

Were the Commandments “Abolished” Through Jesus’ Sacrifice?

*Inaccurate, biased translations suggest as much. But what did
Christ and the apostles really teach?*

In **Ephesians 2:15-16**, the *KJV* reads: “Having **abolished in his flesh** the enmity, *even the law of commandments contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”

The key phrase in this *inaccurate* translation—which has caused a great deal of confusion—is “abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even the law of commandments contained* in ordinances.” What is the “law of commandments contained in ordinances”? Are these actually the commandments of God contained in the Old Testament, as most assume?

The word translated “ordinances” comes from the Greek *dogma* (Col. 2:14, 20), which always refers to “decrees, ordinances, decisions and commands of men” (Arndt and Gingrich). Paul is not referring here to the commandments of God contained in the law of God. Moreover, not once in the New Testament is *dogma* used in reference to the laws and commandments of God.

What decrees or dogmas of men is Paul referring to? Notice, the context clearly reveals that he was writing about the *traditional* dogmas, decrees or commands of Judaism. The harsh traditional laws of Judaism created great hostility and enmity between Jews and Gentiles—as well as among the Jews themselves. Of these Jesus said, “For they bind heavy burdens and hard to bear, and lay *them* on the shoulders of men; but they will not move them with *one of* their own fingers” (Matt. 23:4).

In Mark seven, Jesus Christ strongly rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for adhering to their traditional laws and rejecting the commandments of God: “[T]he Pharisees and the scribes questioned Him, *saying*, ‘Why don’t Your disciples walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’ And He answered *and* said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy concerning you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from Me. **But in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men.**” For leaving the commandment of God, you hold fast the tradition of men, *such as* the washing of pots and cups; and you practice many other things like *this*.’ Then He said to them, ‘**Full well do you reject the commandment of God, so that you may observe your own tradition.** For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “The one who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “If a man shall say to *his* father or mother, ‘Whatever benefit you might receive from me *is* corban (that is, *set aside as* a gift to God),’ he is not obligated to help his parents.” And you excuse him from doing anything for his father or his mother, nullifying the authority of the Word of God by your tradition which you have passed down; and you practice many *traditions* such as this’ ” (Mark 7:5-13; also see Matt. 23).

Not only were the traditional decrees of Judaism contrary to the laws and commandments of God, they were so strange and harsh that they bred hostility and enmity among the Jewish people. Such traditions especially caused Jews to look down on Gentiles with contempt and disdain. In Ephesians 2:11-16, Paul describes this hostile relationship that existed between Jews and Gentiles before the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel of peace. He emphasizes that the enmity was primarily the result of the Jews’ nonsensical traditions.

For example, a major “thorn in the flesh” between the two groups was the Jews’ tradi-

tion—from their added oral law—that Jews were not to keep company with Gentiles, or even eat with them. This was most certainly not a law of God. In order to prevent this Jewish bias against Gentiles from becoming rooted in the Church, God revealed to the apostle Peter early on that such traditions of Judaism were totally unacceptable—and that He was fully annulling those laws and decrees.

When God first began to call Gentiles, Peter was sent through a special vision from God to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius was a Roman Army Centurion who feared the true God and prayed to Him. Notice what Peter said to Cornelius: **“You know that it is unlawful for a man who is a Jew [who practiced Jewish traditional law] to associate with or come near to anyone of another race...”** (Acts 10:28).

Peter explained to Cornelius and those gathered in his house that God had moved him through a vision to proclaim that such hateful Jewish decrees had been made null and void by God as contrary to His laws and commandments. Peter said, “But God has shown me *that no man should be called common or unclean....* Of a truth I perceive that **God is not a respecter of persons, but in every nation the one who fears Him and works righteousness is acceptable to Him**” (Acts 10:28, 34-35).

In order to demonstrate to Peter, and hence all the apostles, that God was calling the Gentiles to the same salvation that began with the Jews and Israelites at the temple on the day of Pentecost in 30 AD, He supernaturally poured out the Holy Spirit upon the uncircumcised Gentiles gathered in Cornelius’ house *before* they were baptized. Peter continued, “ ‘And He [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people, and to fully testify that it is He Who has been appointed by God *to be* Judge of *the* living and *the* dead. To Him all the prophets bear witness, *that* everyone who believes in Him receives remission of sins through His name.’ **While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came upon all those who were listening to the message. And the believers from the circumcision were astonished,** as many as had come with Peter, **that upon the Gentiles also the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out;** for they heard them speak in *other* languages and magnify God. Then Peter responded *by saying*, ‘**Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized, who have also received the Holy Spirit as we *did*?**’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they besought him to remain *for* a number of days” (Acts 10:42-48).

