

BILL VASILAKIS

BIBLICAL STABILITY



...The key to growing to maturity in Christ
...The antidote for combating heresy

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Written and compiled by Bill Vasilakis
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About the Author

Pastor Bill Vasilakis came to Christ in 1971 through the ministry of Leo Harris (the founder of the CRC) and soon after was catapulted into a 'Book of Acts' type evangelistic ministry in High Schools and University that impacted the lives of thousands of students.

Since 1978, Bill has been the Senior Minister of the Christian Family Centre in Adelaide, South Australia, which has grown into a large and influential local church. Through this strong and fruitful apostolic base many daughter churches and outreaches have been established that minister to thousands of people.

Bill's passion is world evangelism through proclaiming the good news about Jesus, strategic church planting, purposeful ministry training and the constant equipping, empowering and releasing of Christian leaders and ministers to fulfill their God given potential.

Bill has been leading his denominational family, CRC Churches International in South Australia between 1988 - 1997 and in Australia since 2002, and serves on various Leadership Boards in Australia and overseas. He and Cathy were married in 1978 and have four adult children and six grandchildren.

INTRODUCTION

It's been my privilege to be leading the Christian Family Centre since 1978 and to serve in various leadership roles within CRC Churches International since 1985. I was appointed as Australian National Chairman in 2002 and this has opened many doors to minister in other nations and to closely observe the church in various contexts and cultures.

Over the decades I have been coming across some teachings that misinterpret and misapply the clear teachings of the Bible. Sadly, these emphases have led a lot of people astray and caused leaders and churches to become misaligned from the clear purpose the Scriptures encourage us to pursue.

A New Testament Church is: Biblically-grounded, Christ-centred, Spirit-led, people loving, forward-moving (in faith & obedience) and outwardly focused (radical not centric). This is the clear picture shining from the Book of Acts and the various letters that the apostles wrote, especially Paul's.

The material in this booklet is adapted from chapters two and six of my recently published book, *The Church We Can Be* and a most helpful article Leo Harris, the founder of CRC Churches wrote in the 1960's, entitled *The Law, the Sabbath and Salvation*.

I have produced this booklet to help pastors and churches avoid some common heresies and false emphases that have occurred in the past and still appear from time to time.

May Jesus help us to do His will here on earth till His return.

Pastor Bill Vasilakis

Senior Minister – Christian Family Centre

National Chairman – CRC Churches International

There is no question in my mind there is a sharp dividing line between churches and movements that are mission driven, compared to others that are personality or tradition driven.

Missteps and misdirections occur when individual lead pastors and churches try to model their ministry and their local church exactly like someone else's.

I am wholeheartedly in the mission driven camp, along with many traditional, evangelical and Pentecostal churches. My deep concern is local churches, movements and denominations will cease to exist in the 21st century if their reason for being is no longer a Biblically-based, Christ-centred one.

Over the years there have been many voices from various places around the world speaking into the charismatic and Pentecostal scene in Australia. Though some good has resulted from these new emphases, there have also been some missteps and misdirections when individual lead pastors and churches have tried to model their ministry and their local church exactly like someone else's. Let me mention several of these new teachings that deeply affected the Australian scene, but have come and gone without lasting mission impact for the Kingdom of God.

SOME EXTREME EMPHASEES

1. The tabernacle of David teaching originated out of New Zealand in the early 1970's, with its emphasis on dancing before the Lord (like King David did) as a sign that you are really free. This caused terrible splits in some movements.

One significant Pentecostal movement had to have a special conference to sort out the polarised opinions that almost wrecked their national cohesion. It's hard to imagine that division occurred because a legitimate and quite joyous expression of worship was made to be '*the sign*' that you are spiritually free. But it happened!

I remember Dr Robert Frost's liberating opening comments at a huge Charismatic Convention in the early 1970's. Dr Frost was a biological scientist and professor from Oral Roberts University, who was also an insightful Bible teacher. The delegates had been whipped up into a 'jumping for Jesus' frenzy for about an hour and everyone was exhausted before Dr. Frost commenced his message. I and my friends sat out this bizarre worship expression and we were feeling the psychological pressure that we had just missed out on God by not entering into this freeing experience. Dr Frost was a breath of fresh air to everyone present when he told us that he was too tired to stand during the worship time and that Jesus was just as satisfied with his quiet worship while he was sitting down.

He then proceeded to logically and lovingly correct the false ideas behind the outrageous claims of the proponents of this new doctrine. He did it gently without making any personal attacks on the sincerity or motives of people who really believed it was what God expected. His presentation was Biblically-grounded, Christ-centred and respectful of people and it was the highlight of the Convention for the thousands

present. It so impacted us that 45 years later we still talk about it.

