Are Christians under the Old Testament law?

Apologetics · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/are-christians-under-the-old-testament-law/

Yes. And no. Christians are not under the Old Covenant given through Moses as a covenantal system that governs their standing before God (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 3:23–25; Heb. 8:13). At the same time, Christians are not lawless. We live under Christ, who fulfilled the Law and now guides His people through His Word and Spirit (Matt. 5:17; Gal. 6:2; Rom. 8:3–4).

The New Testament consistently teaches that believers are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the Law (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8–9). The Mosaic Covenant served a specific purpose in God's redemptive plan. It revealed sin, guarded Israel, and pointed forward to Christ (Gal. 3:19–24). Once Christ came and accomplished His saving work, that covenant reached its intended goal.

This does not mean the Old Testament is irrelevant. Far from it. Christians continue to learn from the Law because it reveals God's character, wisdom, and moral will (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). However, we read the Law through the lens of Christ's fulfillment. The New Testament repeatedly teaches that believers are no longer bound to Old Covenant regulations regarding circumcision (Gal. 5:2–6), dietary laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15; Rom. 14:14), feast days (Col. 2:16–17), sacrifices (Heb. 10:1–18), and the Levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:11–19).

Historically, Christians have often distinguished between the moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects of the Mosaic Law. While those categories are not explicitly listed in Scripture, they can be useful for understanding why commands against murder and adultery remain binding while animal sacrifices and temple rituals do not. The New Testament itself teaches that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial and sacrificial aspects of the Law while reaffirming God's enduring moral standards (Matt. 22:37–40; Rom. 13:8–10).

Theologically, the key issue is covenant. The question is not whether God's Law was good—it was (Rom. 7:12). The question is whether Christians remain under the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. The New Testament's answer is clear: believers are now participants in the New Covenant established through the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:6–13).

As the author of Hebrews explains, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete" (Heb. 8:13). That doesn't mean God's promises failed. It means they reached their fulfillment in Jesus.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Galatians 3 — The Law served as a guardian until Christ came.
- Romans 6:14 — Believers are not under law but under grace.
- Hebrews 8 — The New Covenant renders the old covenant obsolete.
- Galatians 2:16 — Justification comes through faith in Christ, not works of the Law.
- Matthew 5:17–20 — Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets.
- Romans 10:4 — Christ is the goal (telos) of the Law for righteousness.
- Hebrews 10:1–14 — Christ's sacrifice fulfills and supersedes the sacrificial system.
- Romans 7:12 — The Law itself remains holy, righteous, and good.
- 2 Timothy 3:16–17 — The Old Testament remains profitable for Christian instruction.

Old Testament Foundations

- Jeremiah 31:31–34 — God promises a future New Covenant that will differ from the covenant made at Sinai.
- Deuteronomy 18:15–19 — Moses foretells a coming prophet like himself whom God's people must hear and obey.
- Ezekiel 36:25–27 — God promises a future work of spiritual renewal through His Spirit rather than external regulation alone.
- Isaiah 42:6 — The Servant (Messiah) will become a covenant for the people.
- Psalm 40:6–8 — Anticipates a deeper obedience and covenant fulfillment that Hebrews applies to Christ (Heb. 10:5–10).

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Jesus said He didn't come to abolish the Law (Matt. 5:17)."

Correct. Jesus did not abolish "the Law or the Prophets," (Matt 5:17), He fulfilled them. Fulfillment is not cancellation but completion. The sacrifices, priesthood, temple, festivals, and other covenantal institutions pointed forward to Him and reached their intended purpose in His life, death, and resurrection (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 10:1–14).

Common Objection: "If we're not under the Law, does that mean we can sin freely?"

Not at all. The New Testament rejects that idea outright (Rom. 6:1–2). Christians are freed from the Law as a covenant of condemnation, not freed from obedience. We now serve God through faith, love, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:3–4; Gal. 5:13–14).

Common Objection: "Didn't God say His Law is forever?"

God's Word endures forever, but Scripture itself teaches that covenants can reach their fulfillment. The Old Covenant contained provisions that were temporary and pointed forward to Christ (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 8:13). God's faithfulness is demonstrated not by preserving every covenant unchanged, but by bringing His promises to completion in Jesus.

Common Objection: "Should Christians keep parts of the Law like the Sabbath, feasts, or dietary laws?"

Christians are free to observe such practices voluntarily as matters of personal devotion or cultural heritage. However, the New Testament consistently teaches that these practices are not required for followers of Christ and must never be imposed as obligations for righteousness or fellowship (Rom. 14:1–6; Col. 2:16–17; Gal. 5:1–4).

Why This Matters

This doctrine protects the sufficiency of Christ. If believers remain under the Old Covenant as a system of obligation, then Christ's fulfillment of the Law becomes incomplete. The New Testament presents a different picture: Jesus accomplished what the Law could never accomplish. He fulfilled its demands, bore its curse, and established a better covenant through His blood (Gal. 3:13; Heb. 8:6).

Understanding our relationship to the Law also guards Christian freedom. Believers can rest in Christ rather than wondering whether they have kept enough rules to remain acceptable before God. Our righteousness is found in Him, not in our performance (Phil. 3:8–9).

Recommended Resources

- *The Freedom of a Christian* by Martin Luther
- *The Law, the Christ, the Promise* by R. L. Solberg
- *The Gospel-Centered Life* by Robert H. Thune and Will Walker
- Paul and the Faithfulness of God by N. T. Wright

- *Five Views on Law and Gospel* edited by Stanley N. Gundry; contributions by Willem A. VanGemeren, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Wayne G. Strickland, Douglas J. Moo, and others (A helpful survey of the major evangelical perspectives on the relationship between Christians and the Mosaic Law.)