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THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW'S *DIKAIŌMA*: ANOTHER LOOK AT ROMANS 8:1–4

KEVIN W. MCFADDEN*

Among the majority of scholars who work on “Paul and the Law,” there is an assumed interpretation of Rom 8:4a today—Paul refers to the new Christian obedience that fulfills the “righteous requirement” of the law.¹ Many recent commentators have argued for this reading as well.² Historically, however, the majority of Protestant interpreters have read the verse as a reference to *Christ’s* obedience which fulfills the law’s requirement,³ primarily because

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¹ The following authors assume without argument that Rom 8:4a refers to Christian obedience. Note, however, that there is no consensus on how Christian obedience relates to the Mosaic law. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1983) 93–94; Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (WUNT 29; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983) 65–67; Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul’s Thought* (trans. James C. G. Greig; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984) 146–47; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition Historical Enquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (WUNT 16/2; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1985) 288–90; Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 71–73; Frank Thielman, *Paul & the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 242–43; A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 226. For the unique position of N. T. Wright, see below.

² For example, John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 283; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 383–84; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988) 423–24; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. Scott J. Hafemann; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 120; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 404–8.

³ Some Protestant interpreters have seen a reference to Christian obedience, beginning with Martin Luther himself, who follows Augustine (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. 25 of *Luther’s Works* [ed. Hilton C. Oswald; St. Louis: Concordia, 1972] 243–44); so also the 19th-century Reformed commentator Frederic Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977 [1883]] 302). Most, however, have seen a reference to Christ’s obedience in 8:4a. So John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. and ed. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948 [1539]) 283; Thomas Jacomb, a 17th-century Puritan who calls this interpretation the “exposition of the words which our protestant divines, so far as imputation in general is concerned, do commonly give” (*Sermons on the Eighth Chapter to the Epistle to the Romans [Verses 1–4]* [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996 [1672]] 347–48); and Charles Hodge, who overstates his case by claiming that this is “the view of the passage given by the majority of the early Fathers and by almost all evangelical interpreters, including the Reformers” (*Romans* [Crossway Classic Commentaries; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993]). Actually Ambrosiaster, Augustine, and (of course) Pelagius held to the Christian obedience interpretation (Gerald Bray, *Romans* [ACCS; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998] 205–6). Douglas Moo is notable among recent commentators for reading Christ’s obedience in 8:4a (*The Epistle to the Romans* [NICNT; Grand

of an objection to the Christian obedience interpretation: Since Christians do not perfectly fulfill the law, Paul must be referring to the imputation of Christ's righteousness. My article will answer this objection after arguing that the context of 8:4a strongly favors the Christian obedience interpretation. It will also observe, however, that a corrected reading of 8:4a does not support a shift in certain aspects of the Protestant understanding of Paul's soteriology as some interpreters now claim.⁴ I shall begin, then, with an argument for the Christian obedience reading of Rom 8:4a followed by a discussion of the nature of Christian obedience in 8:1–4.

I. CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE IN ROMANS 8:4A

How is the "righteous requirement of the law" fulfilled in us? To answer this question, we must first step back and ask "*what* is τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ νόμου?" All scholars argue for some variation of the definition "righteous ordinance."⁵ But this definition may be further subdivided: First, there is the righteous ordinance that decrees *punishment* as in 1:32, that is, the decree that "those who practice such things are worthy of death."⁶ Second, there are the righteous ordinances that decree the law's *requirements* as in 2:26. Recently, N. T. Wright and Mark Seifrid have both explained 8:4a with a third gloss, as the opposite of 1:32—rather than the decree of death, it is the decree of life. Thus, Wright declares:

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996] 481–84). Finally, note that several Protestant interpreters through the centuries have seen a reference to *both* Christ's obedience *and* Christian obedience in 8:4a, including Philip Melancthon (*Commentary on Romans* [trans. Fred Kramer; St. Louis: Concordia, 1992 [1540]]), Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 2211), and D. M. Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7.1–8.4: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973], 337–342). This hybrid interpretation probably flags the difficulty Protestants have had interpreting 8:4a.

