same reality. The passive mood might extend the judi­
cial meaning beyond its ordinary confines, as Sanders puts it, and this might be very true with
regard to the relationship of this usage to classical Greek. But is it possible that to Paul “right­
eousness” had legal and priestly implications simultaneously? If justification is based on a
sacrifice, the declaration of righteousness might very well be a priestly declaration.

This can be clarified further by returning to the verb λογίζομαι (logidzomai) for a moment. It is crucial in the next chapter of Romans, where we find the quotation from Gen. 15:6: “And Abraham believed (had faith) in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” The Greek passive ελογίσθη (elogisthè) used here is the translation both of the Hebrew נ江县 (va-jachsheveiha in kal) in Gen. 15:6 and the Hebrew שורפ (techashev in niph'al) in Psalm 106 (105): 31. When applied to reward in the New Testament, the Greek word keeps its classical Greek sense of “accounting,” reckoning in the commercial sphere. When taken in conjunction with grace (cf. 4:4), the Greek word is moved beyond its classical usage and into conformity with its status as the translation of the Hebrew שורפ (chashav). So how did Paul understand the passage in Gen. 15?

The law is quoted to make clear that the righteousness that God revealed in Christ without law has been witnessed to by the law and the prophets (3:21). In fact, Paul makes the claim that this revelation actually confirms the law. The general principle of this revealed righteousness is stated in 3:28: we “reckon (an ordinary usage of logidzomai in the sense of thinking) that a man is justified by faith, without works of the law.” The “without works of the law” must mean that doing the commandments is not a prerequisite for obtaining justification.

The question arises: on what grounds then was Abraham to be considered a righteous person? Obviously Abraham could not have acquired that status by doing the works of the law, since the commandments had not yet been given, an issue the rabbis resolved by stating that Abraham and the other patriarchs living before Sinai either conformed to the commandments already given (Noah), or did the law without having to know the written law, or even that the law was already being studied in its form of oral teaching. Now Gen. 15:6 states in the LXX that Abraham believed, had faith in God, and that “it was reckoned” to him, put on his “account,” as righteousness. This cannot mean that Abraham’s faith was a different work of the law that equaled all the other commandments put together. The “reckoning” in the one case is according to obligation, when reward is at stake, and in this case it is according to grace. So Paul reads Gen. 15:6 as saying that Abraham’s trust in God was sovereignly declared by God to be righteousness, to establish Abraham as a righteous man, i.e., that fact alone made Abraham “do the right thing” in accordance with the proper relationship to God. This sovereignty is expressed also when Paul speaks of justification of the ungodly in 4:5. The quotation of Psalm 32 immediately following can be seen as an illustration of the declarative function of this reckoning, when David calls the man blessed to whom God will not reckon his sin. So the ungodly is declared righteous without any condition in his fulfilling the demands of the law, but only conditioned on his affirmation of God’s sovereignty.

Now we can restate our question. What does it mean to say that God declares a man righteous and imputes righteousness to him without works on the basis of faith, i.e., the acknowledgment of divine sovereignty? And most importantly, what is the extent of this declaration? Is it “merely” legal, a legal fiction that has no bearing on reality? Let us consider the weight of the Hebrew formula. In his “Die Anrechnung des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit” (The reckoning of faith as righteousness) Gerhard von Rad argued in 1951 that the expression יְשׁוּפֶה (chashav lo) is taken from a cultic sphere rather than a legal sphere. In Lev. 7:17-18, e.g., the Torah states that if anyone eats the flesh of a sacrifice on the third day after slaughter, “it shall not be reckoned to him that had presented it.” It is the priest that is able to accept or reject the “imputation” of the sacrifice to the believer. The same meaning occurs in Lev. 17:4, e.g., the Torah states that if anyone eats the flesh of a sacrifice on the third day after slaughter, “it shall not be reckoned to him that had presented it.” It is the priest that is able to accept or reject the “imputation” of the sacrifice to the believer. The same meaning occurs in Lev. 17:4, e.g., where we find the niphal jechashev as in 7:18b. Lev. 17:4 is especially interesting, since here what is imputed is dam, blood guilt, which has as its opposite presumably only תְּשׁוֹדָה (tsedaka), righteousness. The formula for this declaration can be found, e.g., in Lev. 13:8, where a priest declares someone to be impure by stating: “it is leprosy.” By stating this in reality and formally, the condition is recognized as such. Of course, the priest does not create that condition.
by proclaiming it. It is not a legal fiction, but a legal recognition of a reality with cultic consequences.

Von Rad then goes on to show that the formula in Ezekiel 18:9, which concludes a long description of a ḫūq (tzadik), is such a priestly declaration: "He is righteous, he shall certainly live, says the Lord God." This declaration of righteousness, as is obvious from the context, does not imply a mere acknowledgment of the constitution of righteousness by man's activity, but the recognition of the status itself, which makes it a reality in practice. It is not simply an indicative of God's observation, nor is it a creative act, in which a new condition emerges in the declaration that has no relationship with reality at all. In all the senses of the word we discussed, we do not find the equivalent of the Greek legal usage of dikaiouv, a legal declaration on the basis of a given reality, but the priestly declaration of a condition that becomes effective in the declaration itself so not conditioned on the reality, nor devoid of reality, but bringing that reality into effect as to its cultic implications. Its condition is faith, the moral status of the person, which in itself does not constitute a sufficient cause for the declaration.

Von Rad then argues that the language of Gen. 15:6 is deliberately taken from the cultic sphere with the intent of setting up an opposition between priestly teachings on atonement and the teachings of the Elohist. Here it is emphatically not the priest who declares the condition of righteousness, but God in His sovereign grace, and such a declaration is not based upon a condition being met as in Ezekiel 18. "The event of 'imputation' is now moved to the sphere of a free and personal relationship of the LORD with Abraham." But is this dialectical tension toward the cultic language really intended? And why should we rule out the possibility that it is completely analogous to the declaration in Ezekiel? Strictly speaking, the cultic usage of chashav would only imply that this single act of faith and trust, mentioned in Gen. 15, of faith in the promise of God made in 15:4-5 warrants a declaration of righteousness. The fact that it is God and not the priest who pronounces it does not in itself imply that its basis is God's sovereignty, as if that fact on its own would imply that nothing in Abraham was its material cause.

Furthermore, the context indicates that this act of faith by Abraham was of crucial importance in Abraham's life. So maybe we should enlarge the scope of this declaration. Could it not be that the declaration of righteousness is indeed an affirmation of the character of Abraham's life that was epitomized in his unfailing trust in God? The act of faith need not have been considered an isolated event. Abraham's life made God the truth (he'emin be- implies a total submission and confidence, whereas he'emin le- would mean a simple acceptance; all are related to the concept of 'emet, truth, stability) and in so doing, the word could very well express on its own a condition similar to that in Ezekiel 18. If we can glean from Genesis the meaning of such a declarative justification, then we would have to say here that God affirms the righteousness of the believer who by his act of faith and trust in Christ identifies himself with Christ, "eats the meat on the day" (Lev. 7), and can therefore be declared righteous. Since faith involves identification with Christ, imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer involves God's declaration of the believer's being made righteous. It would, however, be the whole renewed life of the believer that was the basis of being made righteous, epitomized by trust in Christ, and not faith alone as a single, isolated event or characteristic. Faith, furthermore, would not be the corollary of the reception of justification, but indeed, as the "life of faith," its formal equivalent.

If read like this, we avoid the one-sided emphasis on the legal "fiction." To be "out of the faith in Christ" (3:26) means putting one's faith in Christ's sacrifice, affirming God's righteousness as revealed therein. It means accepting God's promise to be truthful. All that has been expressed in the classic notion of faith as "assent", as affirmation of the facts of God's redemptive action in this world. But beyond that, it also means living in accordance with those revealed facts of God's salvation. God now declares such a believer righteous, for that
is what the believer actually becomes, not in himself and autonomously, but because of his identification with Christ’s sacrifice. It would not mean that his act of faith deserves such justification as an automatic response, since faith is not a “work of the law” but an analogy to a sacrificial act, and in that respect repentance, conversion, and moral commitment belong to it as well. This approach also alleviates the problem of the strange usage of dikaioun, since it can retain its proper meaning of declaring righteous those who have been made righteous. But it also retains the most important notion: that this righteousness is not earned by complying with the law, but received by identification with Christ’s sacrifice. The condition is not the sufficient cause for the declaration, but it still is a condition to be met before the constitutive declaration can take place.

According to Bultmann, there was no difference of opinion between Paul and early Judaism on the forensic nature of justification. Both maintained that, especially in the eschatological judgment, a person was declared righteous or unjust and that the prerequisite of being declared righteous was righteousness! Righteousness, to both, signified a condition of redemption. The issue was how this righteousness was to be achieved and what the declaration actually meant. In the Old Testament, 2 Sam 19:20 reads: “let not my Lord impute iniquity unto,” in parallelism to “do not remember.” So there is a plea for an acquittal without any basis in compensatory merit. Here only the forensic or at least an extrinsic meaning is brought into play, but of course here the issue is not the imputation of righteousness unto the ungodly. In other words, the imputation has a declaratory meaning, but is not without basis in reality. He goes on to say that the main difference lies in the fact that Paul does not see this righteousness as a future condition but as already attributed to man on the basis of faith before the day of judgment. The future in Rom. 5:19 takes its reference point from the “now” of Rom. 3:21, and the future tenses in Rom 3:20 (will not be justified) and 3:30 (will justify) are gnomic or logical in nature.

Because Bultmann at the same time believes that Paul did not fully dispense with the eschatological sense of the imputed righteousness and sees primarily the forensic sense of that concept, the eschatological righteousness is completely severed from any freedom from sin, ethical perfection, or quality of the believer. The future-oriented approach severs the connection between imputed and realized righteousness as far as the believer is concerned. To be truly “righteous,” in the plain sense of the “righteous” as in Rom. 5:19, can then only mean: to be acquitted in the present from a judgment that is in the future. That will have ethical consequences which Bultmann deals with at length from par. 38 onwards, but justification in itself means only this acquittal.

I think that Bultmann has correctly established that to Paul the eschatological judgment or acquittal is effective in the present, but he has underestimated the reality of that present effectiveness by at the same time considering the full reality of the judgment to remain a future event. Now either the being made righteous or being constituted as righteous is a future event, and then justification primarily involves the certainty now that there will be no condemnation then, or it is a present reality, characterized by the contents of the eschaton, which then implies the transformation of man in accordance with the contents of the declaration. If the eschatological event is in the present tense, at least to the Church, it includes the transformation as well as the legal acquittal. Furthermore, the imputation in itself is a reality, not a fiction, as Bultmann correctly states. But because Bultmann was so anxious to remove any possibility of righteousness as an ethical quality, he inferred that it could only be considered a righteousness of works under law if he allowed any meaning of righteousness as intrinsic.

It has been argued that the forensic meaning of justification is not only present in Paul, but also in the gospel of Luke. In Luke 7:29 we find the expression used to denote the fact that the people accepted John’s baptism as coming from God. They justified God, did justice to Him, by acknowledging that baptism to be a “counsel of God.” Although God is the object of the
justification, it is clear that to “do justice” means to acknowledge a situation, and not to pronounce a verdict. Luke 10:29 and 16:15 use the term to denote an action of self-justification, i.e., to find grounds for acquittal on the presumed charge that some commandment has not been obeyed. In Luke 10:29 the question is put, “Who then is my neighbor?” The question serves no other purpose, we are told, than to justify the questioner. That such a question must be asked would involve an affirmation of the difficulties involved in complying with the command to love one’s neighbor, and that would serve as a continuous ground for acquittal. So the point is self-justification.

To justify God and acknowledge His counsel seems to be the opposite of justifying oneself and finding excuses for not obeying the commandment. All in all, this can hardly serve as grounds for the idea that justification is a divine action which is present in faith, though there are overtones of forensic usage in all of these. Where God is the object, the declarative function of the word does play a role, but the basic meaning of acknowledging something as righteous is central to the argument. Where human beings are the object, again, forensic overtones are heard, but the main point is to evade guilt by referring to extenuating circumstances: who is my neighbor? And in the case of the Pharisees in Luke 16, it is Jesus who characterizes their whole moral intent as seeking for grounds for moral acquittal.

We are left with one passage that may be interpreted as referring to justification by God through faith, and that is the parable of Luke 18:14. The prayer of the publican is simple and direct: God, have mercy on me, as sinner. Jesus then states in verse 14 that this one returned home, having been justified. Reformed biblical scholar Byron Curtis argued about this verse:

“The tax-man is a sinner, who freely confesses he’s ‘guilty as charged’. But God nonetheless declares him ‘justified’, so that he goes home acquitted of his guilt. It is beyond reasonable doubt that Luke 18.14 is forensic in nature.”[248]

I cannot find this argument persuasive. The point of the parable is explained in verse 9: he spoke also to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and made nothing of all the rest of men. The Pharisee is not considered unrighteous because he lacked faith, but the point is that he considered his righteousness as something he could earn on the basis of his condition and could be confident about within himself. That self-confidence made him disparage all others who stood convicted under his standards of exclusion and the insistence on levitical holiness that went along with it. Jesus shows thereupon that righteousness (which can be considered standing in the proper relationship to God) is always a matter of divine action, even for the publican who can do nothing but pray for grace. It is a matter of humility before God and of remembering that salvation rests entirely on God’s grace.

The very things that make Paul’s mention of justification into a forensic image are missing here: that divine grace is given on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice which revealed the nature of God’s righteousness (Rom. 3:20), and that faith is the act of identifying with this sacrifice and the basis or even means of justification (Rom. 5:1), on which basis God will grant acquittal in the future judgment (Rom. 5:19) and sanctification according to it in the present (Rom. 8:4, 10).

The doctrine of justification of the ungodly is also stated differently in the letter to the Hebrews. Abel, e.g., is called a “righteous one” a dikaios, in Heb. 11:4. The interpretation of Genesis 4:4 that is given here indicates that the author of Hebrews did not make a declaration of righteousness as did Paul in his treatment of Abraham in Romans 4:5. Abel is recognized as righteous because he is, and the same goes for the other faithful that are mentioned in chapter 11. As the concluding remark in 11:33 shows, all of these have achieved righteousness according to the principle of faith, and were not justified because of their faith. As we have shown, that was also the basic position of James.[250]
§ 28. The status of the justified (ch. 5)

To determine how Paul viewed the status and position of the believer in justification, we need to take a closer look at Rom. 6:1-8:39, which we will do in the next chapter. There is a specific emphasis in the way the word righteousness is used in this passage, e.g., in 6:19, where Paul speaks of obedience unto righteousness, and in 6:20, where it is stated that the "service of righteousness" is in opposition to the former condition of "being free from righteousness." This new emphasis is prepared in chapter 5:12-20, where the justification that imputes righteousness to the ungodly is widened to become an cosmic event. The language here takes a slight turn from the previous chapters when we find Paul speaking about the "gift of righteousness" (which is not forensic language any more) connected to life and kingly rule (5:17), and Christ's deed of righteousness leading to "justification unto life" (5:18), meaning not only staying alive in judgment, but the possession of (eternal) life. Still, in 5:16 justification is the opposite of condemnation, so we have the judicial sense. The subtle transition in the terminology seems therefore to have occurred between 5:16 and 5:17.