2. The discipleship emphasis from Fort Lauderdale (Florida USA) in the late 1970's, took a beautiful truth about being fully devoted followers of Jesus and turned it into a human discipling model of personal submission, commitment and accountability to another person. Taken to the extreme it became a binding, controlling system that hurt a lot of people.

Thankfully some of the leaders of this new teaching emphasis later apologised for the difficulties that many of their enthusiastic followers caused, whereby people were encouraged (by ridiculous applications of scriptural texts) to even be submitted to abusive spouses and pastors. This is clearly wrong and the opposite of how Jesus instructs us to be as His representatives. It is also very damaging to vulnerable people experiencing abuse. They should be cared for, protected and receive practical help, prayer, referral for counseling support and advocacy for justice when they disclose historical or ongoing abuse.

3. The cell church concept in the 1980's also proved problematic. Though it became a successful approach in some highly authoritarian nations, it was an inappropriate model in the context of the democratic west and especially for easy going Australians. It didn't work because of cultural incompatibility, yet many church leaders blindly tried to

implement it and disillusionment about doing life together through small groups set in. How sad this was to observe, as balanced small group ministry is so indispensable for church health, discipleship and authentic pastoral care.

4. The new move of the Spirit in the 1990's arising in Toronto (Canada), Pensacola (Florida USA) and some other places became a panacea for people longing for more fulsome expressions of the miraculous in their lives and churches. However, trying to systematise the Holy Spirit to perform in a certain way or style, characterises the Spirit as a plaything and is fraught with difficulties. Even though many people were touched by God, it caused naive and non-discriminating churches to become centric rather than radic in mission. This sadly resulted in an obvious lessening of their evangelism and church planting efforts.

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5. The missional church emphasis in the 2000's took our most important task in reaching lost people to an unhealthy and unworkable extreme. It was almost the exact opposite to the centric effect of the 'new move of the Spirit' emphasis a decade earlier. This movement elevated personal witness but divorced it from the need to remain connected to regular

weekly worship, teaching and discipling in strong local churches.

The error is so obvious but it led some to adopt a negative and critical view of churches that we all agree are made up of imperfect people. We must avoid the trap of seeing Jesus' Church only from a human perspective, as it can set us up with a prideful attitude that no one else has it together like us because we have the right spiritual emphasis. The noble desire to reach as many people as possible can never be severed from Jesus' big picture vision for His Church. This locked-in thinking was not open to accepting that the vast majority of evangelical and Pentecostal churches are being faithful and fruitful in reaching unprecedented numbers of lost people worldwide. So many of these diverse churches are also healthy and radiant as Jesus' spotless Bride.

6. The prosperity, hyper-faith Gospel is one of the worse false emphases, because it turns the hope-filled and loving message of Jesus into a self-centred spiritual get-rich quick scheme as evidence that one has real faith.

There is no question that faith in Christ opens a door of spiritual prosperity that can have material effects (2 Corinthians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 8:9). Individuals, social groups and nations do experience this redemption/lift phenomena, but it must result in Christ's followers becoming more selfless in their generosity towards the poor in their

communities. Jesus blesses us to be a blessing to others. (Ephesians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 8:14; 2 Corinthians 9:8,11; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Hebrews 13:16)

John Wesley's famous maxim of 'work, earn and save as much as you can' is linked to his most important final phrase that says, 'give as much as you can.' This is how I interpret Jesus when he says, *'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.'* **Luke 6:38** (NIV)

CRC Churches International addresses this in two of its ten core values, ensuring that we are word-based in our application of the gospel of free grace (these core values are in the CRC Charter). Under *Dynamic Faith* we affirm that 'faith is the means by which our potential authority in Christ (as new creations) is outworked in real spiritual power.' Under *Selfless Service* we state that we must 'willingly embrace sacrificial servanthood as a way of life, resisting the temptation to desire a crown without a cross.'

These two inspiring statements help us keep the balance right as we move forward with a daring faith in Jesus, to serve the best interests of others and to truly love and be generous to our neighbour. (Luke 10:25-37)

7. The push to formally recognise and give special authority to apostles and prophets appears every few years and unless managed wisely can cause dangerous division in local churches and movements. This emphasis tends to displace Jesus' headship as these self-promoting apostles and prophets act like lords over God's people, rather than as humble servants. Paul and Peter knock this by telling us that Jesus is the precious foundational cornerstone of His Church, not the men and women He calls into ministry and leadership to serve His purposes. (1 Corinthians 3:10-11; Ephesians 1:22-23; Acts 4:10-12; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8)

All these seven emphases tend to degenerate over time into exclusive cult-like social groups with their misguided submission to a particular Christian leader or church or teaching. When an elitist mentality develops, then other Christian denominations, churches or individuals who haven't received their particular revelation, are viewed as missing out on God and what He is now doing in our world. I also see them as gnostic in the sense that they tend to add to or take away from the Cross, the free grace message of the Gospel, our new identity and completeness as new creations in Christ and the precious permanent all-sufficient gift of the Spirit. The truth is we can never copy and reproduce

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another's ministry, as our social context is different and God's calling and grace on each lead pastor and church is quite unique.