⁴ Here I will be addressing, among other things, Chuck Lowe's argument that Paul grounds the acquittal of Rom 8:1 in Christian obedience or sanctification (Chuck Lowe, "There is No Condemnation" [Romans 8:1: But Why Not?], *JETS* 42 [1999] 231–50).

⁵ Paul uses the word δίκαιωμα only in Romans and with several different meanings: (1) "righteous ordinance(s)" of the law (1:32; 2:26); (2) "justification," contrasted with "condemnation" (5:16), which is probably a rhetorical use to conform with the -μα ending in κατάκριμα (BDAG, s.v., "δικαίωμα"; so most commentators; e.g. Dunn, *Romans*, 1.281); and (3) "righteous deed" contrasted with the one trespass (5:18; cf. Rev 19:8). Compare the Apocryphal book of Baruch for all three meanings of δίκαιωμα in one context: "righteous requirement" (2:12); "justice/righteousness" (2:17); and "righteous deeds" (2:19).

⁶ Benoit stands alone by reading this gloss in 8:4a: "the verdict . . . of the Mosaic Law," that is, the verdict of condemnation that Christ's death fulfilled (Pierre Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel: Volume 2* [trans. Benet Weatherhead; New York: Seabury, 1974 [1961] 30–32). Wright wrongly attributes this same gloss to Keck (N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991] 212) whose explanation actually seems closer to Wright's position (Leander E. Keck, "The Law and 'the Law of Sin and Death' [Rom 8:1–4]: Reflections on the Spirit and Ethics in Paul," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* [ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel; New York: KTAV, 1980] 52–53).

The meaning of τὸ δικάσιωμα τοῦ νόμου is best explained as “the just decree,” i.e., the decree that gives life in accordance with the covenant [e.g., Deut 30:6–20].⁷

This is the “just decree” which belongs to Torah, corresponding to the “just decree” which is issued negatively and referred to in 1.32: they know the δικάσιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ, that those who do such things deserve to die.⁸

And again: “It is . . . the opposite of κατάκριμα in v. 1 [i.e. 8:1]: the decree that gives life, set over against the decree that gives death.”⁹

While Seifrid does not affirm Wright’s connection between the covenant and the δικ- word group, he takes a similar position on this verse:

It is best to understand this “righteous ordinance” as the “life” which the law offered on the condition of obedience. . . . [Paul] now speaks of the resurrection from the dead as the “fulfillment of the righteous ordinance of the law.” We have here a counterpart to 1:32, where Paul uses this term to refer to the sentence of death.¹⁰

Simon Gathercole, following Wright, now adopts this view as well.¹¹

This suggestion is certainly intriguing, but it is not clear that Paul is setting up δικάσιωμα in a rhetorical parallel with κατάκριμα in 8:1 as he does in 5:16.¹² In 8:1–4, κατάκριμα is an action in itself whereas the δικάσιωμα is something that is “fulfilled”—that is, it is not a corresponding action. Further, if the δικάσιωμα is the ordinance of the law that gives life, we must be careful to observe that word does not refer to life itself (as both Wright and Seifrid seem to indicate at certain points)¹³ but the decree that promises life to those who do the law (cf. Lev 18:5). It is possible, of course, that Paul now has this decree in mind and argues that God will now give to those in Christ “the *life* which the law promised (7.10) but could not itself produce.”¹⁴ But one would expect Paul to spell out such an obscure reference as he does in 1:32, where he makes the contents of the ordinance clear with a ὅτι clause. In such a terse reference, it is more likely that Paul uses the word in the same sense as in 2:26, following the typical usage of the LXX, where the plural δικαιώματα is frequently used to indicate the “righteous requirements” or “statutes” or “ordinances” which Israel was to keep.¹⁵ The use of the singular in 8:4a is unique, and we will comment on this below.

⁷ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* 211. See also p. 203.

⁸ *Ibid.* 203.

⁹ *Ibid.* 212.

¹⁰ Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (NSBT 9; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

¹¹ S. J. Gathercole, “Justified by Faith, Justified by his Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21–4:25,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 177.

¹² Contra N. T. Wright, “The Letter to The Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 577.

