

For Christ is the End of the Law
How the Church Fathers Understood Romans 10:4

Charles St-Onge
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Introduction

The theme of the law runs all the way through Paul's epistle to the Romans, from chapter 2:12, "however many sin in the law on account of the law will be judged" through to chapter 13:8, "For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." The word is not univocal in its usage in the epistle, and so an important key to understanding the message of Romans is being able to interpret νόμος correctly in each of its appearances. One verse in which interpretation of "law" is especially critical is Romans 10:4: "For the end of the law is Christ into righteousness for everyone who believes."^A What is the law in this case? In what sense has Christ brought this law to an end? What is the connection between the end of the law and righteousness for believers?

This paper will briefly explore some of the interpretations of this verse found in the early fathers of the Church. The four interpretations presented follow the flow of the epistle to the Romans. It begins with Christ as the end of the cultic requirements of the law, which parallels Paul's thought in Romans 2:17-24, the chapter in which νόμος first appears. The second interpretation is Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, which is the theme taken up by Paul in Romans 4, with his use of Abraham as an example of righteousness through faith in the Old Testament. The third is the classic view of Christ as the fulfillment of the righteousness required by the law, which Paul expounds in Romans 5 through 8. The last interpretation, that Christ works righteous actions in us by our love, encompasses Paul's last use of the word law in Romans 13:8.

Christ as the End of the Cultic Law

One interpretation of this verse held by some of the early fathers was that Christ brought an end to the cultic regulations of the old covenant. Now that Christ has instituted a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) the sacraments of the old covenant have been rendered obsolete. Augustine certainly held to this view.^B In his Epistle 75 to Jerome Augustine writes:

I, on the contrary, shall maintain, and, though the world were to protest against my view, I may boldly declare that the Jewish ceremonies are to Christians both hurtful and fatal; and that whoever observes them, whether he be Jew or Gentile originally, is cast into the pit of perdition. "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," that is, to both Jew and Gentile; for if the Jew be excepted, He is not the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.¹

^A All Scripture translations are from the Nestle-Aland 26th Edition of the Greek New Testament, and are the author's own.

^B It is worth noting that for Augustine Christ was the fulfillment of pretty much everything. His Christological focus is evident in all of his writings. For example, in his writings on the psalms, Augustine connected the mistranslated Hebrew headings, "To the End," as prophesying to Paul's statement in Romans 10:4.

Augustine taught that the old covenant was given to the Jewish people through Moses, which he calls “the oldness of the letter.” However the Gospel, as Jeremiah prophesied, is the new covenant made for all peoples of the world, that they may live “in the newness of the Spirit.”² This does not at all mean, however, that Augustine believed that Christ has destroyed or made invalid the old covenant. Christians do not ignore the ritual laws of the old covenant because they believe them to be without significance. Rather, the cultic law presaged and has now been fulfilled in Christ:

So it appears that all the things in the Old Testament which you think are not observed by Christians because Christ destroyed the law, are in fact not observed because Christ fulfilled the law. The very intention of the observances was to prefigure Christ. Now that Christ has come, instead of its being strange or absurd that what was done to prefigure His advent should not be done any more, it is perfectly right and reasonable. The typical observances intended to prefigure the coming of Christ would be observed still, had they not been fulfilled by the coming of Christ.³

This was not the only way Augustine used Romans 10:4, but it was one interpretation he held in common with other fathers, such as Novatian. He also taught, as Augustine did, that Christ revealed and fulfilled the intent of the cultic regulations of Moses. Even more importantly, the elimination of the cultic regulations is a sign of the beginning of the restoration of all things. Aspects of creation that were once regulated and even prohibited are now once again blessed. Novatian writes:

And thus there was a certain ancient time, wherein those shadows or figures were to be used, that meats should be abstained from which had indeed been commended by their creation, but had been prohibited by the law. But now Christ, the end of the law, has come, disclosing all the obscurities of the law - all those things which antiquity had covered with the clouds of sacraments...“Everything that is sold in the market-place eat, asking nothing.” From these things it is plain that all those things are returned to their original blessedness now that the law is finished, and that we must not revert to the special observances of meats, which observances were ordained for a certain reason, but which evangelical liberty has now taken away, their discharge being given.⁴

Christ as the Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy

Another interpretation given to this passage is that it indicates Christ’s fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. The passage was often used against the Marcionites and other groups who held that the Old Testament God was not to be identified with the father of Jesus. Irenaeus made use of this passage in his writings against the heretics:

How is Christ the end of the law, if He be not also the final Cause of it? For He who has brought in the end has Himself also wrought the beginning; and it is He who does Himself say to Moses, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have come down to deliver them;” it being customary from the beginning with the

Word of God to ascend and descend for the purpose of saving those who were in affliction.⁵

Christ, the Word of God, demonstrated the salvific action of God in the Old Testament that he would bring to full fruition in the New Testament. Ireneus, then, saw the *τελος* of Romans 10:4 as indicating fulfillment, rather than abolition or annulment.

