

## The Gentiles And The Law Of Conscience

Romans 1 had established that the Gentiles are in sin and need salvation. The point of chapter 2 is to show that the Jews likewise are in sin and need salvation just like the Gentiles. The point of Romans 2:12-16 is an amplification of the point in v. 11, that is, God is no respecter of persons. So, his point is that God will condemn those who sin whether they be Jew or Gentile. Those who sin without the law (Gentiles), God will condemn. Those who sin in the law (Jews), God will condemn. This text is used by some of our brethren to teach that the Gentiles and all aliens today are not under the law of Christ (and thus not under his teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage), but under some kind of inherent law in the heart.

The reason why some brethren must have a universal moral law (or law in the heart) is that if all men (including alien sinners) are under the law of Christ, then all men (including aliens) are under Christ's law on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (Matthew 19:9). That would mean that those who violate that law (by putting their mate away and marrying another) are living in adultery.

However, in order to teach that a man can keep his second or third wife when he becomes a Christian, one must teach that the alien is not under the law of Christ. If he is not under the law of Christ, how did he become a sinner? Remember, sin is a transgression of law (1 John 3:4). If there is no law, there is no transgression (Romans 4:15). That is where the idea of some other law comes in.

In the early 1950's E. C. Fuqua was teaching in his paper, The Vindicator, that the alien is not under Christ's law on marriage. In answer to the question of what law the alien violates to become a sinner, he said he was only under civil law. Years later, James D. Bales wrote Not Under Bondage in which he took the position that the alien is not under Christ's law on marriage. He differed from Fuqua saying that the alien is under a inherent law in the heart. In 1981, he wrote The Law In The Heart which explained his concept. Homer Hailey wrote his book The Divorced And Remarried Who Would Come To God in 1991. His position is basically the same as Bales. What Bales calls a "law in the heart," Hailey calls a "universal moral law." These brethren think that Romans 2 teaches an inborn, innate moral law that all men are under until they become Christians.

James Bales wrote in Not Under Bondage, "The Lord willing, I plan to publish a book on 'the work of the law written in their hearts' (Romans 2:15) which will deal with whether aliens, those outside the covenant, are under or in the covenant. If not, under what law do they live? Is Romans 2:14-15 still true concerning those outside his covenant?" Two years later Bales published his promised book, The Law In The Heart. He bases his concept on our text (Romans 2:12-16). In the introduction of that book he speaks of a "moral law written into the nature of man" and cites Romans 2 as the passage that so teaches.

Homer Hailey does not specifically address Romans 2:14-15 in his book, but he does discuss Roman 1-3 and the law(s) by which the Jew and Gentiles will be judged. Speaking

of the Gentiles of Romans 1 he said, "They had truth — God's universal moral law. This is truth manifested or made known by God; they understood the nature and character of God which would include a knowledge of moral right and wrong, of what is good and evil ... they had law, the universal moral law, the violation of which was sin."

As he deals with Romans 2 and what law the Gentiles are under, he repeatedly mentions a "universal moral law." Later in the book he connects his concepts on a universal moral law to his position on divorce and remarriage. He writes, "What does this have to do with the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage? It simply shows that the people of the world are under a system of law other than Christ's new covenant. They are under the universal moral law of God, and the violation of this law makes one a sinner."

Jerry Bassett argues the same concept in *Rethinking Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage*. He puts the world under some "law in the heart" that he sees in Romans 2 rather than the law of Christ. He writes, "Thus, the gospel of Christ, the New Covenant, may warn the world of the consequences of sin, but it is not the means by which those of the world are made sinners." Speaking of the "law written in their hearts (Romans 2:12-15)." Bassett says, "Further, the present tense of Paul's statements indicates the Gentile was still accountable to this law, the basic obligations to God and man, when Paul penned the Roman letter 25 years after the gospel was first preached in Jerusalem."

This innate law placed in the heart that our brethren speak of is presented as a vague concept. Since they are so sure there is such a law, they should be able to tell us more about it. A few questions are in order. First, where can I read this law? Second, how can I know what is in it? Does it include instructions about worship? Does it include requirements to obey civil law? Does it prohibit lust? Does it forbid polygamy? How can we know it does not include some law that teaches the same as Christ's law on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (Matthew 19:9)? Third, does this law differ from other laws? If so, how? Does it differ at all from the law the patriarchs were under? Is it any different from the law of Moses? Does it differ with the law of Christ? Fourth, were the Jews under it too or were they only under the law of Moses? Fifth, how did the Gentiles know this law? If it was not revealed, how could they know it (1 Corinthians 2:9-13)?