¹³ Wright at one point speaks of “life” itself as the “just decree of the law” (*Climax of the Covenant* 212). Note also Seifrid’s words in the above quotation.

¹⁴ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* 212.

¹⁵ This is especially prominent in the Pentateuch and the Psalms (e.g., it is used 28 times in Psalm 119). Cf. Luke 1:6 for the same usage.

We return, then, to our original question: How is the “righteous requirement of the law” fulfilled in us? Here I will argue that the context of 8:4a strongly indicates that the righteous requirement of the law refers to Christian obedience by the empowering Spirit. My case will be established along four lines.

1. *The flow of the argument in 8:1–4.* First, the flow of Paul’s argument in 8:1–4 points to Christian obedience in 8:4a. These verses are difficult, but I hope to demonstrate that my reading makes the best sense of the general flow of Paul’s argument, even if some of the details are disputed. Paul begins with a declaration of the Christian hope: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This conclusion follows on the heels of all that precedes it. It elaborates the cry of victory in 7:24–25: “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” It also expands 7:6—both verses speak of a new situation in salvation history, the *present* (νῦν/νῦν) condition in which Christians are freed from the law to serve in the newness of the Spirit.¹⁶ Further, as Dunn notes, “if in 8:1 the thought skips back to 7:6 . . . it does not stop there” because the verdict of “condemnation,” the result of Adam’s one trespass, is now cancelled for those “in Christ Jesus.”¹⁷

We know the verdict is cancelled because “the law of the Spirit of life has set you¹⁸ free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (8:2). The Spirit has liberated Christians, in Christ, from the sin and death associated with Adam (5:12) and exacerbated by the law (5:20).¹⁹ This liberation is rooted in the atoning death of Christ, which Paul explains in 8:3–4:

for due to the inability of the law²⁰ because it was weak through the flesh, God, by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering, condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law

¹⁶ So Schreiner, *Romans* 398–99.

¹⁷ Dunn, *Romans* 415.

¹⁸ The readings “you” (σε) and “me” (με) are both well attested in the manuscript tradition, but σε is better attested among the Alexandrian witnesses, and it seems more likely that με arose from chapter 7 than that σε arose from the end of ἡλευθέρωσέν (with the terminal -ν represented as a horizontal line over the ε) (so Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 456).

¹⁹ Scholars dispute whether νόμος in 8:2 refers to the Mosaic law or is metaphorical. I cannot solve this difficult issue here, but in either case, I see Paul’s emphasis on πνεῦμα and ἁμαρτίας and θανάτου (so even Dunn, who takes νόμος in 8:2 to consistently refer to the Mosaic law [*Romans* 1–8 417]). That is, Paul’s emphasis is that the Spirit has set Christians free from sin and death.

²⁰ This first phrase (Τὸ γὰρ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου . . .) is difficult to translate. Some take it in apposition to the rest of verse 3 (Cranfield, *Romans* 378). Others see a nominative absolute (Fitzmyer, *Romans* 483–84) or an accusative absolute (Hodge, *Romans* 229–30). Still others see anacoluthon and supply a verb like “what the law was unable to do” (e.g. Moo, *Romans* 477, n. 37). I think the phrase makes best sense as an adverbial accusative, expressing the motive of the verbal action (see Smyth §1610). Schreiner notes that however we construe the grammar, the point of the verse remains clear: “God succeeded where the law failed” (*Romans* 401). Likewise, the meaning is basically the same whether ἀδύνατον is passive (“impossible for the law,” most modern commentators) or active (“the law was unable”; a point made by Dunn, *Romans* 419; Moo, *Romans* 477, n. 36; and Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994] 529, n. 169).

might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (8:3–4)

These verses explain 8:1–2 by summarizing a point previously discussed in chapter seven: The law was impotent to accomplish its goal, because it was weak through the flesh.²¹