But the main change in the terminology is apparent in 5:19, where Christ's obedience leads to "the many [that] will be constituted righteous." This verse presents us with quite a problem.

By taking "will be constitute" (katasthesontai) as referring to an eschatological future, the plain meaning of dikaioi, righteous ones, can be made to refer to the ultimate result of justification beyond the present age. To be (intrinsically) righteous is then no element of the present state of the believer. Our future condition is acquittal, which means that all present efforts at being righteous are the more futile, since not even in that future state of affairs will we be able to obtain such righteousness. If we would take it as a being justified in a forensic sense, the future tense is obviously meant to refer to the present: our acquittal then frees us now. But if we take the basileuontai (they will rule) of verse 17 as its correlate and as a reference to the new eschatological kingdom, we are talking here about "real" righteousness in terms of hope and expectation, as in Rom. 8:28. After all, being kings implies the exercise of righteousness. Then δικαιοιος goes beyond the forensic meaning, and still we have a future tense which must be construed as referring to the present, if we are to be righteous in the future in a real sense, in order to govern righteously, we can anticipate that condition and also be partially in it in the present. If not taken as reference to a temporal future, however, the force of the expression is weakened to mean a future taking its reference point from Christ's resurrection, and then again the interpretation is possible that δικαιος means "having been justified," i.e., declared guiltless, now referring to a moment in time after the resurrection of Christ.

But is it necessary to maintain the forensic meaning of δικαιος as if it refers to the result of a judicial act? Just as the present tense of chapter 7 is at the same time a reference to the past, this future tense can be construed to mean the breaking in of that future in the present of Christian life. The present state of Christian life is temporally shifted from the present of the state of affairs in this world; the Christian way of life is proleptic in essence. So though referring to a future, this eschatology is not temporally removed from our present, since it is the same "time" as the "now" of Rom. 3:21. And if the word δικαιος is read as the opposition of the reality of all those who have sinned in Adam, it can hardly refer to that passive state of being declared pardoned. If this is correct, the verse provides us with an obstacle in understanding the righteousness of chapters 1-4 as meaning only that of an imputed and declarative righteousness, because then implies an inherent righteousness and states something beyond the mere declaration of the acquittal of the ungodly as in 4:5.

Krusel also refers to the fact that the future tense is used in 5:19 and states that Paul has justification in mind throughout this chapter. In verses 16 and 18 the dikaiouma (verdict of righteousness) and the dikaiosin dzoais (verdict of life) stand in contrast to the katakrima in verse 16, so we must have a legal sense of the word righteous.
But the judgment or condemnation needs not to be taken in a strictly forensic sense, since it is contrasted not with pardon, but with the gift of grace, which is given to all, and not to those who are acquitted in that judgment on the basis of their faith as in 3:28 and 4:5. If the judgment on Adam is taken as universal, it must refer to the general consequence of sin in opposition to the general consequence of the gift of grace. There can be no "sentence of justification" for all, but there is no doubt that through Christ's obedience there is a new way of becoming righteous for all. In Adam all are under the power of sin, so in Christ all are freed from sin, so they can become participants in Christ's life and become righteous, which the many actually will become (5:19).

Bultmann argues that Paul's thesis of the present reality of righteousness does not take away from its forensic-eschatological sense. God expresses His judgment now, and then the result of that judgment can only mean amnesty and never ethical perfection. The reality of being justified is that man is not considered as if without guilt, but he is really righteous, be it only in the formal sense of being acquitted in the judgment. This would mean that dikaios in our verse refers to being acquitted and not to any intrinsic righteousness. But the righteousness that is ours is in essence a matter of the right relationship with God.253 So Bultmann stresses on the one hand the reality of justification; on the other hand he excludes from this righteousness the idea of ethical quality.

What then has made this other way of viewing righteousness possible? We need to find the logic of the argument, if we are to read the diakios as meaning intrinsic righteousness. The grounds for this relative shift of emphasis can only be Paul's statement of the corollary of justification in chapter 5:1-9, which paves the way for an extended application of the word righteous (subst. pl.) as meaning the opposite of wickedness, or, more accurately: ἁμαρτωλοί, sinners. It is important in this respect to note that the language of 5:1 does not indicate that justification is the basis or cause of having peace, access, etc., as its result, but all are presented as immediately connected with each other. There is peace with God, access to God, the infusion of the love of God in our hearts (5:5), the reception of the Holy Ghost (ibid.), but all of that is expressed in connection with a repeat of the notion of the justification of the ungodly (here: the death of Christ for us while still sinners, 5:8). Justification of the ungodly cannot be separated from how it is received and the transformation that corresponds to it: by the reception of the Holy Ghost, by being identified with Christ, by having the love of God in our hearts. And if that is so, the liberation of our former life from the bondage of sin and death and the reception of the new life in Christ is such that 5:19 can speak of the believer being constituted as righteous, beyond the legal metaphor, and therefore intrinsically.254

In passing we may note that this can be the response to the claim that the doctrine of justification by faith does not provide the proximate basis of Paul's ethics.255 The argument has been put forward by Schweitzer that the act of justification does not imply that man now receives the capacity to do good works, the fact that the believer is now enabled to do the will of God is based on his participation in Christ. The imperative to walk according to the Spirit is not based on the indicative of justification, but on the indicative of the believer's life in the Spirit. That is true in the case of Gal. 5:16, where the exhortation to walk in the Spirit can only be based on the indicative of Gal. 4:6: and because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts. Gal. 4:29 speaks likewise of being born in accordance with the Spirit. So here the new life of the believer in the Spirit of the Son is the basis for the obedience that is demanded in Gal. 5:16. In the same manner, in Romans 8:1 the indicative is expressed when it states that "to them that are in Christ Jesus," i.e., those who have been freed by the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" and that have the Spirit dwelling in them (verse 9) and on that basis it is expressed that the law is being fulfilled in those who walk according to that Spirit (verse 4). But precisely in chapter 8 of Romans, the interconnection between being justified and being in the spirit is also expressed. To be made free from the law
of sin and death (8:2) obviously expresses the same thing as justification did in earlier chapters. Justification is connected to Christ’s being raised from the dead (4:25), and it is our identification with the resurrected Christ that imparts to us the new life in the Spirit that was Christ’s as well.

But even if this logic holds, how can we determine this conclusively? If we follow the traditional division of the letter, taking chapters 1-4 as dealing with (extrinsic) justification and chapters 5-8 as dealing with sanctification, the issue is resolved. Rom. 5:19 can then only express a reality from the standpoint of sanctification and is therefore doctrinally separated from the earlier chapters. Still, it would remain a problem that chapter 5 uses seven times a word derived from dik-, translated as: (having been) justified (2x), justification (2x), righteousness (2x), the just (1x). It is also connected to the former chapters by the “therefore” (oun) of 5:1. It functions as a means of joining two separate strands of thought: that Abraham was justified through faith, and that Christ revealed God’s righteousness through His death. The particle “having been justified” does not mean a statement of the cause of what follows, but begins to explain the reality of justification on the part of the believer.

So what follows in the chapter can then be read not as the future outcome, but the inner reality of justification. “Having been justified” means that “we have peace,” “have received access,” “stand in this grace,” and “rejoice in this hope.” Only then do we find a restrictive formula: “not only this,” but going beyond all that justification signifies, we also “rejoice in our tribulations,” connecting joy with endurance, endurance with character, and character with hope, verse 5 then returns to justification again: hope does not shame, because, and this refers back to justification as its basis, we have the love of God in our hearts.

This reality of being justified provides the basis for trust in the hour of tribulation. If Christ has died for us while we were weak and ungodly, then we will also be saved from wrath (5:9). The opposition here is not between justification and sanctification, but between justification and life under duress. After that we have a second “not only that” in verse 11, referring to the reconciliation that we have received. So justification is made manifest in salvation from oppression and, ultimately, in reconciliation (katallagè). We rejoice in hope, in tribulations, in God. If we have read the flow of the argument correctly, the chapter is not about the response to being justified, but an explanation of the real effects of justification in the life of the believer. It describes not only the position, but the condition we are led into through justification.

§ 29. The moral objections against the gospel of grace and the life in the Spirit (6:1-8:39)

There is good reason to hold that the passage 6:1-8:39 is all about objections, seeing that we find several real questions and answers, e.g., in 6:1, 15; 7:1, 7, 13. The question that opens this third part makes perfect sense after the 5th chapter has been read:

6:1. What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

After having stated in 5:21 that “grace might reign through righteousness,” and in particular in 5:20 that “where sin abounded grace has overabounded,” the objection might be raised that Paul’s version of the gospel would imply logically that sin is of no consequence any more. The question states this hyperbolically: to sin means in fact making grace abound more. What shall we say with regard to the problem of sin, if we have now been told that grace increases with sin, i.e., that no “amount” of sin is unpardonable, that sin cannot resist grace? In essence the very same argument came to the fore in 3:7: if my sin actually makes God’s justice abound, why am I still judged and condemned for it?
7 But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?
8 And why not do evil that good may come, as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

So the argument of the "slanderers" is that a position that holds that God's revelation of righteousness in Christ, which leads to forgiveness for all sins, an atonement not conditioned by the activity of man, actually leads to complete immorality. "Sin gives God the opportunity to manifest his generosity to man, sin cannot be such a bad thing after all."

Now according to Dunn this question must arise for another reason as well. In Judaism, the place for a sinner to go in need of atonement was the Torah, which provided in the Temple Cult the means for atonement. In early Pharisaic thought, God's forgiveness for sins was an element of His dealing with Israel under the Covenant. But the means for this atonement were given to Israel and not to mankind as a whole. Under the Torah, commandment and grace were held in balance, but both were given to Israel alone. However, in the second and third chapters Paul had developed his main position: that judgment would make no difference between those under the law and those outside of the law. The Torah was posited as an indictment against both Jew and gentile. So it is Paul who disconnected the bond between the Torah-as-law and the Torah-as-grace. The Torah-as-grace was only "testifying" to the righteousness that has now been revealed, that makes no difference between Jew and gentile in the indictment and as a consequence makes no difference between the two with regard to grace. Paul has to sever this link between law and grace because the Torah confines grace to those under the law, i.e., to Israel. God's promise to Abraham could not be fulfilled, since the Torah did not reach the gentiles, the relatively large numbers of semi-proselytes that did not cross the last boundary of circumcision were evidence of that. If the Church chose to cling to circumcision and food laws, this would not guarantee that more Jews would convert to Messiah Jesus, but it would continue to block the entrance of gentiles into the new covenant.

But, even apart from these pragmatic considerations, the basic experience that Paul brought with him on his theological journey pointed in another direction. Paul had been prosecuting Jewish Christians who had already allowed gentiles to enter into the synagogue-based Churches without demanding circumcision and adherence to food laws. That was such a deviation from Jewish practices that the early Church, as seen in the case of Stephen, was considered a threat to Judaism. The conflict at that time was not about the identity of Jesus, but about the inclusion of gentiles Paul's zeal for the law was particularly directed at preserving the distinctive character of Judaism; that is, to protect Judaism from defilement by gentile lawlessness. If the Christ that these early Jewish converts followed was resurrected and could appear to Paul, then this in itself meant that Paul must change his view on the status of the gentiles. It was the fact of the resurrection along with Christ's appearance as resurrected that brought this message home to Paul.

On this basis Paul could not answer the objection by reiterating the validity of the law, which would also imply that the boundary markers which divided Israel and the gentiles were still in place. But how then could there be a basis for a Christian morality, if the law had no role to fulfill? Paul answers by referring to three things: (1) what has happened to the believer in baptism, (2) what is actually involved in the reception of grace, in justification, and (3) what new kind of exhortation could take the place of the commandment under Torah.

(1) what has happened to the believer in baptism

Paul asks the relevant question: "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" The general answer is that we have died to sin. Verse 10 states that Christ has died for sin once and for all, and Paul goes on to explain that we have died with Him. There are obvious
connections to the former chapter. In our former life, we show the characteristics of Adam and share in the general condition of mankind as explained in 5:12, 17 (the reign of death) and 5:19 (the status of sinner). If Christ is the gift of grace (5:15), and if we have received the superabundance of grace and the gift of righteousness (5:17), then that is the cause (cf. 5:19) of our justification unto life (5:18). But what is the nature of this connection? In the previous chapters, including chapter 5 where we might have expected it, no mention is made of our participating in Christ’s death. Still, it was clear that the “deed” of righteousness (5:18) and Christ’s death for sinners (5:8) that justifies us (5:9) changes our status. We will live and rule as kings (5:17) because of Christ’s death. But the reason for that is still unclear in the previous passages. Justification has been dealt with up to now in almost exclusively forensic terms. Only 5:5 mentions the Holy Spirit that has been given us, but in that context the consequences of that fact are not developed. Paul’s statement in our verse that “we have already died to sin” is really a new aspect of the issue.

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.
5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

The connection between baptism and death was made in other strands of Christian tradition as well. In particular, in Mark 10:38-39 it is Jesus who refers to his coming crucifixion as the “baptism” that he is to be baptized with. All believers must be baptized with this baptism. Paul himself had stated in Gal. 3:27 that to be baptized unto Christ implied having “put on Christ.” As Dunn explains, the formula “in(to) the name of” signified a formal act of transfer from one dominion into another. That certainly was the usage in the baptism ritual, where the believer was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or into the name of Jesus Christ. But the expression “into Christ” has even stronger connotations than this change of dominion, as it signifies the fact that “their lives and destinies and very identities became bound up with Christ.”

We have here then a further aspect of justification; beyond the acceptance of the faithfulness that Christ has shown unto His death and the trust in the God of Jesus Christ who can work beyond death, we now have a metaphor of participation. The range of this metaphor of participation is difficult to establish. Since it can be explained as having died with Christ and being resurrected with Him, it follows that it implies that the pattern of Christ’s life (obedience to God, acceptance of death as consequence, a renewal of His life through resurrection and living from the power and motivation of the Spirit) becomes the pattern of the believer’s life. In that sense, ethically, the basic view for discerning ethical possibilities is not the imitation of Christ’s acts as example, but the cognitive effort to view all things moral with the aid of Christ’s life. In part, this involves a renunciation of all attempts at self-justification, of boasting and pride taken in ethical achievement. There is no success to be expected from moral behavior if the Christ who is accepted as morally perfect died on the cross as the consequence of it.