With this background—and an accurate translation of Ephesians 2:11-16—the true meaning of this difficult passage is crystal clear. We see that Paul was in no way abolishing the commandments of God—for no man can abolish the commandments God any more than a man can destroy the heavens and earth (Deut. 30:16-20; Matt. 5:17-18; Mark 13:31).

Rather, God annulled the ridiculous, hateful, traditional laws of Judaism that were against Gentiles, as they had no place in the Church of God. Notice what Paul wrote: “Therefore, remember that you were once Gentiles in *the* flesh, who are called uncircumcision by those who are called circumcision in *the* flesh made by hands; *and* that you were without Christ at that time, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off are made near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, Who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition [created by Jewish traditional laws and decrees], **having annulled in His flesh the enmity, the law of commandments contained in *the* decrees of men,** so that in Himself He might create both into one new man, making peace [between Jews and Gentiles in the Church]; and *that* He might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, **having slain the enmity by it**” (Eph. 2:11-16).

Romans 7:1-6—Are Christians “Released From the Law”? An improper interpretation of this passage gives the appearance that Christians have been “released” from any obligation whatsoever to keep the laws and commandments of God. However, such teachings are, in reality,

rooted in carnal-minded lawlessness and enmity against the laws of God (Rom. 8:7; I John 3:4). Those who believe and promote such blatant misrepresentations are lacking in scriptural knowledge and are unskilled in dividing the Word of Truth—and thus make Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul lawless ministers of sin!

“Are you ignorant, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know law), that the law rules over a man for as long a time as he may live? **For the woman who is married is bound by law to the husband as long as he is living; but if the husband should die, she is released from the law that bound her to the husband.**

“So then, if she should marry another man as long as the husband is living, she shall be called an adulteress; **but if the husband should die, she is free from the law that bound her to the husband**, so that she is no longer an adulteress if she is married to another man. In the same way, my brethren, you also were made dead to the *marriage law of the Old Covenant* by the body of Christ in order for you to be married to another, Who was raised from *the* dead, that we should bring forth fruit to God. For as long as we were in the flesh, the passions of sins, which were through the law, were working within our own members to bring forth fruit unto death. **But now we have been released from the law because we have died to that in which we were held so that we might serve in newness of the spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter**” (Rom. 7:1-6).

Clearly, the context of this passage is the *marriage law* which binds a husband and wife together—until death terminates their marriage covenant. Based on this law, Paul makes a comparison—because the covenant between God and the children of Israel was a *marriage* covenant. The Lord God was likened to the husband and Israel was likened to His wife. God confirmed this marital covenant relationship when He inspired Isaiah to write, “**For your Maker is your husband**; the LORD of hosts is His name; and your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; the God of the whole earth shall He be called” (Isa. 54:5).

This marriage covenant between God and ancient Israel was based on physical promises of territory, long life, abundant material blessings, national wealth and greatness, and God’s protection in exchange for Israel’s obedience in the letter of His laws and commandments. Yet Israel was an almost completely unfaithful wife.

Since marriage is binding by law until the death of either the husband or the wife, how could God terminate His marriage with Israel—apart from destroying every Israelite from all twelve tribes? Remember, God keeps His own laws, as they are a reflection of His inherent spiritual righteousness. Indeed, He was bound to Israel by His own immutable law.

However, the Lord God of the Old Covenant was the One Who became the Lord of the New Covenant—Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Lord God Who became Jesus Christ in the flesh was able to terminate the marriage covenant with Israel through His death on the cross. He could not enter into a *new* espousal covenant relationship with the Church until He had died. This was one of the key reasons He became God manifested in the flesh, so He could release Israel and Himself through His own death from their Old Covenant marriage.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, true Christians could then be espoused as chaste virgins to Jesus Christ as their future husband (II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33). The marriage of the Lamb, the husband, and the Church, the wife, will take place shortly after the first resurrection (Rev. 19:7-9).

Consequently, the phrase “released from the law” means that through Jesus’ death (and the believer’s symbolic death by water baptism), Jewish Christians have been *released* from their marriage agreement that bound them to the Old Covenant. It does *not* mean that New Covenant Christians are released from the obligation to keep the commandments and laws of God (Matt. 5:17-20). Rather, they are to obey the laws and commandments of God in the **newness of the spirit** of the law, and not just in the letter of the law (verse 6).