Sadly, some leaders keep falling into the same trap, ending up discouraged as they discover that shifting emphases eventually destabilises their church. I have observed some leaders having to spend years rebuilding the trust of their people because they have swung from one new revelation to another.

A BETTER WAY: LOOK FOR TIMELESS TRANSFERABLE TRUTHS

For me, there have been some terrific model leaders and churches throughout the world, who have carefully thought through the reasons for their spiritual fruitfulness. They have all remained focussed on Jesus' master blueprint.

We can never copy their experience, but the principles and values they have received from God and from their life journey are transferable. We must contextualise these principles to our own individual scene, which is quite variable even in a multi-ethnic western nation like Australia. They also need to be shaped and applied through the prism of our own unique calling and the specific and particular gifts Jesus has given us.

GROWING IN OUR BIBLICAL STABILITY

When you are thoroughly Biblically-grounded, you become discerning and don't get diverted off-course or pulled to extremes. This is what Paul was imploring the Ephesian Christians to pursue in their quest to be Christ-centred and Christ-like in all things.

'Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.' **Ephesians 4:14** (NLT)

Let me give you some examples of false teachings I have had to counter that have entrapped good people into 'Christian' cults because of their limited understanding of God's Word.

SOME FALSE TEACHINGS

1. There is a deceptive heresy that asserts, if someone is not baptised in water they are destined for hell and eternal separation from God.

Proponents of this false doctrine use **Mark 16:15-16a** (NIV), *'He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ^{16a}Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved..."'*

However, the second half of verse 16 is left out. So let's read the entire verse together. **Mark 16:16** (NIV), "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

There are plenty of verses linking belief, repentance, obedience and water baptism to salvation but there is not one Bible verse linking lack of water baptism with damnation and hell. When you realise what the Bible teaches, this false teaching is demolished. Judgement will occur if we consciously reject Christ, refuse His loving offer of forgiveness and maliciously disobey Jesus' law of love. It's choosing to oppose Jesus Himself that will send you to hell. But while you still have breath in your body, you can turn your heart and life back to Him. He doesn't want anyone to be cut off from Him in hell for eternity, but all to come to repentance and be saved (2 Peter 3:8-9).

*False teachers
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False teachers try to validate their dangerous ideas by using Scriptures out of context which always violate the accepted rules of Biblical interpretation. Nobody eliminates diseased vermin or pests by placing poison pellets on the ground, but by imbedding them in food they like to eat.

Sadly, good people can naively devour these false views without thinking, because deceivers sprinkle in some quotes from the Bible.¹ We must be on guard and rightly discern what is true and when this happens we grow in our knowledge of God's Word.

¹ I have put together a booklet that outlines the reasons why water baptism is important for all new Christians to embrace in their spiritual journey. It is available from the Christian Family Centre, Seaton

2. There's another troubling heresy some people believe about being baptised for a dead loved one or friend, so their dear one can get to heaven.

From an initial reading of one unusually written verse it seems like Paul teaches this in **1 Corinthians 15:29** (NIV) which says, *'Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?'*

However, there are at least three interpretations of this challenging verse and the Zondervan Study Bible gives a good rundown of each view.² Again, let's be really clear on this. Even if this verse can be legitimately interpreted this way, because there are no other verses in the whole Bible that teach this, we can't build a new doctrine around this one isolated verse.

In formulating our core Christian beliefs and the main tenets of our faith, recognised Biblical scholars over the centuries have used 'context' and 'other Scriptures' rules in the establishment of our universally accepted Christian teachings. When you combine these two key principles with a close examination of the 'meaning of words' in their original languages and the 'cultural/social/historical background' of the passages being examined, we can eliminate erroneous

² The NIV Study Bible (1985) Page 1757. Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506 USA

and false notions and get clarity on the relevant teachings of the Bible and their application to our day and age.

When we adhere to these four C.O.M.B interpreting principles we will be able to correctly handle God's inspired Word of truth [**C**ontext, **O**ther Scriptures, **M**eaning of Words, **B**ackground of Passages].

(2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

3. There's another false teaching that asserts that the gift of baptism in the Spirit and speaking in other tongues is essential for salvation.

Proponents of this view misuse the faith-inspiring promise from **Acts 2:38-39** (NIV) which says, ³⁸*Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."*

Baptism in the Spirit, like repentance and water baptism, is often linked to God's saving work in Christ. However, there aren't any passages linking lack of baptism in the Spirit and speaking in tongues with eternal damnation and hell.³

The best answer to highlighting the error of this heresy concerning 'tongues' and the earlier one on water baptism is

³ I have a booklet entitled 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit' that outlines the key truths about this experience. It's available for all Christians from the Christian Family Centre, Seaton.

the example of the repenting thief on the cross. He was assured of salvation by Jesus because of his genuine contrition over his sins and sincere confession of faith in Jesus. (Luke 23:39-43).