A secondary element to this metaphor is that the mode of participation is not individual, but corporate. There is a decisive usage of “we” in these verses, and the whole range of texts on baptism is laden with references to the whole community of the baptized as being one through baptism. By being baptized, the believer takes his place in this world amongst those who have identified themselves with Christ and thus joins a single corporate entity. The moral impetus of baptism involves a change of orientation (the pattern of Christ’s life, death and resurrection) as well as a change in social identity (becoming part of the community) and the view on
corporate, social life that is connected to it. Paul’s exhortations on the issue of Church life in chapters 12 and 14 show this corporateness of morality in clear terms.

(2) what is involved in the reception of grace

Nevertheless, the act of baptism is not the reality, but a sign. It signifies a decision: to take one’s place within the community of the redeemed. But it is not in itself the reality. That reality is expressed in the following verses.

6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

7 For he who has died is freed from sin.

8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.

9 For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

10 The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.

The identification with Christ implies an identification with Christ’s death and along with it a complete reversal of values. What had seemed to be life-giving to the “old man” has now turned out to be part of the Adamitic condition of mankind. What seemed a loss of self and life turns out to be liberation and a new life. The “old man,” the way of life the believers had before conversion, which was dominated by (fear of) death and (weakness towards) sin, has been crucified. I.e., Christ’s life has shown that God ultimately will step in to recognize and reward a life that has been faithful and obedient without the fear of death, to give it the eternal life that is intrinsically congruent with God’s nature. This identification with Christ implies that “the sinful body is destroyed”; i.e., it loses its power and is rendered inactive. This is to be taken literally, since we should not think that “body” here refers to the physical aspect of human life. As Dunn explains, sooma stands for the embodiment of man in his social relationships. Adopting Christ as Lord means a clean break from all the relations we had in this world that would keep us under the power of sin and death. To have died in that sense is as much experiential as a matter of doctrine.

The newness of life should not be expressed only in terms of death, not only in negative but also in positive terms. Sharing Christ’s death means that our former life has been rendered inactive and useless. If that is all that justification can bring, it is hardly worth it (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14). But if it means sharing Christ’s resurrection as well, a matter of hope and expectation and not yet a fully realized promise, the transformation is complete. The experiential connection is not severed, however. Although it is true that Paul’s emphasis here is on the “eschatological tension” expressed in the repeated antitheses between the aorist of the meaningful fact and the future tense of expected events, the hope for sharing in Christ’s resurrection is affirmed by the “newness” of life that is already here and now. That newness of life is at the same time a promise and expectation based on Christ’s work, and a commandment or imperative for us. Verse 8 expresses as an expectation of our faith that we will live with Him. Verse 11 then expresses the exhortation to consider it trustworthy that this is already the case: we are alive before God and dead to sin. This is a description of the situation of those who have been made righteous. From verse 12 we have the exhortation that draws upon the basic act (having died with Christ), runs through the expectation that is linked to it (we will live with Him), and returns to the present (we are alive before God). On that triple basis of fact, expectation, and present condition, and the tension between its temporal modes, the exhortation must then be to
act in accordance, to draw a practical consequence and act like we will be and no longer act as we are, since what we are has been pronounced dead and weak before God.

(3) the new kind of exhortation

The contours of the foundations of Christian morality now come into focus. Faith has made us identify with Christ. Baptism means we express our participation in His death, which reverses the standard by which we live and takes us out of the dominion of sin and death. The hope for the resurrection, and its certainty of through Christ’s resurrection, allows us to consider ourselves as already dead and buried and resurrected before God. The unseen reality of the new post-resurrection situation, which robbed death and sin of their power, is now a motivational force for Christians who live in a world that is still determined by these forces.

11. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and [must consider yourselves] alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Understanding this reality makes possible the exhortation that immediately follows it. The believer is dead to sin, though the passions of his body, his belonging to the environment, can still reawaken his old life. So, no longer in bondage to sin, but still submitted to the power of death, the believer is “to draw [his] vital energies and motivations from God in Christ.”

12. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

13. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

Though freed from the power, the environment still provides a possibility to be tempted again by the still-active passions of the body, to act in accordance with the reality of the old world. But in Paul’s mind, such a relapse is no longer a necessity. It is not the power of sin itself that entices a Christian to sin, but the possibility of acting as if the believer still has sovereign liberty in himself. So Paul again emphasizes the new situation as “under grace.” Such a situation must be understood properly. In a way, justification might in itself tempt one to disobey the commandment, since it removes the fear of condemnation. If grace has already set me free, why worry at all about obedience and sin?

14. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

15. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

16. Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

So the answer lies in the awareness that sinning indubitably leads to a restoration of the former bondage. The actual condition of a believer under grace, his response to it in practice, does indeed effect his situation in practice also. Sin as such still leads to death, not as eternal condemnation, but in the believer’s subjective experience of the quality of his life under the influence of despair and meaninglessness.

17. But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,

18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Liberation from sin is not the restoration of the Adamic condition. It is a new condition of
submission to God in Christ that fills the space previously taken in by the powers of sin and death. Obedience from the heart no doubt refers again to the basic notion of the new covenant of Jeremiah, replacing the law written on the heart with the law obeyed through or by the heart.

19 I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.

20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

21 But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.

22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In 7:5 the antithesis between being in the flesh and being “in the new state of the Spirit” is described. Being in the flesh meant that our sinful passions made use of the law to bring us to death. The law couldn’t prevent that, since it actually provoked transgression in us by stating God’s commandment.

In 7:7-26 we have the development of the function of the law and the answer to the question of whether the law that made sin known and became the instrument of sin was inherently sinful, the answer being that the law is intrinsically holy and righteous. The problem is not the law, but man. And the problem of man can only be solved through transformation by the Spirit. The passage as a whole therefore develops the statement of 7:5, where it is said that the passions work through, with the aid of, the law.

Then, in a second statement, the life in the Spirit is brought forward. So we are discharged from the law and dead to it, released from captivity under it (7:6), not only to be acquitted, but to serve God in a new manner, which Paul announces in 7:6 as “the new condition of the Spirit” and not the “old state of the letter.” This latter part is developed in chapter 8:1-17, on which we will focus our attention in this paragraph. If my life in the flesh turned out to be unable to fulfill the righteous demand of the law, then I need to be transformed by the Spirit. Then it would seem that the law, which is holy and righteous and good, is still discarded! We might then be released from the power of guilt and death, but the law would still condemn our lives since we could still not attain its standard. Does that express an intention on Paul’s part to get rid of the law?

The first sentence of the passage 8:1-17 makes the connection between justification and new life. Kruse rightly points out that “justification and new life in the Spirit might be able to be separated in discussion; they cannot be separated in experience.” But we hold that even a separation in discussion goes beyond Paul’s language and argument. In the course of this letter, it becomes increasingly more difficult to separate the two “in discussion.” That there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ does not refer to justification only with the phrase “no condemnation,” which is of course a forensic term, but also by “being in Christ,” which is the language of our condition, of the reality of the Spirit, or, as we think Paul alludes to, the language of identification with Christ’s sacrifice of Rom. 3.

The connection therefore is not only experiential, as if sanctification and justification are in themselves unconnected in the sense that the former is the objective condition of the latter, but also with regard to what this one, indivisible act of God brings about. Verse 2 brings this out clearly when it argues that we have been freed from the law of sin and death, apparently in an attempt to explain what is stated in verse 1. Being freed from that law implies of course
both status and condition. It means not only that we are not formally in the grasp or jurisdiction of such powers, but also that such powers have no effect on our lives any more. The spiral of guilt which begets more guilt because we despair of our ability to be moral is broken. And so is the fear of death, which hinders us in fulfilling God's command.

Still, the forensic element of the statement remains important. It helps to insure that the extrinsic origin of being made righteous, the essential element of imputation, is not lost to sight. And that also conforms to the fact that the new condition is derived extrinsically. The transformation that we have here is never a possession of the believer that separates him or her from its source and grants him a return to an autonomous way of life. The language of life in the Spirit, Christ in us, although not forensically extrinsic but rather intrinsic, does not refer to a renewal after which man is able to stand on its own and resume his life as if nothing had happened. Käsemann has rejected, in our opinion with solid basis, that the new life of the Christian would imply reinstitution of the law under new conditions. Because "ceremonial law" and ethical demand are never separated in Paul's thinking about the Torah, the passage could never refer to a restoration of its function. So "law" in this passage means "Herrschaftsfunktion", the sovereignty of the principle. To Paul the law in its Jewish use is not reinstated, since it does not give power and commands obedience; therefore it condemns without enabling us to obey. So in as far as Paul understands the life of obedience under law as an autonomous human effort to obey specific precepts, there is no hint at a renewal of that kind of obedience after the impediments have been set aside. The form of obedience is completely changed.

So the opening argument is clear: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, who have been liberated from the necessary connection between sin and death. The law of Moses was unable to do this. The condemnation of sin by the law only set up the commandment as a standard of performance and brought death as a consequence. Sin had to be condemned in such a way that its power was defeated. That which was impossible for the law, God had accomplished by sending His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin (verse 3).

The translation of this verse (8:3) is difficult. The function of ἐν ὁθεο (in which) is not clear, and the whole sentence appears to be anacoluthic, since there is no verb in the present tense connected to ho theos (God). We might read like this: "because of what was impossible in the law, in which it was weak through the flesh (i.e., the fact that it could only condemn sin by sentencing the sinner but could not transform the sinner) God has made possible, so we complement the sentence by the opposite of "impossible," so God and the law become the agents here, by sending His Son in the likeness of the flesh and as a sin-offering (following LXX usage of the term and not: because of sin, which is superfluous) He has judged the sin the flesh." The notion of atoning sacrifice is expressed four times in the letter to the Hebrews (10:6, 8, 18; 13:11), in the first three instances as a clear derivation from LXX Ps. 40 (39):7-9. "Likeness of the flesh" might imply a distinction from humanity, since Christ's flesh was not the same as sinful flesh, but like flesh that became corrupted by sin. So it might here express the same thought as in Phil. 2:7: en homoioomati anthroopoon, in the likeness of man. As in 1:23, the likeness does not imply identity, but similarity, which allows for representation.

If God in Christ could atone for sin and remove it, the law (in its accidental function) of (empowering) sin and death could be broken. Sin was judged and condemned as the law demanded. But Christ's death also accomplished liberation from sin and death for all those in Christ who have been resurrected with Him. So we can summarize our analysis of 8:1-3 as follows: There is no (present or future) condemnation for those who are set in Christ. They (Paul changes to "us") have been liberated from the power of sin and death. That which the law could not do, make itself be obeyed and condemn the sin without destroying the sinner, God has been able to do In Christ by making Him into a sin-offering. The result of this offer-
What then is the consequence of all of this? The hina-phrase in verse 4 expresses God's intent. In us who walk according to the Spirit, the just demand of the law is actually being fulfilled, even beyond the satisfaction given to the law by our death with Christ. Paul uses dikaiouma here, as in 1:32 and 5:16, with the meaning of demand, and not like dikaiosuo (judgment). The just demand of the law might mean here: (1) the love of the neighbor and (2) the judgment of God over sin or (3) in its narrowest sense: the law as seen from the perspective of the 10th commandment. We will look at these possibilities in turn.

The just demand of the law is summarized in the commandment to love the neighbor. In Gal. 5:14 Paul stated that the whole of the law is fulfilled in the commandment to love one's neighbor. Gal. 5:16 calls upon us to walk in the power of the Spirit. Kruse (pp. 218-219) has argued in favor of this interpretation, citing three major arguments: (a) the notion of the spirit comes to the fore in both passages, (b) the antithesis of flesh and spirit is the same, and (c) the striking convergence of the concepts of freedom, walking in the spirit, and the negative aspects of the flesh. Schlatter, however, argued against this option with the contention that the context shows God here to be seen as judge (starting from the mention of condemnation in 8:1) who wanted to condemn sin, not atone for it (Schlatter, 257). But in Rom. 3:25, the concepts of showing righteousness and sacrificial language ( mercy seat) are also connected. We might make such a clear distinction, but Paul apparently did not. So Schlatter's counter-argument must be rejected.

The just demand of the law is the judgment on sin. Schlatter maintains that dikaiouma is the opposite of katakrima: the justifying judgment of God. Justification happens through the condemnation of sin and therefore it is the establishment of the law and not its annulment (Rom. 3:31). However, dikaiouma is not only the commandment of righteousness, but also its restitution through the justification of the believer. Our justification is based on the condemnation of Christ, so that we believe, and it happens (is a reality) through the reality of the Spirit in which we believe. There is one divine act: giving Christ up to death as a sacrifice for the many who believe, accompanied by the efficacy of the Spirit of resurrection.

The just demand of the law is summarized in the commandment not to covet. The third possibility is quoted in Kruse (218). Ziesler maintained that the dikaiouma refers to the 10th commandment, which Paul had in mind throughout 7:7-25. Kruse argues against this by stating that the 10th commandment functioned as a paradigm of the entire law. Rom. 7:7 does indeed introduce the 10th commandment as an illustration for the effect of the law with regard to mankind under the power of sin.

We favor Kruse's interpretation in (1) because we find the parallel between Gal. 5 and our passage a convincing argument indeed. He also accepts the use of dikaiouma in the plain sense and does not overemphasize the opposition to katakrima as Schlatter did in our opinion. Käsemann agrees implicitly by translating: the legal demand of the law (Rechtsanspruch des Gesetzes).

The just demand of the law is then that what the law can rightfully demand from human beings; that demand is then accepted as such, and not reduced to it, by referring to the one single demand in it that can be used pars pro toto to express the whole of it under a specific aspect: to love one's neighbor. (In the same manner, the 10th commandment could stand paradigmatically for the entire law and the way it is abused by human lusts to bring man under the verdict of death.) We must equally emphasize that our text uses the divine passive for fulfilling. It is not about believers fulfilling the law as a requirement, let alone that such was a new condition for salvation. Walking in the power of the Spirit accomplishes it because God accomplishes it in us (8:4). If we have the Spirit, we have the mindset of the Spirit of Christ,
which is life and peace. The flesh does not submit to God's law; it is hostile toward God. But believers, first of all being in Christ (8:1) and in the Spirit (8:9), do. The multiplicity of God's commandments (implied in the claim of the law, but there seen as a unity and not as a fragmented series of prohibitions and commandments), seen from the perspective of love for one's neighbor, are being fulfilled in such a life.

Our next observation must be of verse 13, where Paul introduces a new concept: soma. The concept is taken to mean the whole of the human being as creature, the seat of volition and passion, without the connotation of sinfulness. Romans 8:12 first of all defines our situation in life with an image derived from civil law. We are debtors; we stand under an obligation. The term oφειλέτης is used figuratively for a variety of obligations. In Gal. 5:3, someone who opts for circumcision becomes a debtor to the law and can be required to perform according to its dictates. It is as if he signed a contract and now has to perform a duty. Being freed from sin and death, we are obligated not to live according to the flesh, which stresses the negative meaning: in verse 13, to put to death (mortify) the deeds of the body. All acts that lead to death in the flesh must be put to death in the body.