Tertullian used the passage in much the same way against the heretics who were in his particular sights. If the God who instituted the Old Testament law was different than the God present in Christ, then why would Paul have spoken at all of the old law? Why would Paul have written Romans 3:31, “we uphold the law”? Paul “would have had [to] summarily abolish [the law] if he had published a new god.”⁶ Tertullian writes:

Hereupon we shall be confronted with an argument of the heretic, that the Jews were ignorant of the superior God, since, in opposition to him, they set up their own righteousness - that is, the righteousness of their law - not receiving Christ, the end (or finisher) of the law. But how then is it that he bears testimony to their zeal for their own God, if it is not in respect of the same God that he upbraids them for their ignorance? They were affected indeed with zeal for God, but it was not an intelligent zeal: they were, in fact, ignorant of Him, because they were ignorant of His dispensations by Christ, who was to bring about the consummation of the law; and in this way did they maintain their own righteousness in opposition to Him.⁷

Augustine and Athanasius both use the passage in a similar way, Augustine against the Manicheans, and Athanasius against the Arians. They use Romans 10:4 to demonstrate that the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ, and that there is therefore an intimate connection between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God who is in Christ Jesus. Augustine says that Paul “tells me that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth...He also tells me that all the promises of God are in Christ. And you tell me that the prophets of Israel foretold nothing of Christ!”⁸ Athanasius used Romans 10:4 to emphasize that Christ, unlike the Old Testament prophets, pointed to himself and not ahead to the future. “And others prophesied in different and various ways, concerning the Lord. But by the Lord, of Himself, and of no other, were these things prophesied; to Himself He limited them all, saying, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me - not to any other person, but to ‘Me.’”⁹

Christ as the Righteousness of the Law

A third interpretation of the passage, held by Augustine and others, is that Christ fulfills the righteous requirements of the law. Therefore works are excluded; perfect righteousness is ours by identification with the righteousness of Christ through faith. For Augustine, there is no possibility for man to bring an end to the law; only in Christ is this possible. The Jews erred in making the law of God their own law,

and then claiming to be able to carry it out apart from the work of God. Therefore when Christ appeared, they rejected him as their righteousness, just as they rejected God's gracious covenant pledged in circumcision and the cultic rites:

Then are we still in doubt what are those works of the law by which a man is not justified, if he believes them to be his own works, as it were, without the help and gift of God, which is "by the faith of Jesus Christ?" And do we suppose that they are circumcision and the other like ordinances, because some such things in other passages are read concerning these sacramental rites too? In this place, however, it is certainly not circumcision which they wanted to establish as their own righteousness, because God established this by prescribing it Himself... This then is the sole distinction, that the very precept, "Thou shalt not covet," and God's other good and holy commandments, they attributed to themselves; whereas, that man may keep them, God must work in him through faith in Jesus Christ, who is "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."¹⁰

The Christian participates in Christ's righteousness through faith alone, and not by any cultic rites or works that merit any inherent righteousness. In one of his homilies on John 6, Augustine points out that the crowd wanted more material food from Jesus – more bread – when what they truly needed was justifying faith in him.^c

"Jesus answered and said unto them, 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He has sent.'" This is then to eat the meat, not that which perisheth, but that which endureth unto eternal life. To what purpose dost thou make ready teeth and stomach? Believe, and thou hast eaten already. Faith is indeed distinguished from works, even as the apostle says, "that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law:" there are works which appear good, without faith in Christ; but they are not good, because they are not referred to that end in which works are good; "for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." For that reason, He willeth not to distinguish faith from work, but declared faith itself to be work.¹¹

Chrysostom likewise in his *Homily on the Sermon on the Mount* speaks of Christ's fulfillment of the law as opening the way for our participation in his righteousness through faith. Since Christ has perfectly fulfilled the law, the law has come to an end. Like other church fathers Chrysostom uses Romans 3:31 as an interpretive key to Romans 10:4, so that *τελος* must mean fulfill rather than annul. "For this is the marvel, that He not only Himself fulfilled [the law], but He granted this to us likewise. Which thing Paul also declaring said, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."¹² In his homily on Romans 10, Chrysostom makes this point even more clearly:

^c Some have used this passage to show that Augustine did not hold to a sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The context of this passage clearly shows that Augustine is thinking of the "making ready of teeth and stomach" of the crowd at Capernaum, not of any eating or drinking in the Supper. In any case, the emphasis is on faith so that "the sacrament is for every man to life, for no man to destruction, whosoever shall have been a partaker thereof." (Augustine, *Tractate 26: John 6:41-59*, NPNF 1:7)

For if Christ be “the end of the Law,” he that hath not Christ, even if he seem to have that righteousness, hath it not. But he that hath Christ, even though he have not fulfilled the Law aright, hath received the whole... For what was the object of the Law? To make man righteous. But it had not the power, for no one fulfilled it. This then was the end of the Law and to this it looked throughout, and for this all its parts were made, its feasts, and commandments, and sacrifices, and all besides, that man might be justified. But this end Christ gave a fuller accomplishment of through faith.¹³