Jesus didn't say to him, *"Son you will be saved and have a place in heaven with me, if you can somehow find a way of getting down off the cross, get someone to baptise you in water, lay hands on you to receive the gift of the Spirit and speaking in tongues, then ask them to help you back onto your cross."* This very moving story demolishes both these heresies as we see Jesus' heart in saving this lost man and guaranteeing Him a place in eternal paradise. (Luke23:43 NIV)

4. The heresy of mixing law and grace which is as incompatible as oil is to water.

From time-to-time this deception tries to marry Old Testament teachings about the Law, the Sabbath and even worshipping in a future rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, with the New Testament's teaching on salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-10). It has and still does cause significant trouble for newer Christians and churches.⁴

It is incredibly misguided to think that God wants to inhabit a physical temple, rather than dwell in human beings who are

⁴ Leo Harris, the founder of the CRC wrote on this in the early days of our movement to combat this false teaching that would arise every so often. 'The Law, the Sabbath and Salvation' is included in this booklet and is available through CRC Publications – www.crcchurches.org

made in His image and who have been redeemed by Jesus. Christ's death on the Cross for the sins of humanity tore down the dividing wall of hostility between a perfectly just God and imperfect people who all fall short of God's ideal. (Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:14-17)

When the Jerusalem temple curtain was torn from the top to the bottom (Mark 15:37-39), God was telling us with no ambiguity that it is now possible to continually experience His Presence. The impassable barrier of our sin has been removed forever and we are now safe and secure in our relationship with God. Praise the Lord! Jesus can now live in our bodies through the presence of the Holy Spirit because the sin issue has been dealt with (Ephesians 2:18-22). After fulfilling all the requirements of the law for us, Jesus brought into being the new creation. We live in this liberating New Testament era of free grace. (Matthew 5:17; Galatians 2:19-21; Colossians 2:16-17)

It is incredibly misguided to think that God wants to inhabit a physical temple, rather than dwell in human beings who are made in His image and who have been redeemed by Jesus.

Paul ends his famous letter to the Galatians, who were so troubled with this heresy, by saying, *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*¹⁵ *Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts*

is the new creation. ¹⁶Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.” Galatians 6:14-16 (NIV)

5. The heresy of visiting heaven to receive special knowledge.

In the early 1970's I came across several overseas itinerant preachers who were proclaiming that they literally went to heaven for a time. What's more, they said that Jesus showed them around and even pointed out which mansion was going to be theirs as they walked the streets of gold. Though I was a new convert it seemed to me that their claims were spurious, even though I couldn't explain why I felt this at the time.

Over the ensuing decades this notion has come up again and again but I now have a better grasp of what is taking place with these preachers, some of whom are very sincere about their heavenly experiences. There is also no question that there are some charlatan preachers who are making a lot of money by visiting churches that are taken-in by their story. However, I do believe some people are having a genuine spiritual vision or a dream, but are misreading its intent and are taking literally the symbolic images of the Book of Revelation. (Revelation 21:21)

The Holy Spirit can give us real visions and dreams and prophetic words to help us outwork the mission of Jesus. The Book of Acts is full of references to this miraculous dimension and it would be a dull history if all the supernatural elements

impregnating the story of the first church were taken out. (Acts 2:16-18; Acts 7:55-56; Acts 9:1-12; Acts 10:3-20; Acts 16:6-10; Acts 21:10-14)

There are many people, particularly Muslims, who testify that it was a supernatural vision or dream that converted them to Christ.

My wife experienced this type of transformative vision and was miraculously touched by Jesus as an eight-year old after a severe beating by her abusive father. She came to know Jesus and was baptised in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues at that tender age. In fact, it set the spiritual trajectory of her life.⁵ These supernatural signs and wonders are part of the normal Christian life as we move forward to share the Good News about Jesus with people. The Gospels, Acts and New Testament letters give some vivid examples of these miraculous happenings.

However, the idea of being caught up to heaven and talking with passed-on loved ones, receiving directions from angels or Jesus Himself for our life here on earth, is plainly a heresy. Sadly, this destabilising and dangerous teaching is prevalent in some newer Christian movements. We can easily dismiss this false doctrine by pointing out that its nowhere to be found in the New Testament.

⁵ Cathy shares on this in my book 'New Beginnings' (chapter 4 page 51) that is available from the Christian Family Centre, Seaton.