What are these acts (praxeís) and what does it mean to put them to death? The acts of the body must be the same as the result of walking according to the flesh. The first expression seems to describe the fruit of the latter, the result of not submitting oneself to the law of God (8:7), of enmity against God. Being in the flesh meant succumbing to sinful desires, which led to the breaking of the prohibitive side of the law (7:5), so putting to death the acts of the flesh means refraining from doing what the law prohibited. It seems that the prohibitive side of the law is being referred to specifically. It also does not state directly that we will put to death the workings of the flesh or the flesh itself, for we are unable to do that. The terminology of deeds of the body is a way to describe deeds that have no power in them any more to make us obey, since the "body" can be seen as the flesh without power, or the flesh as being put to death in the Spirit. It does not say either that we have now a personal existence that is as "body," i.e., that is flesh without power, which in itself would be able to produce the works of obedience that the flesh could not. The body, the personal existence of man, is useless even if cleansed from the power of sin and death. As a matter of fact, Paul even states directly that the body also is dead in chapter 8:10, and here the spirit is alive because of Christ. It is merely the bearer of the new reality of the Spirit, it is the new creature that gets its spirit from God, and where it tries to maintain its own in distinction to the Spirit, its works are equal to that of the flesh and should be "put to death."

So it seems we have reached a point now from where we can express Paul's view on the ethical life of the justified. We have found that since both Jew and pagan are under condemnation, they can only escape judgment if God accepts Christ's sacrifice as the basis of judgment. Those who have identified with him are set free from judgment and can already experience the fact that they are acquitted. But identification with Christ also implies the reception of the Spirit, the gift of a new life. We have died unto the demand of the law, so that we are no longer under its verdict; we are set free from the power of sin which threatens our moral life and from the power of death which reigns in our body. Having been set free, the Spirit of Christ can now act in us so we are justified also in the sense that we are made righteous, not in the sense that we are now enabled to do the law from our autonomous capability, but in the sense that God can fulfill the demand of righteousness through, not in, us. The most visible sign of that is the love for our neighbor in which the claim of the law is summarized. The ethical life of the believer is therefore most adequately present in an attitude of receptivity, in which the works of the body are being ignored or put to death, since the body is dead on account of its identification with Christ.

The previous section has shown how the righteousness that comes from God implies the believer's death and resurrection in the Spirit. God justifies man on the basis of his sharing in
the life of Christ, who in His faithfulness unto death revealed God’s righteousness. The status of the law has changed dramatically because of this: from the covenanted condition that leads to life for the obedient it has become, because of sin and human weakness, the source of desire, the cause of death and despair. I know the law is good, says Paul’s alter ego in chapter 7. And because it is good, it shows my inability to be righteous on my own. Fortunately God justifies beyond the law (8:33).

This raises a third important issue, that of the status of Israel (9:1-11:36). Manifold are the privileges of Israel (9:4-5a), but the highest of them all is the one that actually changes the perspective on Israel’s former history and status before God: the coming of Christ. If the consequence of Christ’s coming is then that man is redeemed outside of the law and its demands, what is the value of the promises to and the covenant with Israel? Are the promises annulled by the coming of the Messiah?

As Paul explains, the giving of the law need not be seen in contradiction to the revelation of righteousness in Christ. God has always been sovereign in the dispensation of His promises. The election of Jacob who became Israel was based on God’s elective grace, and not on any previous obedience to law. The privileges and achievements of Israel are ultimately all linked to the same sovereignty that reveals itself in the righteousness of faith. If God intended to acquire for Himself a people, consisting of Jews and gentiles, on the basis of faith in Christ, then that is His sovereign will, and who could object?

If that is the case, it explains the quite paradoxical turn of events that Paul mentions in 9:30. Pagans who did not strive for righteousness have received it through faith, or better: have received a righteousness that is based solely upon God’s faithfulness. Israel, however, who pursued righteousness through the law, has not acquired such righteousness. Paul states that they did not even reach such a law. Why not? Because apparently they did not fully comprehend its nature. They removed the principle of faith that was contained in it and were left with a principle of works.

This notion of righteousness through works figures prominently in both Galatians and Romans. In Gal. 2:16 we hear about the “works of the law” that will not justify man and will certainly not give the Spirit (Gal. 3:2). Those who are trying to achieve perfection by doing the works of the law are in fact under the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10). The law, seen as a demand for works without faith, can only condemn. It requires full compliance, since whoever who has broken one commandment has broken all. In Romans we find seven references to works of the law: no flesh will be justified on the basis of it (3:20), Abraham’s justification was not on the basis of works (3:27; 4:2), and neither is the election (9:11; 11:6). And then there is the reference here in 9:32. It is obvious that Paul is arguing that Israel misunderstood the law, for he claims that they did not know the real nature of the sovereign righteousness of God (10:3). Had they known, they would not have excluded the principle of faith from their effort to obey the law and would not have interpreted the law in terms of works.

§ 30. The new righteousness of the believer’s community (Romans 12)

We have found that Paul actually teaches a new type of righteousness that is not earned in a life that tries to fulfill the various demands of the law, but is fulfilled through us by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit when we accept Christ in faith. The atonement that Christ brings once and for all, assuring us of future acquittal in God’s judgment, frees us from the effort to acquire righteousness by doing the “works of the law,” both in the sense that we seek to become part of Israel as community and in the sense that we take upon ourselves the separate duties under the law to become more fully righteous. Faith leads to righteousness in the sense of leading us into an acceptance of God’s sovereignty in the sacrifice of Christ and the atonement brought by God’s action alone, and in the sense that the individual’s identification
with the resurrected Christ involves a new way of life in which sin has no power and death does not have the final word.

This act of faith does not evoke a declarative judgment of acquittal alone. It is also connected to our participation in Christ and the gift of the Spirit. These three elements of the initial movement of grace within us cannot be separated. The participation in Christ implies our dying with him and being resurrected with Him in the newness of life. The gift of the Spirit implies sharing His life, and being controlled by that Spirit. But there is an aspect of “not yet” in all of this. We have been given the Spirit in a world that, though already under control of the Messiah, is not yet fully realizing the Kingdom. Within the believer this is evident from the struggle between the Spirit of Christ within us and our own flesh. By remembering that we have actually died with Christ, implying that the interests of the flesh no longer have a place in the new reality of the Kingdom, we can “mortify” it, thereby allowing God’s spirit to work within us.

We must turn now to the most important question of what the content of this new life in the Spirit really is. Is it determined in its contents by Christ as such, i.e. as a mode of imitation? After all, it is His Spirit, and we participate in His life. Christ is the “New Torah,” so we could emphasize the aspect of Christ as the teacher of righteousness. The basis for Christian ethics might then be the embodiment of God’s decrees in the Kingdom as exemplified in Jesus’ obedience in life. But the essence of God’s will would then be fully revealed only in the self-surrendering love of Christ on the Cross. That self-sacrificing love could then become the primary image in which the ethical ideal is portrayed. Imitation of Christ could refer to both these elements of course. But we might also construct an opposition between these two, creating a gap between the teachings of the “historical,” pre-resurrection Jesus of Nazareth (implying that we follow Him or become the disciples of this Teacher), and the post-resurrected, glorified Christ (that we through the power of His Spirit can imitate).

Is there however a third way that does not try to derive the content of obedience from the narrative of the One who is to be obeyed? Is God’s demand perhaps already expressed in the law of Moses (and interpreted according to its inner purpose in Jesus’ teachings and example), and have we been freed from its destructive power by being set free from the power of sin? Is grace enabling us to actually live in accordance with the law of Moses? In that case, the intent behind the unity of the believer with the Spirit of Christ is enablement and in that sense it leads to the fulfillment of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The Kingdom-ethics is then a transformation, not an abrogation, of the Mosaic law. As we will see, a concept of the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice is of the utmost importance to understand the transformation of ethics and the continuity between Jesus’ ethical teachings and this focus of attention on the Cross.

We turn now to the text of Romans 12ff. to seek an answer to this question in the environment of Paul’s paraenesis. This exhortatory section is immediately linked to the preceding one by the “therefore” (oun) of verse 1. In Rom. 12:1, Paul cites the “compassions” of God as the foundation of the exhortations that follow, undoubtedly meaning that this was the character of God he had been displaying in the first 11 chapters of his letter. Since all have been trapped in disobedience by sin and death, it was only through God’s mercy that righteousness is attainable for man (cf. 11:32). The service of God which is “intelligent” (DV) or “spiritual” (NIV) is based upon our understanding of God’s character as revealed in His actions towards mankind in Christ’s death and resurrection. That service can now no longer be understood as analogous to law-obedience outside the principle of faith. Nevertheless it is a worshipping of God through our actions as servants, and a service through obedience to Him.

Let us review the meaning of the law in this respect. The law, as Paul understood the primary effect of its dictates (not its intent as a whole!), effectively demonstrated the frailty of man. Death and sin took advantage of our weakness, and the law could only affirm what we
were by condemning us and glorifying God's justice in the process (Romans 2). Having been identified with Christ as the revelation of God's ultimate grace, we have died to sin and regained new life in the Spirit (Romans 8). In that new life there is no room for sin any more, we are "dead" to it. The works of the flesh have no hold over us any more. Yet, even without the power of sin, our personality (Paul then speaks of the "body" in the sense of "being in a social environment) is weak. The deeds of the body must be controlled by the power of the Spirit. This does not involve a feverish activity on our part, but an attitude of "Gelassenheit," of receptive surrender to the activity of God's Spirit within us. That is the gist of what we have found so far.

In this exhortatory part of his letter, Paul draws the ethical consequences of his exposition of the meaning of the law for gentiles, the new life in the Spirit, in short, all that justification by grace was shown to imply. The gentiles are called to a new shape of obedience. The new obedience forms a precise counterpart of the pagan vices that have been listed in the first chapter. That gives a macro-structural connection between the last and the first part of the letter. Stanley Stowers puts it like this:

Chapter 1 tells of the ungodly and unacceptable worship of idols. These people worshipped (latrein) the creation instead of the creator (1:25). They thus dishonored their bodies (1:24). The readers in 12:2 are to renew their minds. In the first chapter, gentile minds became base (28), their reasonings confused, and their sense darkened (21). Verse 3 of chapter 12 exhorts to a realistic humility as a basis for behavior, while 1:22 and 30 accuse gentiles of false claims to wisdom, hubris, arrogance, and pretentiousness. As 1:28-31 lists a long string of antisocial vices, so 12:4-13:10 spells out a counter list of social virtues. The first chapter speaks of enslavement to desire and sexual passion; 13:8-14 elicits a freedom from sensual gratification; the latter chapters call for a reversal of precisely the degeneracy depicted in 1:18-32.

The structure of the letter therefore is basically circular: the righteousness revealed as wrath over pagan vices is by its revelation as sacrificing grace effecting a reversal of these vices in the life of the Church. It shows also that the exhortatory part is not an addition to an already complete doctrinal letter, but a major aim of the letter. Yet, Stowers argues that the basis of chapters 12 and 13 is to be found in a single concept that expresses the basis for the righteousness revealed: Christ's faithfulness.

The opposition to chapter 1 only partly explains the construction of 12. The best traditional accounts have 12-15:13 exhorting readers to the new life described in 1-11 and thus connect the parts of the letter only in the most superficial and abstract way. I, however, want to argue for a genuine internal coherence between the discourse and thought of the two sections. If 1-11 finds its focus on God's righteousness being made good through Christ's faithfulness and understands Christ's faithfulness as his generative adaptation to the needs of others, then 12-15 sketches an ethic of community based on the principle of faithfulness as adaptability to others.

If that is correct, elements of the exhortation must be referring back not only to the list of vices, but to the positive character of Christ as revealed in His life and death. We might see in the renewal of thought in verse 2 a reversal of the "confused reason" of 1:28, but the exposition of verses 3-8 goes beyond the reversal. The community that is ordered along the lines of self-control, according to the measure of faith that reaches each member in particular, is an organism. It is the one body of Christ, which implies that each member sees the other in the social character of member of the body of Christ, as part of Christ. And in that organismic concept, the different charismata are like specific organs or functions within the whole that are working toward the common goal: to express the life and death of Christ in the form of a social community. The measure of faith can be easily recognized as an element of the previous discourse. The metaphor of the body is not new either, since we are "in Christ," according to
Rom. 8:1, which expresses a similar thought. And the rest of chapter 12 can be looked at in the same manner. The apotheosis of the passage in verses 19 and 20, with respect to love for the enemy, feels like a sober and pragmatic consequence of Christ's attitude towards us, who had been "enemies" of God (Rom. 5:10).

The shape of this new obedience (for obedience it still is; cf. Rom. 6:16, 19; 7:6) is called "presenting your bodies [as] a living sacrifice." The terminology brings us back to the theme Paul mentioned only in passing, the cultic background of Christ's death as a sin-offering in Romans 3:25. What does this expression mean? First of all, to what does it refer within the letter itself? The sacrifice of Christ in which God revealed both His justice (Rom. 3:21-26) and His sovereign grace (Rom. 4:2-4) is imitated by those who believe in Him. Sharing His death implies sharing His life-pattern. We are not called to imitate or follow Christ in the same sense that the moralism of Paul's gentile audience called them, they believed, to obey Torah. The essence of Christ's sacrifice had been expressed by His full dedication to God and His obedience to the law as an expression of God's sovereign will for the present and unto death. Such a service in imitation of Christ's obedience on the part of the believer can then be called "reasonable" or "intelligent," because it makes sense that we, after sharing in His death, now share in His life.

The reference to "bodies" is important too, since this was the term Paul used for the concrete existence of the believer within his social environment, as well as after his being united with Christ in His death. In Rom. 8:13, Paul adds the notion that the deeds of the body must also be mortified and brought under the power of Christ's death. The idea of "sacrifice" must mean a rendering of our lives to the service of God through death, i.e., through our identification with the death of Christ, as being dead to sin. But the force of that lies in the resurrection, not in the death itself, and certainly not in the "body" as such. So it is not enough to speak of sacrifice in the weakened sense of a commitment of our power. We are not seen by Paul to have any. The basis of our living in service is certainly our "death" in the sense of the acknowledgment in faith of our powerlessness. It points towards a source of power that is different from the "life in the flesh" and does not exert itself from within towards the world, but allows the power of Christ to move from the outside into the inner man. But what does it mean that, on the basis of our death as identification with Christ's death, we follow the life-pattern of Christ in His obedience unto death?