Hilary of Poitiers writes of Romans 10:4 in the same vein as both Chrysostom and Augustine. Hilary sees Romans 10:4 as speaking of the final fulfillment of the law. He does, however, see this fulfillment as awaiting a final consummation in the future. In Christ we see the end, the goal, of the law, yet to borrow from St. Paul, we see it only in a mirror dimly. Therefore the righteousness that is ours in Christ remains hidden with him, and we await its revealing with patient faith:

Christ is the end of the law; but, tell me, is He come to destroy it or to fulfill it? And if Christ, the end of the law, does not destroy it, but fulfills it (as He says, I am come not to destroy the law but fulfill it), is not the end of the law, so far from being its dissolution, the very opposite, namely its final perfection? All things are advancing towards an end, but that end is a condition of rest in the perfection, which is the goal of their advance, and not their abolition. Further, all things exist for the sake of the end, but the end itself is not the means to anything beyond: it is an ultimate, all-embracing whole, which rests in itself. And because it is self-contained, and works for no other time or object than itself, the goal is always that to which our hopes are directed. Therefore the Lord exhorts us to wait with patient and reverent faith until the end comes: Blessed is He that endureth to the end.¹⁴

Christ as the New Law of Love

One more interpretation of Romans 10:4, closely related to the last interpretation presented above, is that Christ is the one who actively fulfills the law in and through us. If the former interpretation dealt with justifying faith, this interpretation is more on the lines of sanctifying life. Augustine sees Christ not only as our imputed righteousness, but also as the one working the righteousness of love within us, by faith. “Every one who is incorporated into Him and made a member of His body, is able, by His giving the increase within, to work righteousness. It is of such a man’s works that Christ Himself has said, “Without me ye can do nothing.”¹⁵ It is impossible for anyone to fulfill the law outside of Christ. But as one incorporated into Christ’s body, the Christian is able to work righteousness through his or her love.

Chrysostom speaks in a similar way in his homily on 1 Timothy 1:5-7. Christ awakens in us faith, which in turn serves God, not through outward obedience to a set of rules, but by exhibiting the love that fulfills the law. As Paul himself writes, “Do not owe anyone anything, except to love each other, For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (Romans 13:8). Chrysostom puts it this way:

Therefore when he says, “Christ is the end of the Law” (Romans 10:4), that is, its fulfillment, and this is connected with the former, so this is a commandment implied in love. The end of medicine is health, but where there is health, there is no need to make much ado; so where there is love, there is no need of much commanding.¹⁶

Jerome, writing against the Pelagians, points out as do Augustine and Chrysostom that obedience to the law is not possible without participation in Christ’s righteousness and his activity in us. It is God who makes loving actions possible; nothing in our will can accomplish the will of God in us. Taking his cue from Paul’s words in Romans 7:15-24, Jerome writes;

You see that neither an Apostle, nor any believer can perform what he wishes. “Love covereth a multitude of sins,” not so much sins of the past as sins of the present, that we may not sin any more while the love of God abideth in us. Wherefore it is said concerning the woman that was a sinner, “Her sins which are many are forgiven her, for she loved much.” And this shows us that the doing what we wish does not depend merely upon our own power, but upon the assistance which God in His mercy gives to our will.¹⁷

Conclusion

This brief survey of the early church fathers has shown four interpretations of Romans 10:4 expounded by them in their writings and preaching. These interpretations, it is worth noting, are not mutually exclusive, but in some cases compliment and reinforce each other. Augustine used all four approaches to the verse at one time or another. The key thought present in all the writings surveyed is this: that the New Covenant between humanity and God is rooted solely in Christ; and that only through participation in Christ through faith can we and our actions be found righteous before God. Christ is therefore the fulfillment of the expectations of the Old Covenant, and the end and goal of all our thinking and doing.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, Letter 75, *To Jerome*, Chapter 4:14, NPNF 1:1

² Augustine, *ibid.*

³ Augustine of Hippo, *Contra Faustus*, Book 19:1, NPNF 1:4

⁴ Novatian, *On The Jewish Meats*, Chapter 5, ANF 5

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 4, Chapter 12, Part 4, ANF 1

⁶ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, Book 5, Chapter 3, ANF 2

⁷ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, Book 5, Chapter 14, ANF 2

⁸ Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, Book 12.5, NPNF 1:4

⁹ Athanasius, *Letter 14.4*, NPNF 2:4

¹⁰ Augustine, *To Marcellinus*, Chapter 50, NPNF 1:5

¹¹ Augustine, *Tractate 25: John 6:15-44*, NPNF 1:7

¹² Chrysostom, *Homily 16, Matthew 5:17*, NPNF 1:10

¹³ Chrysostom, *Homily 17, Romans 10*, NPNF 1:11

¹⁴ Hilary, *On The Trinity, Book 11, 28*, NPNF 2:9

¹⁵ Augustine, *To Marcellinus*, Chapter 50, NPNF 1:5

¹⁶ Chrysostom, *Homily 2, 1 Timothy 1:5-7*, NPNF 1:11

¹⁷ Jerome, *Against the Pelagians*, Book 2:6, NPNF 2:6