The great Apostle Paul tells us about a vision he had of heaven but he was forbidden to say anything about what he saw. (2 Corinthians 12:1-4) That should be enough to silence those who talk falsely about their regular visits to heaven to get new orders from departed friends, angels or Jesus in person. Even the Apostle John suggests the Book of Revelation came from a spiritual vision by the Holy Spirit and he implies that its message is predominantly in symbolic form. (Revelation 1:10-20; Revelation 4:1-11; Revelation 21:1-5; Revelation 22:16)

The idea of being caught up to heaven and talking with passed-on loved ones, receiving directions from angels or Jesus Himself for our life here on earth, is plainly a heresy.

What really knocks this heresy on the head about visiting heaven to get new direction is that it is the exact opposite of the New Testament's teaching about who we now are as new creations in Christ. A reborn Jesus follower is a believer-priest who is in a permanent and stable relationship with God because of what Jesus did on the Cross for them. We are now actually indwelt by God Himself through the Holy Spirit. We have continual access to our Heavenly Father because our sins are covered by Jesus' sacrificial death. What's more, the Holy Spirit guides us in all matters and aligns our thinking and beliefs to God's written word.

The following passages are crystal clear about the privileges and prerogatives that are now ours as spiritual children of our loving Heavenly Dad.

(Romans 5:1-2; Romans 8:15-17; 2 Corinthians 1:20-22; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians 2:19-22; Ephesians 3:12; Colossians 1:27; 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Timothy 3:15; Titus 3:3-7; Hebrews 2:14-18; Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 7:23-25; Hebrews 10:19-23; James 1:22-25)
Take time to read and think deeply on each of them.

All of these heresies I have listed above have caused a lot of damage to precious people who are ill-informed and unfortunately gullible. This is why it is vital that all Christ-followers are trained how to correctly handle God's Word of Truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

6. When ministry orthopraxy is disconnected from theological orthodoxy

The New Testament is the key that unlocks our understanding of the Old Testament. In fact Jesus himself said that all of the Old Testament points to Him (Luke 24:25-27, 32). For example the book of Joshua is not our starting point to build a framework for Christian ethics. It's obvious that our starting off point has to be Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

The same for King David in regards to marriage and sexual morality. As great a man as he was, it's fairly clear that having multiple wives and concubines was not God's plan in the beginning and Jesus reaffirmed monogamous, life-long marriage between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:18-24; Matthew 19:1-12).

When it comes to how we are to minister in Christ's name, the Book of Acts and especially the letters of Paul are our guide. We look for the timeless transferable principles that apply for all people in all cultures, rather than the absolutely unique ministry style of Jesus in the Gospels. Don't get me wrong here. We learn so much from Jesus in how He ministered to people, but because He is God's Son some aspects apply only to Him.

For example, we don't follow His example of spitting in a sick person's eyes (Mark 8:22-26), or their mouth (Mark 7:33), or placing mud on a blind person's eyes (John 9:6-7), or attempt to walk across a stormy lake. (Matthew 8:23-27, 14:25)

For example, when it comes to healing ministry, we lay hands on the sick in appropriate places (Mark 16:18) i.e. usually on the person's head or shoulder, anoint them with oil (a symbol of the Holy Spirit), and pray to Jesus with a faith expectation that He will heal the sick person. (James 5:13-15)

BE DISCERNING

Be very wary of self-promoting apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors, teachers and leaders who set themselves up as authoritative spiritual 'gurus'. Their claim of special knowledge or being an expert spiritual guide beguiles and deceives good people into following them.

You can easily discern people who have attached this kind of status to their ministry because they are not accountable to any responsible denominational family or there is no covering Board in place that can correct their false teaching or sack them. They are a law unto themselves. Usually the people who come under their influence have to separate from their family, local church or denomination as they get terribly conflicted in their loyalty. Following these false leaders is incompatible with being able to have any other close or healthy relationships outside of their influence.

Be very wary of self-promoting apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers and leaders who set themselves up as authoritative spiritual gurus.

The leader gradually becomes cultic and followers become their disciples, rather than devoted followers of Jesus. They can even end up giving their money and material goods to them personally, rather than humbly embracing the tithing principle to help churches share Jesus' good news and give to people in real need.

These pseudo-leaders also have a spiritual emphasis or some new teaching that is not satisfied with the Gospel of free grace, the new creation message of who we now are in Christ and the gift of the Spirit. They tend to add to or detract from these widely accepted fundamentals of the Christian faith.

(Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Corinthians 11:3-6)

Paul nails it on the head when he said, “they distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them”. (Acts 21:30)

This is why it is essential for all followers of Jesus to become more Biblically literate over time and systematically taught all the key teachings of the Christian faith. Coupled with this is our need to be in loving, non-coercive submission to credible and consistent leaders and Oversight Boards. However, we must only be obedient to them if they are worthy of respect and display genuine spiritual fruit. We can have confidence in them if they exhibit consistently good behaviour. We should only submit to credible leaders with a proven track record of selfless service, integrity of character, and who are accountable for their own conduct and have our best interests at heart.