What goal could the law not accomplish? Because of the close parallel between the law's thwarted action and God's reciprocal action of condemning sin in 8:3, many commentators argue that the law was unable to condemn sin.²² But this cannot be the exact point of Paul's argument, because it does not correspond with the reason for the law's impotency—"it was weak through the flesh." The flesh would not hinder the law from condemning sin. Instead, we should read this verse in light of Paul's earlier argument that the law was unable to accomplish its goal of bringing life and instead led to death, because sin hijacked the commandment and brought death (7:10–11).²³ Paul's explanation of 8:1–2, then, is that the law was impotent to accomplish its goal of life,²⁴ and because of this situation, God accomplished what the law could not: God condemned sin in the flesh of his Son, taking care of the reason for the law's impotency. He did this for the purpose "that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (8:4a).²⁵

Here we may be tempted to take the new interpretation offered by Wright and Seifrid: God brought about the life which the law was unable to bring, thus the "righteous ordinance of the law" is the decree of life. But in addition to my earlier points, this interpretation misses the details of Paul's argument in 8:1–4. As an explanation of 8:1–2, verses 3–4 must clarify the argument of 8:1–2—the verdict of "no condemnation" and Spirit's liberation of the Christian from sin and death. This is exactly what Paul does: He roots the verdict of "no condemnation" in the condemnation of sin in the flesh of the Son, and he explains the Spirit's liberating work in terms of its result, the fulfillment of the righteous requirement of the law. Thus, Paul is not introducing something new into his immediate argument, whether the imputed righteousness of Christ or the law's decree of life; rather, he is explaining the previously mentioned liberation in terms of its result—Christian obedience.²⁶

²¹ I am reading ἐν φ̄ as a causal construction (so Calvin, *Romans* 278; Cranfield, *Romans* 1: 379; BDF § 219[2]). But if the construction is taken modally (Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* [trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 216) or temporally (J. F. Bayes, "The Translation of Romans 8:3," *ExpTim* 111 [1999] 16), the basic idea remains the same: the flesh was the problem that prevented the law from reaching its goal.

²² Godet, *Romans* 297–98; Murray, *Romans* 277–78; Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 135.

²³ In 8:3a Paul speaks of "the flesh" weakening the law instead of "sin," but clearly the flesh and sin are closely tied in Paul's thought, since God condemns "sin in the flesh" (8:3b).

²⁴ So Wright, *Climax of Covenant* 202.

²⁵ Since God's purposes are always accomplished, we can say that this is also an assured *result* (Cranfield, *Romans* 383).

²⁶ Fee likewise notes that "the relationship with v. 2 seems to me to clinch the matter" that this fulfillment refers to our walking by the Spirit (*God's Empowering Presence* 536).

2. *Walking by the Spirit and pleasing God in 8:4b–11.* Second, the Christian obedience reading of 8:4a flows better into the following context, which emphasizes walking by the Spirit and pleasing God. Paul immediately describes we in whom the righteous requirement is fulfilled as “those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:4b). “Walking” is a typical Pauline description of ethical behavior, so Paul is clearly referring to the Christian obedience of those in whom the righteous requirement is fulfilled.²⁷

Paul also describes Christians as those who can please God. In the next six verses (8:5–11) he contrasts those who are in the flesh with those who are in the Spirit. For Paul, all Christians are “in the Spirit,” since all Christians have been given the Spirit (5:5; cf. Gal 3:2–3), and all in whom the Spirit dwells are “not in the flesh but in the Spirit” (8:9a).²⁸ Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, a mindset of death because it is a mindset at war with God, not able to submit to the law of God, and thus not able to please God. But those according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit, a mindset of life and peace with God. Paul does not explicitly carry the contrast out to its conclusion—he never directly says that believers now submit to the law of God or please God. But in his contrast in 8:8–9 he certainly implies as much: “Those existing in the flesh are not able to please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit.” Thus, a reference to Christian obedience in 8:4a flows well into the immediately following verses which emphasize walking by the Spirit and pleasing God.

3. *Broader patterns in Romans 5–8.* Third, a reference to Christian obedience in 8:4a would follow certain broader patterns in Romans 6–8. First, Paul has established a pattern of purpose/result clauses involving the new Christian obedience, which follows from the work of Christ applied to the Christian:

- Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so also we might walk in newness of life (6:4).
- Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be destroyed, in order that we may no longer serve sin (6:6).
- So my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, in order that you might be joined to another, the one who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God (7:4).