The "sacrifice" is further determined as "living, holy, and acceptable" to God. The term "living sacrifice" obviously is meant in distinction from the animal sacrifices that served to represent the possibility of communion between God and man. They needed actual moral submission (repentance, conversion) to achieve atonement, and had no efficacy in themselves. In this sense, the temple cult as a whole represented to Paul a means to obtain the "forbearance" through which sins were "passed by" (cf. 3:25). The death of the animal represented the dedication of a human life: as completely as the animal was given over to God in its death, so completely would man redeicate himself to keeping the law. In that perspective, calling Christ's death a sacrifice means understanding His death as being an expression of God's moral demand, and not as a cultic ritual of atonement by direct analogy. The prophets, after all, had argued against a sacrificial cult that had severed the links between ritual and moral dedication. Furthermore, it would set us up for the impossibility of a human sacrifice, unheard of in the Old Testament and early Judaism, and we would miss the more important connection with Jewish thinking on the merits of martyrdom. Here Christ sacrifices Himself by responding so completely to the demand of the law that his death became an inevitable response by a world that was in bondage to sin and death and dedicated to the pursuit of power. In that sense, Christ's life as a whole was sacrificial, because the moral dedication that was intended by sacrifice was in Him provoking His death as a response of the ungodly powers. In that sense, Christ was indeed a "living sacrifice."
The expression “living sacrifice” as applied to believers does, however, also imply a distinction from the sacrifice of Christ. His death brings life. His death, and our participation in it, makes it possible for God to fulfill the claim the law has on us, instead of our dedicating ourselves completely to God by our own efforts. Following Christ on the basis of identifying ourselves with Christ does not put us in the same position. In other words: Christ’s death and our moral commitment are not linked in the way the believer’s sacrifice under the old covenant was intended to bring that connection about. There is a reverse analogy between the ritual that signifies and presupposes moral dedication, and Christ’s death which removes the bondage of sin and grounds our dedication. Christ’s death is not a cultic sacrifice in the sense that its atoning effect lies in the satisfaction it gives to a God demanding punishment. Christ’s death is the outcome of the conflict between a world governed by sin and the New Man who complied fully with God’s will.

The main point behind the notion of a “living sacrifice” can now be formulated: the death of the animal represented the total dedication of the believer which must work itself out in obedience to the law, the same law that prescribed the sacrifice. Where this connection is severed, the early prophets of Israel express the moral prescription as superior to cultic purity, because then the intent of sacrifice is reduced to an outward and legal compliance. The prophets can then boldly state that such sacrifice is merely provisional, and even invalid, without its necessary moral accompaniment. Christ’s death expresses first and foremost His total dedication in terms of the obedience to God that led to His death in this world, this world being what it is. And on top of that, His resurrection implied that believers who identify with Him adopt the way of life that is dedicated to God completely and has divine sanction even beyond death. So the analogy is reversed: the death of Christ is the outcome of moral dedication to God, and a counter-concept to the sacrifices under the old covenant that provided the basis for such moral (re-) dedication. The antithesis between sacrifice and service that could arise where humans failed to achieve the moral dedication that was presupposed in the sacrifices, and that is so prominent in a prophet like Amos, is overcome in Christ’s sacrifice. And that leads to the first conclusion: that Christ’s surrender unto death implies that our dedication to God no longer requires “our” sacrificial death by proxy, or, in a way, by identification, that we have passed through it. But having gone through death, having received justification and being transformed by the spirit, we are now enabled to imitate the pattern of Christ’s life of dedication ourselves. We must be careful here: “we” as a community are “enabled” to conform to this pattern of life. The major and primary effect is not that all of us separately have been given the ability to do so, so that we as individuals can now lead better lives.

The second principle of our moral renewal is expressed in verse 2. There should be no conformity to this world, but we should have a reform of thought, i.e., our way of hearing and understanding must be renewed as well. Through the renewal of thought we are able to recognize what the will of God is. Both statements are passive: the body of sin becomes a living sacrifice, dedicated to the service of righteousness, motivated by the knowledge of a compassionate God. Our thinking, which begins with conformity to this world, is changed through a transformation of our understanding of the reality before God. Both exhortations call us to allow ourselves to be transformed, not to achieve it on our own. As Schlatter emphasizes: we are exhorted to “do” this, because God is already doing it “in” us. The compassionate God who motivates our service is the power source for our new understanding.

The aim of this understanding is the answer to the question, “What is the will of God?” According to Käsemann, as well as Schlatter, the answer to that question must be found in the varying circumstances of life, and the answer to that question implies testing of that answer and an immediate affirmation of that will. But the argument can be developed in two different directions. When the believer judges the answer in accordance with his renewed thinking, the result will be such an affirmation of the divine will. The three attributes of the divine will that
are mentioned here might be merely apposite equivalents. It would then state that the divine will is the good, the acceptable, and the perfect. They are of course maximum qualities. In that sense, the righteousness striven for is the ultimate that God demands, because God can demand it of sinners who have been made righteous. They might, however, also qualify the sense in which the divine will is sought for. By using renewed thinking, the good etc., that which is found can be recognized as the divine will. The mention of the divine will in this context then moves closer to being the motivational force behind the informed judgment on the ethical demand. We can easily recognize the classic dilemma of Plato’s Eutyphron in this difference. In the one case, (1) whatever God wills is the good, the acceptable, and the perfect. In the other, (2) whatever we find to be the good, acceptable, and perfect must be done because we recognize it as the divine will. So does God will it because it is good, or is it good because God wills it?

The form of our obedience is at stake in this exegetical dilemma! Käsemann argues that δοκεῖμεν refers to a specific decision in a concrete situation. The reference to the three attributes of God’s will is meant to curb the Enthusiasmus of those who would identify the moral command with the ability to decide and the immediate spiritual awareness of God’s will. Inspired obedience at the spur of the moment, in response to each and every situation as it occurs, must have some guiding principles. The congruence between my will and that of God cannot be complete, making necessary a reasoning process that is guided by the understanding of what is good, acceptable, and perfect. Käsemann argues that the three attributes are guidelines toward finding the will of God, but cannot be identified with it. So, in opposition to (1), Käsemann appears to deny that God’s will can be equated with the attributes. And he weakens the second argument by stating that the attributes are guidelines, and not the substance of our ethical decisions.

But is that indeed what Paul is saying here? Of course the good, the acceptable, and the holy can be seen as references to the law in its capacity to instruct us in the divine will (12:2). In a way it can be seen as a higher mode of the law that is in itself called holy, just, and good in Rom. 7:12. Still, his goal is not the reestablishment of the law as system. But there can be no doubt that Paul presupposes that the law would still have some function in the Christian life: its requirements, after all, are being fulfilled in the Christian life, according to Romans 8:4. How the law should be used we should try to determine from the next passage.

In 12:3-15:13 Paul draws out the implications of this living sacrifice for various aspects of Christian living: 12:3-8, the inner structure of the Church with regard to differences in faith and grace among them, the concept of the organismic unity of the Church; 12:9-21, love in action, present in particular in the adoption of a completely non-violent attitude; 13:1-7, submission to the state, as a witness to it; 13:8-10, love of fellow believers as a way of showing a better community than the state with its power of sword can guarantee; 13:11-14, life in the light of the imminent end; 14:1-23, no judging or causing fellow believers to stumble; 15:1-13, following the example of Christ in accepting others.

There is a remarkable difference of opinion about the contents of these admonitions. According to Käsemann, the admonitions in chapter 12 are directed against exaggerated enthusiasm. Similarly, Otto Michel argues that in 12:3 the exhortation is directed against the charismatics. That would explain why Paul stresses notions of σωφρόνειν sober thoughtfulness, which is one of the Aristotelian virtues. Not to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think sounds indeed like a caution against Gnostic exaggeration or against the kind of spiritual enthusiasm also found in 1 Cor., in which charisma would bestow personal status. But the motivational clause in verses 4 and 5 makes it clear that polemics is not the prime intent; indeed, Paul’s emphasis is on the solidarity of the members of the Church as a way to exercise the righteousness by faith that the entire letter is dealing with.

Though the believers are different in many ways, these differences are the result of the
measure of faith, not quantitatively, but qualitatively. They share in each other's life because their life has become that of Christ. They have died to the ways of the world in which position and rank determine one's social status and effectiveness. Not all members have the same office, but these "offices" are not seen as levels of hierarchy. To look at each member of a community as someone who has a personal contribution to make to the whole puts an end to the kind of hierarchical structure that might distinguish each person in a collective by social or political status. It is not power that determines the status, but service to the whole. Proleptically, the official of the state is also dealt with in this manner (Each member has a specific office according to the measure of his faith, based on his gifts, according to the grace that is given, i.e., completely dependent upon God's work in man and not on the development of natural abilities. The different gifts are summed up in verses 5-8 together with the principle that guides their development. But it is important to remember that all of these different gifts come from one and the same grace; the will of God is one and the same good, and what is required of us constitutes one service of God. Not only the context but also the content makes it clear that Paul is speaking of the one principle of love as the commandment for Christians.277

We come now to the two passages that form the context of the passage on the relation to government: 12:9-21, and 13:8-14, which we will discuss together. In general we can say that the exhortations in 12:9-21 express how the commandment of brotherly love must be exercised within the community (verses 9-16) and with regard to "outsiders," who are called "all people" (verses 17 and 18) and "enemy" (verse 20). The passage ends with the exhortation not to be overcome by evil - meaning not to resist evil with violence, but to overcome it with the good. Very naturally at this point, the three elements: (1) acceptance of the different gifts of people in a community as contributing to the unity of the whole, (2) brotherly love that makes patient acceptance of suffering possible, and (3) love for the enemy and submission to evil, are used to describe the attitude towards the rulers in chapter 13.

The exercise of righteousness that is the fruit of transformation through the Spirit is a dedicated life governed by the principle of nonconformity to the world and an attitude of submission. It involves a life within a community, structured around the principle of love and unselfish service to others, and love of the enemy and suffering with regard to the outside world. So how is the relationship to be worked out in a society within which Christians are a minority? What is the relation between Christian life and the powers of the state? There is no doubt that the passage in Romans 13:1-8 is not a separate discourse that strayed into Paul's treatment of the principle of Christian love.278 It is an integral part of the ethical discourse here. Let's see how we can show this structural integrity of the letter.

The structural connection between chapters 12 and 13 has been put nicely by J. H. Yoder:

In his short exposition of the contents of the entire letter leading up to chapters 12 and 13, he stresses the calling of the gentiles and God's continuing concern for "ethnic Israel." The point of the letter, according to Yoder, is the overcoming of the hostility between Jews and gentiles by the creation of community, "reaching even to the nuts and bolts of financial sharing and missionary support." From that perspective he develops a reading of Rom. 13 within
the context of the whole letter, not as a separate statement, and certainly not as the center of what the New Testament has to say about the meaning of the state and its power. To Yoder, the connection between the former chapters and chapter 13 lies in the social-political dimension of the letter as a whole, and the social ethics of chapter 12 in particular.

The problem that is of great concern to any Christian is of course Rom. 13:1-7, which seems to imply submission to a government that, as instituted by God, has the right to make use of the sword, i.e., it may use violence to achieve its goals. It would imply, as Yoder pointed out, that the ideal of love of one's enemy in 12:19-21 and the demand of love in 13:8-14 are characterized as religious affairs, but that, for a Christian, existence in this world implies acceptance of the government that is there, even when it contradicts these religious ideals, as long as such a government provides for the minimum requirements of human society. All governments and authorities derive their power from God (verse 2), so that any kind of resistance, even on the basis of the religious principles mentioned in the context of the passage, is resistance to God, again, unless the government fails to comply with its basic function, and then rebellion seems in order. The essence remains that every soul (a Semitism for 'everyone', kol nefesh), here referring to Christians, must submit to the authorities (which Yoder consistently reads as synonym for the "state") that are set over them. With that statement, the fanatics of 12:3, according to Käsemann, had to be put in their place; literally: "had to be put back into the boundaries of the earthly order." 260

Anders Nygren argues this possibility: the anticipatory, eschatological attitude would lead to a denial that a Christian lives in this present eon. Being set free from the present ruling powers would then lead to an anarchist attitude. The difference is simply that the exousia, as dominating and demoniacal powers, have been reduced to mere worldly powers; Christians do not need to put their trust in them to achieve the good. That would be the reason Paul uses the same word, exousia, for demoniacal powers as for worldly government. The freedom of the Christian would then be exercised in the free attitude with which he can approach the government and measure it by its own standard. To Nygren, all government is in principle instituted by God, and only God can give the government power.261 This would lead, however, to a life in duality: being on the one hand religiously committed to the ethics of the new kingdom, and on the other hand standing in compromise with the realm of the old world.

Adolf Schlatter defends clearly the exact point against which Yoder has argued so forcefully. He acknowledges that the primary point of doubt for the Christian in his obedience to the state is the spilling of blood. Then Schlatter states: "Paul accepts even the military foundation of the state's power as part of that which enables the state to fulfill its divine mission because she is the 'advocate of justice', of which the divine wrath makes use; because of that power, God's anger persecutes and punishes the wrongdoer." If that is so, morality is subordinated to the political dimension: the state's power and its habitual killing must be accepted because the state punishes wrongdoings in the place of God, as if the entire letter had not first preached the fact that the revelation of God's justice meant acquittal for sinners; as if chapter 12 had not spoken out loudly against hatred and violence.

Michel (1955) speaks quite similarly here. According to him, the state acts as the protector of the divine law and judges on matters of right and wrong. Good is the "general good" that pagans could know about through their consciences; evil is the disruption of social life. The sword is only the power of justice. All Christians have a duty towards the state. The state could rightfully demand taxes (both direct taxes like an income tax, φόρος, and indirect taxes, τέλος, e.g., levies) but also respect and tribute. The institution of the state is based upon divine law, therefore its retributive justice, including the death penalty, is within its divine prerogative.

First of all we can see, with Yoder, that the text does not imply a divine act of institution or ordination of a particular government.262 It is merely a matter of accepting the political power
that happens to be there. This might be inferred from the usage of ὀνοματικοί in verse 2, the powers that are there. Yoder concludes by arguing that that excludes both the affirmation of the providential act by which any particular government comes into existence and the idea that the principle of government is being taught here. Paul is not intent on describing the minimal conditions under which a government may be accepted. A rebellion against such a government that fails to live up to this standard might then be motivated by the prophetic call for a proper government, which is the ideology of the just rebellion. Christians would then be in the dilemma of giving active moral support to a government that fulfills its duty under God or of rebelling against the evil state if it fails in that respect. But the text merely speaks about submission. In no way can Paul be understood to be saying that a rebellion with force against any government is warranted, but what is important is the reason for this submission. Is it the divine origin of the state, or the general prohibition against the use of violence for no matter what purpose?

But does the passage teach the divine institution of the state? Yoder observes that Paul does not say that the authorities are created or instituted by God (though the NIV uses “instituted” here as its translation of τεταγμέναι from τάσσω, to order, to set in its place), but rather that God sets them in their place. Government as such was not created by God: the state involved “domination, disrespect for human dignity, and real or potential violence ever since sin has existed.” Paul’s acceptance of authorities is therefore no moral affirmation, but he intends to say, according to Yoder, that “by his permissive government he lines them (the authorities in general) up with his purpose.” Christians are therefore called to a nonresistant attitude even toward a tyrannical government. No revolution or insubordination is possible for the Church, precisely because it trusts in a God who governs the governments.