THE LAW

THE SABBATH

AND SALVATION

What does the New Testament teach about the Old Testament Law?

What is the Believer's relationship to the Law?

What is the Believer's relationship to the Sabbath?

What is the Believer's relationship to Christ?

By Pastor Leo Harris

(Founder of CRC Churches International)

©Written by Leo Harris – Scripture references updated from the original KJV to NIV and gender inclusive language is used.

1. WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACH ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW?

Let us consider a few New Testament facts concerning the Law of God.

First, THE LAW SETS A STANDARD.

Let us make no mistake about that. This is what we read in **Romans 7:12** (NIV), *“So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.”*

The moral law was given by God to Israel at Mount Sinai in order to establish a standard of holiness. It set forth the requirements of a holy God – requirements which must be met if humanity is to satisfy the demands of the righteousness of God.

“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. ⁹We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine...”

1 Timothy 1:8-10 (NIV)

Second, THE LAW BRINGS THE KNOWLEDGE OF SIN

That was the purpose of the law. Let us read the words of Paul again:

“What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known that sin was bad had it not been for the law...¹³Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. That sin, by the commandment, might become exceeding sinful. ¹⁴We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.”

Romans 7:7; 13-14 (NIV)

Hear now the words of Paul in **Romans 3:20 (NIV)**,
“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.”

Just a simple illustration on this point. It would be morally wrong for people to drive their cars at sixty miles per hour along a crowded city street, but they cannot be convicted until there is a law introduced governing the speed and manner of driving in that street. Then they are not only morally wrong, but their wrong-doing is identified. Just so, humanity’s moral nature has fallen away from God as a result

of our first parents' disobedience, but it was not until God introduced the moral law at Mount Sinai that human beings were shown to be sinners, falling short of God's righteous standards. Thus, *"By the law is the knowledge of sin."*

So we hear the Apostle Paul saying, *"What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" ⁸But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead."*

Romans 7:7-8 (NIV)

Third, THE LAW CONDEMNS ALL MEN

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." **Romans 3:19**
(NIV)

Thus we see that not only does the law show up sin in the human life, but it legally condemns all. It stops every mouth that would be opened in self-defence and self-righteousness. It declares everybody to be guilty.

The law cannot justify—it condemns. *"...know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus*

Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

Galatians 2:16 (NIV)

Murder is shown by the law, *“Thou shalt not kill,”* to be sin, and the law declares the murderer GUILTY. If there were no such law, the murderer would be morally wrong, but their sin would never have been defined, nor their condemnation established.

The law of God makes the whole world guilty and condemns all.

Fourth, THE LAW BRINGS DEATH UPON ALL MEN

Having made all people sinners and declared them all guilty, the law pronounces the death-sentence upon all, *“For the wages of sin is death...”* **Romans 6:23a** (NIV)

Consider the logical argument of Paul in **Romans 7:9-11** (NIV), *“Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.”*

Friends, that's all the law has ever done and can ever do, for anybody. It reveals them to be a sinner. It condemns them and slays them. Thus the whole world is pronounced "*dead in trespasses and sins.*"

Fifth, THE LAW LEADS US TO CHRIST

Just one moment! There is one other purpose the law fulfils. It prepares us for the Gospel of Christ. It shows that Christ is our only hope of salvation. Meditate on these words from **Galatians 3:22-24** (NIV), "*But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. ²³Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.*"

The law conditioned all humanity for the coming of Christ the Saviour, that we might be 'SHUT UP' unto salvation by faith in alone.

"Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." **Romans 3:31** (NIV)

The law serves its purpose. Its supreme purpose, however, is to cause us to flee to Christ and be saved and justified through faith in Him alone.

2. WHAT IS THE BELIEVER'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAW?

Having seen what the New Testament teaches about the Old Testament law, let us now consider the believer's relationship to the law.

This all-important point is much debated in certain circles today. It was the issue in the Apostle Paul's day too, and that is very fortunate for us because it led the apostle to set out some very clear teaching on the matter, so that we in our day may be guided by his inspired writings.

Here then is a summary of New Testament teaching concerning the relationship of the believer in Christ to the law of God.

First, THE BELIEVER IN CHRIST IS DEAD TO THE LAW

"So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ..." **Romans 7:4a** (NIV)

The law thunders at every man and woman, 'You are a sinner! You are guilty! You must die!' That is the just verdict of the holy law of God.

But hear the message of the Gospel. It cried to every man and woman, 'Look to the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary! He died in your stead! He died in your name! He was

your substitute! Therefore, in God's sight, you died when Christ died!

Thus the apostle declares, *"You also died to the law through the body of Christ."* The law demanded death, and we died in the person of Christ, our substitute.