Just what is Romans 2:12-16 saying? First, notice that it was the work of the law and not the law itself that was written in the heart. There is nothing in Romans 2 about a law being written in the heart of man. The text does not say anything about God placing a law in the heart. Rather, v. 15 says, "who show the work of the law written in their hearts ..."

Second, the law referred to was the law of Moses. This is not some mysterious moral code that is inborn. It was the law given at Sinai. Verse 12 refers to the Gentiles as those "without law." All agree they were not without any law. So, what law were they without? The same law the Jews had (v. 12). Follow the references to the law in the context (vv. 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27).

Third, one must ask the question, “When did Romans 2:14-15 apply?” To what period does it refer? It describes the time when the law of Moses was in effect. If the text is talking of the Jews (who were “in the law”) before the law ended and the New Testament began, then it must be describing the Gentiles before the law ended and the New Testament began. However, if it is referring to the Gentiles after the New Testament is in force, then it is describing the Jews as being “in the law” after the New Testament is in force.

Fourth, one must also ask the question, “How do the Gentiles do the works of the law by nature?” Those who have misapplied the passage take it to mean the law is innate or inherent. However, nature can mean something that is learned and becomes a matter of practice (sometimes called our second nature). The word for nature is *phusis*. Thayer says the word can mean “a mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has become nature” (p. 660). It is the same word found in Ephesians 2:3, which says the Gentiles “were by nature children of wrath.” There is nothing in Romans 2 to demand that there is an inherent moral law. Actually, the thing that is by nature is their doing the things in the law. Thus, if the word “nature” suggests something inherent, it is suggesting inherent morality and obedience. If Romans 2 is suggesting inherent morality because “nature” is used, then Ephesians 2 is suggesting inherent evil because “nature” is used. But how was the work of the law “written in their heart?” Consider a parallel example. Jeremiah said that the new covenant would be written in the hearts of man (Jeremiah 31:33). How did God do that? By men being taught and learning the new covenant. Likewise, the Gentiles had learned the principles of the law of Moses and adopted them thus having the works of the law written in their hearts.

Fifth, Romans 2:12-16 is not describing all Gentiles. The arguments made about a universal moral law from Romans 2 gives the idea that Paul is describing all the Gentile world. Some of the Gentiles did not even retain God in their knowledge (Romans 1:28). However, some of the Gentiles adopted the principles found in the law given to the Jews (Romans 2:12-16). This text is only speaking of those that did by nature (their learned practice) the things in the law. The point of Romans 2:12-16 is not that the Gentiles were without law. If so, there would be no sin (Romans 4:15), and we have already shown that is an impossibility (1 John 3:4). Again, the context says that they were without the law of Moses.

God had law for the Gentiles. In describing the dispensations, we sometimes give the impression that the patriarchal period ended at Sinai when the Law of Moses began. Since the law given by Moses was for the Jews, what about the Gentiles? As God had dealt with man before the law of Moses, He continued to deal with the Gentiles. The focal point of the Old Testament is the story of the nation through whom the seed would come. The camera of the Old Testament focuses on the Jews and the law given to them. However, God was still dealing with the Gentile world. The Gentiles had the opportunity to learn what God expected of them by the prophets and priests God sent among them and by observing the Jews and the law God gave to them. God did not simply leave them alone with an “inherent law within the heart.”

Jesus has universal authority (Matthew 28:18). The gospel (the law of Christ) is for all. Jesus commanded that His law be preached to every creature (Matthew 28; Mark 16). Since all men are under the law of Christ, all men are bound by his law on marriage, divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:9). His law on marriage is part of the gospel that is for all. Furthermore, Jesus applied his law to “whosoever” (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Luke 16:18). There is no evidence at all that Christ’s laws on marriage, divorce, and remarriage only apply to Christians. This misuse of scripture will condemn the souls who follow this destructive doctrine.

Adapted from Donnie V. Rader