Yet there are limits to this submission to the state and the cooperation it generally calls for. The sword, for Rome, was the symbol of judicial authority, not of state-violence, and the function of the sword to which Christians are subject, even when it implies the use of violence, is the judicial and police function, not the death penalty and war. And yet another limit is expressed in the structure of verse 6b: “attending to this very thing.” Käsemann discusses various possibilities without making a choice: (1) the authorities are constantly mindful to be in the service of God (exaggerated and unlikely, according to Käsemann) (2) the authorities, insofar as they exercise their function, remain within the limits ordained by God. Yoder chooses the second possibility, seeing in the participial construction an adverbial modifier to the main statement. The full translation, in the restrictive sense, would then be: “they are ministers of God only to the extent to which they carry out their function, i.e., the judicial and police function; through taxes, the ordering of economic life; what is referred to in the phrases "servant for your good" and “execute wrath on the wrongdoer.” This is the criterion by which we measure whether the state functions as God devised it to do, not to ascertain whether such a government is permissible, using the condition of the kingdom as a standard, or should be rebelled against because it does not further the interests of the Church. Yet the payment of taxes does not in itself constitute recognition of the state, as Ridderbos argues, e.g.

Yoder then makes an interesting point of exegesis. Normally verse 6 reads: “For that reason you also pay taxes, because they (RSV and NTV: the authorities) are ministers of God, [insofar as they are, Yoder] attending to this very thing.” We take αἰτιοῦνος to be the nominal part of the predicate, and then have to search for the subject of ἐπιστάιν [they are], which we found some verses ago: the authorities. But what if the nominal part is in fact the plural subject, referring to Christians? The text would then read: “For that reason you also pay taxes, because [you, as] ministers of God are also attending to this very thing.” Christians also devote themselves to approval of the good and the reprimanding of evil, with good and evil understood in the individual sense of the personal well-being of all. Christians should have no restrictions in their doing well to all, so that would include proleptically the servants of the
It seems obvious that the state can then command obedience insofar as it serves the same goals as Christians do. We find it quite unconvincing, however, to assert this about the state and not about its officials. The expression “authorities” can better be read as “officials” to prevent the next problem from arising. Yoder concludes:

Romans 12-13 and Matthew 5-7 are not in contradiction or in tension. They both instruct Christians to be nonresistant in all their relationships, including the social. They both call on the disciples of Jesus to renounce participation in the interplay of egoism’s which this world calls “vengeance” or “justice.” They both call Christians to respect and be subject to the historical process in which the sword continues to be wielded and to bring about a kind of order under fire, but not to perceive in the wielding of the sword their own reconciling ministry. But can we really maintain that Christians should submit to all governments merely because they are there? Is it that the state must be affirmed because it does some good for its citizens, then we affirm the whole because of the goodness of some of its elements? It is one thing to reject the possibility of violent rebellion, but is this non-violence in the face of power wielded by the state really based upon the principle that the state is there and has a general function to fulfill? And does this function imply the abstract realms of judicial, economic, and political power, which would then be represented paradigmatically in these verses? Or can we read differently, such that the connection between chapters 12 and 13 becomes even clearer than in Yoder’s argument? For as things stand now, Paul would be changing his perspective from the individual obligation to love the neighbor and the enemy to affirmation of the state insofar as it does good. This proves to be quite unnecessary if we let ourselves be guided by a reading proposed by Strobel.

§ 31. Love for the enemy as the pattern of justice: the “moral” dimension of social ethics (Romans 13)

Mennonites broke away from the idea that the state was coterminous with the Church. Instead they argued that state and Church each had their own distinct and exclusive membership, and their own standards of behavior. The Church was a voluntary separation of society because of the assumption of a different standard. The sword of justice was necessary to punish evildoers and maintain order in society. So there were two standards of morality for the state and the Church and only if the state turned evil could it be argued that Christians should not obey its official representatives. It followed from this principle that Christians were not allowed to serve in government, even if they could affirm the state’s right to use the power of the sword. Even though there was a social justification for the existence of the state, Christians were morally denied access to political power. Nonresistance to evil, the love for the enemy and the acceptance of repentance of all evil-doers were the positive requirements of any Christian that were inconsistent with the application of worldly power. The rejection of all warfare and capital punishment were equally incompatible with the other elements of the function of national states: to defend by force the political unity of a community and to restrain the evil-doers by the ultimate violence of death. In sum: the state could never be Christian.

When the New Testament refers to the state it never uses the abstract term πόλις (polis) which is reserved as the common term for a township. The state is meant when it refers to the emperor (Mt. 22:17) or the king (1 Pt. 2:13, 17; 1 Tim. 2:2), or when Paul speaks about “authorities” as “exousiai”. The philosophical background of the term polis can be assumed to be lacking in New Testament discourse on the state, and instead the notions of power and order come to the fore. It must be an anachronism therefore, to read back into the New Testament the notion of the modern state as it evolved since the Renaissance and has undoubtedly influenced the theological reflection of the 16th century Reformation. The proper strategy for
reading “backwards” can only be found when we remember that after all the reality of the state is present not when we argue that the state is a “divine institution of ordering power” because all authority is from God. Power has been given to the state to serve the order, the community and justice.

To apply the concept of the modern state, with its centralized power and the right to warfare and death penalty, to the submission to the “authorities” in Romans 13 has long been the standard practice. We propose a different avenue, by starting from the assumption that the reality of the state is nowhere else to be found as in the specific actions of individuals who act in conformity with the standard of the state and in a way produce its reality by doing so. The state is present whenever an individual justifies acts of government over others on the basis of the concept of the state, i.e. on the basis of the idea that a particular action is both necessary for the preservation of the state and beneficial to the wellbeing of a particular (national) community and serves their interests. If we start from the idea that the state is a reality only in specific actions of individuals, we can begin to understand the moral weight of the exhortation that Paul addressed to the Romans on this subject. Only then can we find the biblical foundation for the Mennonites’ insistence, that the “state”, far from expressing a divinely ordained political order in which all human beings live and are required to give their allegiance to, is actually a framework of justification for specific individual actions that may or may not be at odds with Christ’s teachings. An institution outside the perfection of Christ. Ultimately the political order must be measured by the moral order that grounds its reality.

It is vital to make the distinction between the abstract concept of state and the notion of the state-official. Strobel, quoted in Käsemann’s commentary (p. 338), argued that Paul used specific terminology of Hellenistic political life that would imply that Paul is not talking about the state, but about its representatives. The “governing authorities” (ἐξουσιαί, verse 1) specifically refers to Roman officers of state. The expression “rulers” in verse 3 (ἀρχοντες perhaps synonymous for exousiasai) refers to magisterial power, and “ministers” (λειτουργοι) refers to appointed representatives of an authority. If that is so, the jus gladii, the power, or better, right of the sword, in verse 6, refers to control over life and death, i.e., (capital) punishment, but also to the system of rewards and privileges that went along with that power in the emperor’s representatives. It refers in Roman perspective, therefore, to judicial power as it is put into the hands of officials. The word itself therefore points to a basis for the legitimacy of actions to the benefit of others or against others that otherwise would be acts of violence.

If the language that characterizes the authority is in this sense morally neutral (it refers to individual acts in a political perspective), then by contrast the references to obedience (submission as ὑποτάσσεσθαι is to fulfill an existing duty) and to the goal of government, the “good” cannot be political but must indicate a moral response. The application of love for the enemy to the civil servant in a way detaches this servant from his own political order of legitimacy and looks upon him as a possible resident of the Kingdom of God. In the same vein, the ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργὴν the “servant who executes wrath” (RSV) or the “agent of wrath,” might be the prosecutor or district attorney in a legal sense, and the concept of the legitimacy of the state’s violence would be far removed from Paul’s thought. This would fit in very well with the general intent behind the passage to show how life within a hostile society is possible. It also makes the part about tax collection fit in nicely with the rest: the tax is paid because we recognize proleptically the intent of its collector to do good to all. And finally, this interpretation makes sense of the “all” in verse 7: this must refer to the officials themselves. The conclusion from all of this must be that Paul’s exhortation is contextual and not directly based upon a theological-metaphysical determination of the nature of the state. Neither the state nor the Roman Empire is the subject of Paul’s statements here, but the officials, the police, the tax collector, the judge, the circle of the bearers of delegated power. Paul de-
mands an application of the love for the enemy in a moral sense to those who exert force in
the name of the state and no affirmation of the state in any modern sense is implied.
We have argued that submission to the functionaries can be seen as an applied case of the
love for the enemy in 12:20-21. His presence is not simply affirmed as an empirical reality,
though the powers “are” simply there, as 13:2 states, with the word οὐκ ἀλήθεια (being)
implies a moral neutrality, but they are seen as a means to act proleptically according to the values
of the coming kingdom. That God has set them in their place does not mean that there is any
kind of moral legitimacy to their being there, nor does it mean that the principle of statehood
in itself is affirmed, but only its existence within the context of the coming Kingdom which is
already a present reality. The Church should, by accepting this reality of the state only insofar
as there are persons acting under its principle, accept the situation in which God has set her. If
resistance against such bearers of authority, in whom “the powers are concretized personally”
(Käsemann), is motivated by the effort to become emancipated either individually or collectiv­
ely, such authorities become obstacles to political autonomy or social emancipation. If the
Church does resist violently because she judges the state to be less than adequate, she is in
fact showing hatred for the “enemy,” since every effort to emancipate politically will immedi­
ately make the officers of the state into enemies, which will make it necessary to resist them
violently, even though she might argue that the necessity for violence results from their be­
havior and attitude, in order to achieve political goals. Read in that way, on the level of en­
counter with the representatives of government, political and violent resistance is not simply
forbidden by the legitimacy of the state but is per se impossible for the Church. It is the com­
mandment to love the enemy that prohibits violence to the officials of the state. It is not an
acquiescence in the legitimacy of that state in so far as it does not hinder the practice of reli­
gion.
In itself, this presentation of Paul’s ethical exhortation with regard to the powers of the state
powers does not exclude Yoder’s claim that Christianity is a social ethic. It only brings us
closer to understanding that Paul in his presentation of that ethic did not construct an abstract
ontology of the state, but tried to put into the language of politics the very fundamental de­
mand of love for one’s enemy as taught by Jesus Himself. The passage can be understood as a
refutation of Zealotism.289 Political rebellion against Rome was based upon affirmation of
God’s rule as the concrete alternative to human rule, i.e., as in basic conflict with it. The Mac­
cabean revolt, which was its forerunner, was justified with the argument that when the reli­
gious existence of the people of Israel was threatened, a rebellion against foreign powers was
the only way ot be faithfull. The Zealots applied that principle to the political independence of
Israel, perhaps because they saw in it a means to obtain and secure the former. So if Rome
governed the world, then God was excluded, and only human action could reinstate God in
His rightful place. Human government was always an occupying power where only God could
rule. For the same reason, the Zealots called it an injustice to pay taxes to such a “foreign”
government.
The opposite of that position would be the acceptance of worldly rule without reservation.
But Paul did not just reverse the Zealot position, and neither had Jesus. His argument against
the Zealots is that God already does rule, albeit without deposing a faulty human government,
and not in the perfect way of the coming Kingdom. But the governmental powers are still
subject to God’s judgment and are under God’s control insofar as they provide the basic con­
ditions of a stable society. That, however, is no reason for their acceptance. Christians do not
deal politically with the state; they deal with it morally, in their dealings with the representa­
tives of the state.290 The Zealots could try to make a case for justified killing of Roman offi­
cials as part of a just war scenario: when they killed even their own countrymen to further
their political goals, this was to be accepted because they themselves accepted the principle of
politics that the end justifies the means.
The Zealot option was not reversed on the issue of the denial of the legitimacy of human rule where only God should be sovereign Lord. Submission to the state is not part of an acceptance of the old order if it had been reversed to become submission to the people who represent the state. The concrete alternative to Zealot violence, was the proleptic dealing with officials as if God already had established his Kingdom – which in Christ He already had in the view of the Church. This is a vital point: it is not the state itself that is acknowledged, but its legitimacy is reduced to the domain where neighborly love, the good of the individual, the love for one’s enemy rules. The moral order supersedes the political order. Such a submission is revolutionary in nature and far from constituting acquiescence to the status quo. It looks upon the representative of the state with respect to the good he achieves to the extent that he works toward the good that the powers of the state are supposed to accomplish. We do not see the state in the man we encounter, but we do see the function by which such an official is commissioned to further the well-being of others. In a way, such an acknowledgment treats the state official in a way analogous to that in which the members of the Church are to behave toward one another.

In this respect, the Pauline exhortation proves to be similar in nature to the parenetical material that the Church ascribed to Jesus. In Mark 12:13-17 we find such paraenesis embedded in a controversy between Jesus and the Zealots. By this procedure of “embedding” the question, whatever Jesus was teaching becomes connected to the Church’s question as to who was handing down that teaching. The Zealots were refusing to pay the taxes because to do so would mean acknowledging the Roman Emperor as their sovereign. Jesus’ reply aims at rejecting the presuppositions of that approach. The coin with the emperor’s face on it makes trade possible, and only the Emperor has the authority to mint coins. God, however, mints people, because all have been created in his image. It is therefore in vain to refuse to render the coin back to Caesar, who has made that coin in the first place and in that sense is entitled to it as an “object,” and at the same time also to refuse to render unto God what is rightfully His, i.e., to reject the image of God in every man and to kill to further political goals. To kill people in the name of God is absurd, and so is refusing to pay taxes when you are participating in an economy that was made possible by that same Emperor. So the point is not that we should give all to God because of the radical understanding of the coming kingdom (against Goppelt, Theologie des Neuen Testamentes, p. 164), but that we are caught up in an absurd paradox if we kill the image-bearer of God in His name for political reasons, and refuse to pay taxes on the profits that were made possible by the very imperial power that we seek to fight.

So it is all right to pay the taxes needed to provide police and judicial functions within society, while at the same time Jesus commands us not to make use of that force and those rights under law. In Matthew 5:38 we find that we should not resist those who perpetrate evil. We should “love the enemy,” i.e., present our left cheek to those who smite us on the right cheek. Nonresistance and love for the enemy are correlative, and the point of this nonresistance is expressed by Paul in Rom. 12:21 to be no less than the victory of good over evil.