The believer accepts the good news. He believes it. Now when the law thunders, 'You are guilty! You must die!' the believer agrees with that verdict, but then he looks to Christ on the Cross and says, "BUT I HAVE DIED! I died in the person of Jesus Christ who took my place." That's it, friends. The believer enters into death with Christ. The law has no more power over a dead person. The law remains unchanged, but the believer has DIED to the law. They no longer hear its thundering. They are no longer moved by its charges and condemnation – so long as they see themselves identified with Christ on the cross. *"You also died to the law through the body of Christ..."*

Second, THE BELIEVER IS DELIVERED FROM THE LAW

"But no, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." **Romans 7:6, (NIV)**

The unregenerate person is 'HELD' by the law, but through the death of Christ on our behalf we are DELIVERED from the law.

Paul considered the bondage of the law to be something to be DELIVERED from. This deliverance is wrought through our identification with Christ in His atoning death.

Third, THE BELIEVER IS DECLARED TO BE NO LONGER UNDER THE LAW

“So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by FAITH. ²⁵Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (law).” Galatians 3:24-25 (NIV)

Such words as these are surely self-explanatory. The law served its purpose by making us all sinners, declaring us guilty, stopping every mouth that might be opened in self-justification, condemning us all to death ... UNTIL CHRIST CAME. Now we have heard the Gospel, faith has come into our hearts; we accept the substitutionary death of Christ, by faith seeing ourselves dead with Him. Now, by a great act of faith, we become DEAD to the law, DELIVERED from the law, NO LONGER UNDER THE LAW!

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” Galatians 2:19-21 (NIV)

This, in a nutshell, is the believer's relationship to the law.

3. WHAT IS THE BELIEVER'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE SABBATH?

Having considered the New Testament teaching concerning the Old Testament law, and the believer's relationship to the law, let us now see what the Scriptures teach about the believer's relationship to the Sabbath day.

First, observe that of the Ten Commandments in the moral law as set out in Exodus 20, nine apply directly to the moral relationships of human beings to God and of people to people. The fourth commandment relates to the observance of the seventh day as a Sabbath, in remembrance of the fact that God created the heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh day.

Second, I want you to notice that all the other NINE commandments are referred to in the New Testament and applied to believers living in the New Testament era. However, the FOURTH commandment, relating to the Sabbath, is not so applied to believers in the New Testament. Later we shall see just how those NINE moral commandments are fulfilled in the believer, but now we shall move on to our next point:

Third, the seventh-day Sabbath observance not only pointed backwards to the creative work of God and His subsequent resting on the seventh day, but it also pointed forward. It pointed to CHRIST, to the NEW CREATION to be formed in Him, and the TRUE REST into which the believer enters following their acceptance of Christ and becoming a 'new creature' in Him.

Fourth, this profound truth is revealed in at least two New Testament scriptures. We read in **Colossians 2:16-17** (NIV), *"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."*

Friends, that word 'Sabbath' is the word used in connection with the weekly seventh-day Sabbath (the word 'days' is not in the original), and here Paul says that it, as well as other Old Testament observances, were but a SHADOW of things to come, but the substance is CHRIST. The Sabbath was a type, a forerunning shadow, preparing the hearts and minds of men and women for the great anti-type, the Lord Jesus Christ. All these other substances find their fulfilment in Christ.

The other Scripture which I wish to quote is found in **Hebrews 4:9-11** (NIV), *"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹Let us,*

therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.”

Friends, this Scripture shows us the true significance of the Old Testament seventh-day Sabbath. It pointed backward to the fact that God rested after His works of creation, but it also pointed forward to the fact that our real Sabbath is in Christ, when we cease from our own works and enter into the rest of faith. The word ‘rest’ in Hebrews 4 means ‘Sabbath-rest’. If you read the entire chapter you will see that the context refers to the believer entering into rest from all their own works through faith in Christ, even as God rested from His own works on the seventh day.

The word ‘Sabbath’ simply means ‘cessation’ – to cease from work. The keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath however, like all other Old Testament observances, is a ‘work’ from which we are released when we enter our rest through faith in Christ.

Thus we see that the Old Testament Sabbath pointed backward to God’s rest after the first creation and pointed forward to the believer’s rest from their own works after being made ‘a new creation’ in Christ. This is the Sabbath-rest that remains for the people of God. This is the true Sabbath, of which all other Sabbaths were but a shadow. This is why Paul says no one should judge another on the keeping of any day. It is why he says in **Romans 14:5** (NIV),

“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.” The important matter is not which day we keep, but whether or not we are a new creature in Christ.

Friends, this is also why the Apostle Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:17-18a** (NIV), *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! ^{18a}All this is from God...”*

In this way the fourth commandment, concerning the Sabbath, played its part along with the rest of the Old Testament law in preparing the way for the coming of Christ and our acceptance of Him by faith alone.

4. WHAT IS THE BELIEVER’S RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST?

In our previous text we have considered the New Testament teaching concerning the Old Testament law, the believer’s relationship to the law, and the believer’s relationship to the Sabbath.

In this final text we shall briefly examine a vast and powerful truth – the believer’s relationship to Christ.

Of necessity, this will be but a summary of a teaching which occupies so much of the epistles of the New Testament.

First, THE BELIEVER IS LEGALLY IDENTIFIED WITH CHRIST

This is a profound truth, a revelation with revolutionary power for all who will receive it. We are told the believer is crucified with Christ – dead to the law, dead to sin. See Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:1-11; Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 2:19. The believer is buried with Christ in the symbol of baptism. Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12.

The believer is identified with Christ in His triumphant resurrection – ‘raised with Christ.’ Ephesians 2:4-7; Colossians 3:1-4.

All that Jesus did – His death, burial, resurrection and ascension to the Father’s right hand – was not for himself, but for US. He identified himself with us in our fallen, sinful state, becoming our representative. Now by faith we are identified with Him – as though we ourselves had died for our own sins, had been buried and raised again and were now seated on the Father’s throne!

Jesus was born of mortal flesh, under the law, that He might suffer the curse of the law on our behalf. And in OUR NAME He paid the penalty of a broken law. Thus we have, IN CHRIST, died to the law.

We have also, IN CHRIST, died to sin. We are now, IN CHRIST, alive to God, with life eternal. We are complete in Christ. (Colossians 2:10)

Second, THE BELIEVER IS INDWELT BY CHRIST

The risen, triumphant Christ now dwells within the heart of the believer. We are told that God has *'sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts'*. (**Galatians 4:6** NIV)

Paul not only saw himself legally crucified with Christ, but also now vitally indwelt by Christ. *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."*

Galatians 2:20a (NIV)

In Christ the believer is made a NEW CREATION. As the 'old creation' made in Adam, we were condemned under the law, made sinners under sentence of death. Now, however, as the 'new creation' in Christ, we discover that *"...The old has gone, the new is here!"*

2 Corinthians 5:17b (NIV)

The law cannot condemn us now, for we are 'dead to the law'. The law cannot condemn Christ and it is Christ who lives in us. *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."*

We cannot place the believer under the Old Testament law without denying this powerful, precious truth that they have become a 'NEW CREATURE', legally identified with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection, and vitally indwelt by Christ in His super-natural life and power.

This is the fundamental teaching of the New Testament.

HOW THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ARE FULFILLED IN THE BELIEVER

First, LOVE

We saw in an earlier text that nine of the Ten Commandments relate to a human beings moral relationship to God and to people. We now see how these are fulfilled in the believer.

Jesus said that all the law hinged on loving God and loving our neighbour, (Matthew 22:37-40). Now the unsaved person cannot do that. Once we are truly born again however, Christ dwells within our hearts, and the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost (Romans 5:5). We can love God and love our neighbour with the perfect love of the indwelling Christ – the new kind of love that is born within us when we become new creatures in Christ. Thus our lives become controlled, not by the letter of the old law, but by the LAW OF LOVE operating within us by the power of the Spirit.

Now see what the Scriptures say about the person who has this love of Christ within their hearts. “...love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.” **Romans 13:8b** (NIV), and in verse 10, “*Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*” Again in **Galatians 5:14** (NIV), “*For the entire law is fulfilled in*

keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Friends, we have been given a NEW COMMANDMENT that comprehends all other commandments. We are under a new law, the law of love.

Second, NEW LIFE

We saw earlier that the Sabbath commandment is now embraced in the Sabbath-rest which the believer enters upon becoming a new creature in Christ. And now we see that the other nine commandments are embraced in the revelation of the indwelling Christ and the 'new creation' that we have become in Him.

Now it is not a matter of Saturday or Sunday, or any other day, for we have entered into our SABBATH-REST IN CHRIST every day of the week. We are NEW CREATURES ('not I, but Christ'), and all that we are and have and do, is holy unto the Lord.

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." **Colossians 3:17** (NIV)

It is no longer a matter of living by the letter of the law, but being born from above, indwelt by Christ, filled with the love of Christ, and going forth day by day in the power of Christ.

By faith we see ourselves as God sees us – crucified with Christ, buried with Him, raised with Him, seated with Him in the heavens. By faith we live on the other side of the tomb. By faith we live in the power of His resurrection. We walk in the Spirit.

Third, THE SPIRIT

“¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Galatians 5:18, 22-23 (NIV)

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.” **Romans 8:14 (NIV)**

Fourth, LIBERTY

“The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” **Romans 8:15 (NIV)**

“So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” **Galatians 4:7 (NIV)**

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Romans 14:17 (NIV)

This, then, is the New Testament teaching concerning the law, the Sabbath, and our salvation in Christ.

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