But is all of this connected to the expectation of the immediate coming of the Kingdom? Are we right to argue that the main perspective is the Kingdom that has already been established instead of the referring to the eschatological expectation. Goppelt argues that though nonresistance is in direct conformity to the coming kingdom, there is now, under the present conditions, also reason for resistance. Because the Kingdom of God is still invisible, “history must be maintained with respect to its hidden and its visible coming.” Now there is a new character to resistance: one who has found the freedom not to resist will resist injustice with the aid of power and law without hating or despising the enemy: “He suffers because he has to resist. This new way to resist is also a behavior in conformity with the sermon on the Mount.” If the coming kingdom, instead of the present rule of God as visible in the Church, is relied on as the motivation for obedience to the command to love the enemy, then in actual
fact the commandment loses its strength altogether. Now it is the situation that determines when it is proper to resist and when not to. Can Goppelt accept that Jesus only acted in nonresistance and still acknowledge the application of justice and power, both “fundamentally” and “practically”?\(^{293}\)

But one must agree with Yoder that such a perspective on Christian ethics actually destroys Christ’s mission. “The cross is the extreme demonstration that agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.”\(^{294}\) Goppelt calls it a “conformity with the sermon on the mount” to resist evil by seeking an effective response or to use violent means in order to establish justice, because the “old world” still is there and the Kingdom is hidden. The individual can do so because he is part of the society around him, and Christ’s mission is to effect salvation, and His commandments are only “indirectly” realized through the process of salvation from within the society. So the new eon, according to Goppelt, is not entirely separated from the old. Jesus’ demand for a new kind of life is balanced by His acceptance of the legality of the old. Basically Goppelt defends this view because of an exegesis in which Jesus taught that the imperial taxes should simply be accepted.

Part of the problem might be that Goppelt envisions an individual in this situation and asks whether it is possible for any single human being to act in conformity with Christ. But the call for the kingdom does not address the individual alone, and the point of the taxes is without merit in this context. The paying of taxes is not an affirmation of the old order nor of the state, as we have seen from Romans 13; it is a proleptic affirmation of the new one, changing our perspective on what is important and what is not within the remnants of the old world. In the context of Jesus’ saying, we can put it like this: if our dedication is fully to God it becomes immaterial whether we pay our taxes to the government, and if we use the system, why complain about that one element of it through which some good on an individual level can arise? We pay taxes, not because we affirm the state, but because we affirm the possible goodness in those people who use those taxes for the good of all, to the degree that this is what happens.

There is good reason for us to do so. In the words of Yoder: “Christ is not only the Head of the Church; he is at the same time Lord of History, reigning at the right hand of God over the principalities and powers. The old eon, representative of human history under the mark of sin, has also been brought under the reign of Christ (which is not identical with the consummate kingdom of God, 1 Cor. 15:24).”\(^{295}\) We may therefore expect that the evil, which is inherent in the power of the state does not simply create chaos but is made subservient to God’s purpose. In Yoder’s words: “The characteristic of the reign of Christ is that evil, without being blotted out, is channeled by God, in spite of itself, to serve God’s purposes.” So we would confirm the state, not as created or instituted by God, but at least as a means by which God brings order and gives “room for growth and work of the Church.” Yoder may say that in such a way the violence of the state is not redeemed or made good, but is made subservient to God’s purposes. It may ultimately serve some good, and in that respect at least it earns some legitimacy.

However, this will only be true, Yoder explains, for a given state if it does not add to the evil already there. The state has on some occasions subscribed to a moral value, punishing the guilty and saving the innocent. Then evil is used for a good purpose, though it in itself remains evil. The demoniac state, however, denies all moral responsibility, punishing the innocent and rewarding the guilty, as in Revelation 13. The state as such therefore cannot be called good, but some of its actions though can be called good to the extent that they do not add to the evil already there!

Yoder presupposed that the authorities mentioned in Romans 13:1 (and the parallel passages in 1 Tim. 2 and 1 Peter 2) refer to the state as such. Romans 13, of course, has been most often interpreted like that, and we have quoted another solution above. But how can we possibly identify the “kings and people in high places” in 1 Tim. 2 with the state? 1 Peter 2:13
speaks about human institutions and mentions the emperor or his governors. Again, with Käsemann, we must say at least that the powers are personalized, though we prefer to state that the powers are being seen on the level where they are represented by individuals. In Romans 13, we would have to accept that Paul changes from his perspective on Christian morality, the application of love for the enemy, to the perspective of the state. But we find the position persuasive that the terminology of Romans 13 points toward the embodiment of the state in bearers of authority who continue the intersubjective framework of chapter 12. The point might be, then, that we never accept the state as such, but always and only specific people who use power, on the presumption that they do so with the object of doing good. It would mean that the state, per se, is mentioned only in Revelation 13 in the typical language of apocalyptic prophecy: the beast coming from the sea. The powers that govern the world are personalized, and only when the system dominates all the people in it and the intersubjective perspective of Romans 13 cannot be employed any longer, the state is envisioned as “beastified,” in the language of the Apocalypse.

We must come now to the question of what kind of response Paul expected from his paraenesis, what kind of obedience is implied in all these specifications of the commandment of love. In general, we have found both in Galatians and in Romans that the way of life of Christians is determined by a threefold freedom: freedom from sin, from death, and from (an incorrect interpretation of) the law. It is not freedom from all restraints, since the believer is liberated to a new service. But this service seems to be rather paradoxical. “The servant of Christ” is at the same time a freedman of the Lord (1 Cor. 7:22). We are freed as was Israel: in order to obey. For Christians more particularly: to lead a life in the Spirit that allows God through us to fulfill the claim the law has on us (Rom. 8:3).

What character does this new Christian imperative have? Bultmann and others have argued that, to Paul, the imperative follows the indicative. Let’s use this idea for a moment. In our passage we might look at 12:1 as a case in point. The exhortation is motivated “by the mercies of God”; the “sacrifice” is reference to Christ’s sacrifice for us (Rom. 5). The “indicative” of what God has done in Christ not only serves as a motivating force; it also expresses a reality in which we already share. The gift of the Spirit turns an eschatological future into a present reality. The spirit therefore can be expressed both as the power by which the believer can act in obedience and the standard by which he measures his acts, combining indicative and imperative. Gal. 5:25 expresses this duality: “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

As Beker puts it, this connection between indicative and imperative is meant as a polemical stance towards Jews and Jewish Christians because it “eradicates the works of the law and any fearful striving for acceptance in the last judgment, as if the Messiah had not already come.”

If the nature of righteousness is at stake, as in Romans and Galatians, Paul will emphasize the indicative, but where there is danger of the exaggeration of the “exclusive celebration of the indicative” Paul stresses the imperative, as in 1 Cor. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see Paul’s ethic only in this tension between indicative and imperative. Beker explains this issue by making reference to the debate between Bultmann and Käsemann:

“Ernst Käsemann has inserted a new dimension into the discussions. With Bultmann, he locates the heart of Paul’s gospel in “the righteousness of God,” but he disputes Bultmann’s interpretation of it. ‘The righteousness of God’ has an apocalyptic derivation and denotes both God’s power and His gift. It expresses God’s cosmic claim on the world, which is proleptically made manifest in the lordship of Christ and in which the believer participates through obedience. The lordship of Christ, however, does not rob believers of their volition; they are not simply pawns in a cosmic struggle, because their obedience demonstrates their allegiance to God’s sovereign will for his creation. According to Käsemann, the obedience of Christians must be viewed in the context of their solidarity with the created order, which comes to ex-
pression in Paul's definition of "the body" (sooma). In other words, Käsemann advances the discussion of the relation of the indicative and imperative in Paul, which had heretofore been dominated by Bultmann's definition of "the body" as a person's relation to himself. This existentialist definition of "the body" neglects its cosmic-historical character and spiritualizes a person's relation to the world. It causes an existentialist narrowing of both the indicative and imperative, because indicative and imperative are here construed as an antinomy or paradox in which God's gift in Christ is simultaneously an appeal to our decision to become bearers of the cross in each moment of time. The problem is that a precise explication of this antinomy or dialectic remains hermeneutically vague. Bultmann defined it in terms of possibility and actualization and so not only endangered Paul's emphasis on the actuality of God's act of salvation in Christ but also overemphasized the human will. 2

So how does Beker see things? Beker considers the ethical necessity for Christians as closely linked to the apocalyptic expectation of the divine indicative, which he sees in Käsemann's correction to Bultmann's existentialist approach. But to Beker, Christian ethics is definitely aimed at the future cosmic-theocentric affirmation of Christ in the final redemption. All of the activity that Christians are commanded to do is defined as redemptive activity, pointing toward its final consummation in the future kingdom. So it is not the indicative itself that motivates obedience, but more precisely the indicative and "pattern" of the eschatological judgment, and the imperative of Christian obedience serves as a pathway to the final indicative of the glory of God. The soteriological effects of Christ's victory in the future are the telos of Christian obedience, but not its motivating ground. Christian obedience does not stand on the basis of a present reality; it has the character of hope.

Beker sees his view confirmed in Romans 12. The use of the term "bodies" here refers, in his view, to the ontological solidarity between Christians and a world still under the power of death. At the same time, the "body" suggests the ethical seriousness of life in the Spirit "because believers are called to challenge the power of death in the world." Christian obedience is therefore determined by solidarity with the world and proleptic faithfulness to the new life that God has ordained for his creation. The Christological indicative does not completely fill up the apocalyptic indicative: the last judgment is still there as a reminder of the seriousness of the need for solidarity with a fallen world.

The problem with Beker's approach is that if eschatology grounds ethics, all ethics of necessity becomes an interim ethic (the final indicative even swallowing up the imperative), and man simply has to await the coming of the new kingdom to see his obedience evaporate into thin air, along of course with any thought of merit. The imperative then has meaning only as long as Christians are still living within the old world, and only for that world. Christian ethics can then easily become the ethics of the present age, to which the element of a redemptive scheme provides only the hermeneutic and the motivational background. That is so because it is held at the same time that the apocalyptic vision of the future kingdom cannot be expressed in terms of precise behavior or values. Congruence between ethical acts today and the apocalyptic indicative cannot be established with certainty, only some tendencies or probabilities might be construed that give some direction to ethics.

The basic flaw in this scheme of things is this: to Paul the righteousness of God is revealed in the faithfulness of Christ to the God of the covenant. Jesus' dedication to God's kingdom was therefore firmly rooted in His dedication to God as the One who promised ultimate redemption. So our dedication in obedience to Christ must be rooted primarily in dedication to God. It is not based on any specific character of God's revelation to us, but only modified by it. Christian ethics, we contend, is not rooted in the eschatology of God's future redemption, and is not rooted in the present soteriology of Christ's Spirit as reality in us, but it is established in the Cross as the basic symbol of complete dedication to God. In other words, Christian ethics is the ethics of the present Lord Jesus Christ who showed in his humiliation.
and death the way that God provides to become righteous.

Beker's argument in connection with the expression \(\sigma\omega\iota\alpha\) (body) in Rom. 12:1 overlooks the obvious. If we are called to a reasonable service not in conformity to this world, and to a renewal of our thoughts which makes us "prove what is the will of God, the good, the acceptable and the perfect," then our "imperative" is rooted in the character of God's will and not partly based on our solidarity with the present world while hoping for a better one. The latter would constitute a principle of obedience besides that of God's relating to humanity through the Cross of Jesus Christ and would invoke a separate source of motivation for ethics. To put it in the simplest of words: we obey God because Christ died for us, and in our obedience we constitute a separate community of the faithful, dedicated to obedience, accepting suffering, maintaining Christ's position in this world as nonviolent love. At the Cross, solidarity with the present world is expressed as suffering love, not as moral dedication to improve it. There can be no solidarity with the world without going through its judgment.

The expression "mercies of God" is also, as we have explained earlier, not so much a reference to the deeds of God, even if surely God's revelation of righteousness in Christ reveals that character, but a name of God taken from the Old Testament. So chapter 12:1-3, if understood in the scheme of indicative/imperative, grounds our obedience in the God who chose to be Mercy and not in any particular activity of God with reference to this world, present or future. It does not allow us to posit solidarity with the world as our main motivation for ethics. Instead we must look to ethics as a way to define the particular community that is called upon to express its redemption in a concrete way of life in the midst of the old order.

§ 32. The positive meaning of the law

The first passage we need to examine now is chapter 13:8-14, where the fulfillment of the law and the eschatological condition are mentioned together after the general exhortation to love each other. Ridderbos reads it like this: do not be in debt to others, i.e., do what is required with regard to others and (therefore) love each other.\(^{300}\) The statement then refers to existing obligations of the same order as those of the government in verses 1-8. That makes sense, especially because the word \(\phi\varepsilon\iota\lambda\eta\) (\(\phi\varepsilon\iota\lambda\eta\)) can mean debts, but also obligations, which brings it closer to the Hebrew technical expression \(\tau\nu\tau\nu\) (\(\tau\nu\tau\nu\)) and because it makes a bridge between verses 8 and 9.\(^{301}\)

Nevertheless it is quite unnecessary to think of existing obligations within the society where Christians need to live, which would imply that Paul was thinking first of financial obligations and then enlarges the scope of the word to include all societal obligations. It makes better sense to read it like this, with Käsemann: Do not accept any burden or obligation (and thereby become formally indebted) with regard to others except the obligation of the commandment of love. The only formal "debt" we have is that of love. The motivational clause then makes perfect sense: whoever loves the other has fulfilled the law, which must refer to the Mosaic law, and which in the context stands for the sum total of what can be required of us with regard to others. Everything that we might take on as a formal duty is already contained in this one commandment. So we are not to bring ourselves under the specific commandments of the law, but can profit from the law if we see it as a way to discern what the commandment of love requires us to do. Read like this, the passage again warns against bringing the law into play as a formal rule of obedience.

But even so the law here gains a positive meaning as expressing God's will, even if our new status implies that it does so without directly and formally prescribing what we are supposed to do, and without connecting obedience to the promise of life. The different context of redemption in Christ changes the reading of the law as the source of knowledge of God's will. Paul goes on to explain that all the commandments (in this order: 7th, 6th, 8th, 10th) can be
brought under the heading of the commandment of neighborly love. The expression used might indicate a "summing up," but more likely we have here the technical term for grouping a set of commandments under a principal rule that governs them hermeneutically,\(^1\) the various commandments so grouped together are then considered applications of the "head" commandment. He goes on to explain in the next verse that love does no harm to the neighbor, and that is why it fulfills the law.

Now what does this mean? It cannot mean that all the commandments can be reduced to the one commandment of love. It is surely an affirmation of the "ethical" meaning of the Mosaic law, but this poses a new problem, because it is not immediately clear what "moral" can mean in this context. There is a more solid answer, derived from the technical implications of such a "summary" of the law. The whole of that law is now being put under a specific hermeneutic perspective that looks for its provisions under the aspect of neighborly love, and not formal authority, the holiness of God, or simply the givenness of a manifold of commandments and prohibitions. It indicates a way of interpreting the law that is in conformity with the general rule of 12:2. Only by a change in our way of thinking can we "use" the law to guide us in finding the will of God.

Every commandment in the Old Testament therefore is included in the commandment of neighborly love, and the radical nature of the love commandment is applicable to each and any of these. In that sense, the law is not reduced to the commandment of love as if other commandments are annulled, but all of these commandments are seen as concretizations of the demand of love, and the latter is used as the principle of their exegesis. That is the first step we need to make here.

But the situation has changed for Christians with respect to the law.\(^2\) First of all, Christians belong to a new type of peoplehood that is to be considered a "body," i.e., that has organismic, not organizational, coherence amongst its members. They all share the same life of faith and have the same Lord, have been redeemed by the same Sacrifice that renders their differences in merit meaningless. They are a people taken out of the nations, which implies their being dissassociated from the various states in which the life of the nations is organized.

Secondly, they are all bound to the imitation of one particular aspect of Christ's life that Paul mentioned in Romans 5 (Christ died for us while we were all enemies) and is now expressed ethically in 12:14, 17, 19 and 20: love for the enemy, in the real Old Testament sense of providing for his needs, the prohibition of revenge, aspiring for the good of all people.

Thirdly, as Paul explained in the preceding sections: Christians are not "under" the law in the sense that their autonomous freedom is being commanded to obey, necessitating a qualified response in accordance with the measure of power and the depth of our understanding of that law. Inner will power and knowledge would then become the basic traits of a life in obedience under law. Instead, power is derived from the Holy Spirit, and our status has changed since we have died according to the principle of the law. The new life fulfills the demands of the law, not by our aspiring to obey in a free response, as if our condition had not altered, but by allowing itself to be governed by the Spirit of Christ and by the communal process in which Christ is embodied.

Apart from the situation and condition, however, the written law is still the source for our general understanding of what is good and holy and righteous. As Paul had explained that the law was not used "lawfully" when it was considered a definition of righteousness and redemption, so here the law is used lawfully when it is considered as God's righteous claim, to be fulfilled in our communal Christian life through the specific hermeneutic that is embodied in Christ. To accept Jesus Christ as the definition and standard of our lives ("putting on Christ Jesus," in 13:14) is perfectly congruent with fulfilling the law through the hermeneutic of the love for the neighbor in 13:10. Such a perspective on the law implies that it is still seen as the standard of righteousness, but as being established by (Abrahamic) faith, and not by works.
Israel had pursued a law of righteousness, the Mosaic law, in vain, because they disconnected that law from the principle of faith that was embodied in it. By accepting the promise as a national prerogative and by demanding works as testimony to status alone, the law was not seen in its original intent as redeeming charter and guide to a life under God's sovereignty.

That implies, however, no criticism of the law as such. Israel (that is, the element of Pharisaic Judaism that Paul has in mind) did not attain that law because it did not approach it from the viewpoint of faith ("creaturely faith" as Dunn puts it, as in Abraham's case, a faith that trusted in God's ability to go beyond human capability) but from the viewpoint of formal obedience and works (Rom. 9:31, 32). That error consisted in establishing their "own" righteousness instead of trusting in God's faith: His righteousness in remaining loyal to the Covenant and promise (10:3). In that sense, Christ is the end of the law, because now the righteousness of the law that is required is established through faith in Christ, both by establishing a new covenantal relationship and by an ongoing life of faith. It is not that the law has simply vanished. To be the end of the law means to be its apex, its fulfillment, in the sense that all that the law was trying to establish has become visible in Christ.

But to Paul this Mosaic law had not remained the same. Christ had given it His final interpretation, not only through the structure of His life and death, but also in His teachings. Dunn quotes "some eight or nine" echoes of Jesus' teaching in Paul's paraenesis. Romans 12:14, e.g., reminds us of Luke 6:27-28: Love your enemies...bless those who curse you. Romans 14:14 may remind us of Mark 7:15. He also argues that in a community that was well versed in the traditions, an explicit reference to Jesus' authority was unnecessary. When Paul does so, it is because he needs to qualify that authority or distinguish it from his own, as in 1 Cor. 7:10 -16. Since Paul also understood his own apostolic authority and the tradition handed down in the congregations as derived from Jesus' authority, the Pauline paraenesis did not need to be a formal explanation or commentary on the law. In fact, as Dunn states it, the paraenesis in Paul had the same function as the Mosaic law had for Israel. The written word had become taken up in the ongoing process of discernment within the congregations, illuminated by reflection on Christ's life and death and supported by new traditions that arose from it. The law of Christ could become the term that encompassed all of this into one title in Gal. 6:2, and it is reiterated in Rom. 13:9-10 as the fulfillment of the law in connection with "putting on Christ."

The larger thesis that underpins the entire letter can now be made clear. In effect, Romans 1-7 deals with the wider picture of the fall of man (Romans 2) and how it was dealt with prophetically by the kind of relationship under the promise that God established with Abraham (Romans 3, 4). The righteousness God has established in Christ deals effectively with the fall of man (Romans 5, 6), whereas the law as written standard of indictment against humanity can only bring despair. (Romans 7). The New Covenant of the Spirit upholds the validity of the law while surpassing it in two ways. First of all, it brings in the gentiles, and secondly, it gives the ability to obey from the heart because of the power of the Spirit coming from outside us, dislocating the center of our lives (having died with Christ) and giving us a new center of life in Christ. The written law is thereby surpassed in a manner analogous to the prophecy of Jeremiah 31.

Two elements of the new covenant are of importance here: first, the notion of having the law put "in their inward parts" and written "in their heart" (Jer. 31:33). A typical interpretation of these words along the lines of the a priori convictions concerning the meaning of the law and the new Covenant can be found in C. F. Keil's commentary on Jeremiah. One of the most illustrative passages in that commentary is this one:

"The law, with its righteous demands, can only humble the sinner, and make him beseech God to blot out his sin and create in him a clean heart (Ps. 51:11ff.); it can only awaken him to the perception of sin, but cannot blot it out. It is God who must forgive this, and by forgiving it, write His will on the heart. ...the forgiveness of sins is a work of grace which annuls
the demand of the law against men. In the old covenant, the law with its requirements is the impelling force; in the new covenant, the grace shown in the forgiveness of sins is the aiding power by which man attains that common life with God which the law sets before him as the great problem of life....

It is important to realize that this is a commentary on the words of Jeremiah 31:31, that deals with a new covenant for Israel and Judah. The last part of verse 34 reads: “...for I will pardon their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.” It is the final clause of the passage, opening with “behold days come...” (verse 31) The order of thought seems to be like this:

1. God will make a new covenant, different from the covenant of the Sinai.
2. Now the law will be written in the hearts; God will be inseparable from His people.
3. All will know God and no one needs to be instructed by anyone else, and
4. God will forgive their iniquity.

In James Dunn’s view, Paul uses the word heart (καρδία, kardia, 52 times in Paul’s writings) in its Hebrew sense as the seat of emotions, thought and will. God searches the heart (Rom 2:15) and obedience should be from the heart (Rom. 6:17; 10:9-10). Faith was “an expression of deeply felt commitment.”

Now, it is not immediately clear in what relationship the text of Jeremiah 31 stands to Paul’s description of the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us (Rom. 8:9). In 2 Cor. 3:3, Paul, of course, directly refers to the Jeremiah 31 quote. Here the Corinthians are called a letter from Christ, written on tablets of flesh within their hearts. The contrast is described between the old covenant of letter and stone versus the new covenant of spirit and freedom. The “letter” is surpassed by the Spirit, but, as in Jeremiah 31, the contents remained that of the law.

Likewise in Romans 8, though the indwelling of the Spirit describes a new reality of mankind and a new relationship to God, the moral content remains the same. It is the requirement of the law that is met through the Spirit, though the mode of being of the law under the old covenant (the letter, that needs instruction) becomes powerless because of the flesh (Rom. 8:3). The danger here is of turning the mode of enablement into the contents of the demand. If we stress, with James Dunn, that Christ’s death was a means to an end, i.e., “the end of a people ‘who walk in newness of life’ (Rom. 6:4), who ‘serve in the new life of the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:4),” then we wind up losing sight of the concrete contents. Dunn concedes that the contents of this walking in the Spirit is righteousness. “Such conduct fulfills the just requirement of the law.”

But this reference to the law is based on the former transformation of that concept as the “law of the Spirit of life, the law no longer restricted and defined in terms of the flesh.” The law in Romans 8:2 is the same as the law that led to death and condemnation, the “law of the Flesh,” but now connected to the “inner parts” of those who delight in that law (Rom. 7:22), who have been strengthened by the Spirit of Life that dwells within them - at the same time killing the flesh in the identification with Christ on the Cross.

At this precise moment we must be careful. Life in the Spirit does not refer directly to a new ethics, but more to a changed attitude toward the same source of ethics. The law, if applied lawfully, from the principle of faith and with total commitment, is not split in itself, but there is a dual mode of applying it already referred to in the Old Testament. Accordingly, Jer. 31 mentions that God will put His law in their hearts, not replace the law with something else. James Dunn correctly concludes that to Paul, “the purpose for which God sent his Son is explicitly stated as to bring about the fulfillment of the law’s requirement” (Rom. 8:4). But Dunn assumes that the meaning of “law” in these cases is actually the equivalent of “God’s will.” Law of faith, law of the Spirit, and law of Christ can be rendered as: God’s will accessible through Faith, doable because of the Spirit and executed under the sovereignty of Christ. In place of the specific demands of the law, there is a reduction to a single “just requirement”
that is equalled to "doing God's will," thereby going beyond the status of written law that has specific rules and regulations.

Now this can certainly be defended as an appropriate interpretation of Paul. After all, we have found in Rom. 9:31 an opposition between a search for a law of (that leads to) righteousness that was not based on obedience in faith but on the teaching and learning of specific tasks and living according to rules, the "so-called works." Rom. 8:4 does speak of a single "requirement," and 8:14 seems to stress a being led by the Spirit as if from within (cf. 8:9-10) that is distinguished from a life in submission under the law. What is left of the function of the law can then be summarized in this manner: (1) the guiding, instructing function of the written law is taken up in the exhortations of the spirit-led life, and (2) the law is still a written source of understanding and finding the exhortatory demand exemplifying God's will in specific situations. But the final word is no longer in the written statute, but rather the opposite: the law keeps its function as source of ethics only where it can be interpreted along the guidelines of the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of the Messiah Jesus working within the community has hermeneutic priority above the written text. Christ does not replace the law, but He does replace the hermeneutic principles of the oral tradition. It is no longer the authority of tradition and the legal hermeneutic of rabbinic commentary that decide on issues of law and ethics, but the Spirit of Christ as working in the discerning community.

§ 33 Summary and Conclusions

God reveals His power of salvation and His righteousness (1:16) in the crucifixion of Christ (3:21, 25) and the sovereignty of His judgment (2:2, 5; 3:5) so that all stand condemned in His judgment. Neither Jew nor pagan can put his hope in the law or in his descent from Abraham, not even in the trustworthiness of conscience or the moral fiber of society. God's judgment reveals the injustice of all the institutions or safeguards of righteousness of man's making, and the possession of the law does not in itself grant salvation from judgment. The election of Israel has no bearing on the day of judgment. Both Jew and Greek will be judged according to their effective obedience to God's command. But the law does not grant the possibility of acting according to God's will; it merely proclaims death as the result of disobedience. Neither does conscience do anything else than accuse its owner of guilt. In that sense Jew and pagan are alike.

God does, however, now reveal a righteousness based on His sovereign grace, beyond the demand of the law, but testified to by revelation in the Old Testament. Christ through His death is made by God into the mercy seat of atonement, implying that they who identify themselves with His death are set free from judgment. Their identification with Christ is tantamount to dying with Him as required by the final judgment and being restored to a newness of life in the Spirit, even to incorporation into the body of Christ. That theological concept is symbolized by believer's baptism, which effects this identification and at the same time marks the entrance of the believer into the Body of Christ, a community that identifies with Christ's position in this world. Faith in Christ, in this sense, means being now set free from judgment: justified in a quasi-legal sense. But the declaration of righteousness is based on a reality: first of all the reality of Christ's death and resurrection. But secondly, the declaration is priestly: it institutes the reality that it declares. In that sense it is like an adoption: the legal declaration of being adopted allows me to take up my position as a child and to act like one.

Being justified therefore also means being made righteous. We are set into a new relationship with God which transforms us: no longer slaves of sin, death and the law, we have become servants of righteousness in Christ. Being made righteous is even used one time in the sense of being freed. That is not a future reality, though it is in its full sense eschatological: the faithful are now being constituted righteous in the way all mankind will be made righteous.
in the day of the coming of the Lord. The reality of justification in its positive sense is the indwelling of the Spirit. The infusion of righteousness which makes us “inherently” perfect is in process.

The principles of the new life can then be described. There is a new condition of the Spirit that we live by, a service in a new manner without the letter (7:6). The whole purpose of Christ’s coming into this world can then be summed up, with regard to us, as allowing us to fulfill the demand of the law, but now without the power of the law of sin that abused the law of Moses to provoke sin, knowing the external rule of the law, its “letter” actually made that possible. Having been justified in the legal sense with regard to the demands of the law, so acquitted from God’s judgment, we are now bound to the claim of God that was hidden in the law. The higher righteousness, which in terms of the law can be summed up as the demand of love, is only achievable if the law is approached from the principle of (Abrahamic) faith, and not if it is seen as an inventory of commandments (works) addressed to our human ability to obey them.

The contours of the new obedience in the Spirit can then be summed up as not a matter of complying with a written rule, but of allowing the reality of God’s Spirit to direct our thoughts and actions. Put negatively, we put to death the workings of the body, i.e., the kinds of actions that flow from our fear of death, our moral weakness strengthened by feelings of guilt, and our inner craving to do what is forbidden.

In the exhortation to the Romans in chapters 12 to 15, these principles remain the guideline. Christians dedicate the whole of their lives to the service of God in response to Christ’s sacrifice for them. The radical change in their lives, stemming from the power of the Spirit, enables them to apply the principle of neighborly love in their dealings with their brethren and sisters and, following Christ’s example, in their dealings with the enemy. Under that same heading, the acceptance of the state official and not the state itself is dealt with in chapter 13. The whole of the law remains expressive of God’s will in the lives of the faithful, if read under the hermeneutic guideline of neighborly love that is also the one and only formal obligation that Christians should accept. A formal obedience to the law as such, as a collection of imperatives, is abandoned. Yet, obedience to the “great commandment” is still understood as obedience, and not simply as inner submission. To be part of the Church implies having a changed way of thinking in which the general principles of the gospel are constantly being applied to diverse situations.

Such a process of communal discernment, however, was still informed by a study of the law. The living tradition of Jesus’ teachings and apostolic paraenesis had acquired very much the same function as the law in Israel. Because the situation had changed, the authority of the law was not expressed in technical commentary, as in the halakhic midrash, but present nonetheless. Exegetical rules were not developed, but instead the law of Christ and the hermeneutic of neighborly love provided a means of interpreting the law to become one of the pillars of the believer’s knowledge of God’s righteous demands.