²⁷ See Rom 6:4; 13:13; 14:15; 1 Cor 3:3; 2 Cor 4:2; Gal 5:16; Eph 2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15; Phil 3:17, 18; Col 1:10; 2:6; 3:7; 1 Thess 2:11; 4:1, 12; 2 Thess 3:6, 11. On the significance of the verb “walk” here see Schreiner (*Law and Its Fulfillment* 151).

²⁸ Note that Paul is thinking primarily in terms of the history of salvation. The “flesh” is tied with the old evil age in contrast with the new age of the Spirit (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001] 143).

- But now we have been released from the law, dying to that which held us captive, in order that we might serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (7:6).

In each of these texts, the Christian's death with Christ should result in a new life of obedience—walking in newness of life, not serving sin, bearing fruit to God, and serving in the newness of the Spirit. Romans 8:3–4a likely follows the same pattern, with a statement about the work of Christ (8:3) followed by a purpose clause involving Christian obedience (8:4a).²⁹

Paul has also introduced a broader pattern of liberation from sin leading to Christian obedience:

- . . . and having been set free from sin, you were enslaved to righteousness. . . . For as you presented your members as slaves to uncleanness and lawlessness leading to [more] lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (6:18–19).
- . . . and now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your fruit leading to sanctification, and its end eternal life (6:22).

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that freedom from sin leads to not sinning, while the new enslavement to God leads to Christian obedience, but it would still be correct to say in summary that liberation from sin leads to Christian obedience.³⁰ With a reference to the Spirit's liberation in 8:2, then, we may expect to see its result, Christian obedience.

4. “*Fulfillment*” language in Paul. Finally, Paul uses “fulfillment” language several times in his corpus to describe the relationship between the Christian obedience and the law. He speaks of the fulfillment of the law in three overlapping ways. First, he speaks of the command to love as fulfilling the law: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:13–14).³¹ Notice that he exhorts believers to love one another

²⁹ Note one variance in 8:4a from the broader pattern: in all of these texts the Christian is both the one who dies (although it is a death *with Christ*) and the subject of the purpose clause. In 8:3–4, however, Christ is the one who died and the righteous requirement is fulfilled passively in us. Still, since the Son was sent *in the likeness of our sinful flesh*, it is not a stretch to imagine that Paul contemplates the flesh of those “in Christ” participating in the condemnation of sin in *his* flesh in 8:3. And though God is the one fulfilling the law in us, we are still the ones who are “walking.”

³⁰ See Jon Pratt's dissertation for a convincing argument that sanctification *necessarily* follows justification in Paul (Jonathan R. Pratt, “The Relationship between Justification and Sanctification in Romans 5–8” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1999).

³¹ Thompson lists several parallels between Rom 8:4 and Gal 5:13–16 observed by Van de Sandt (Richard W. Thompson, “How is the Law Fulfilled in Us? An Interpretation of Rom 8:4,” *Louvain Studies* 11 [1986] 32–33).

in light of their freedom, following the pattern mentioned above. Second, Paul speaks of love itself fulfilling the law: “Love works no evil to the neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:10). Third, he speaks of the Christian who practices love as one who has fulfilled the law: “Owe no one anything except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).

In various ways, therefore, Paul teaches that Christian love “fulfills” the law. Following his usage elsewhere, we should expect that the *fulfillment* of the righteous requirement of the law in us would refer to the Christian practice of love. This would also explain Paul’s use of the singular δικαίωμα—he departs from the plural found in the LXX because “the law’s requirements are essentially a unity,”³² which he later explains as the command to love.³³ We should note here as well that Paul never speaks of Christ “fulfilling” the law.³⁴

In summary then, I have argued that the fulfillment of the δικαίωμα of the law in Romans 8:4a refers to Christian obedience of the law’s righteous requirement by the empowering Spirit.³⁵ This interpretation explains the liberation announced in 8:2 and fits with Paul’s emphasis on walking by the Spirit and pleasing God in 8:4b–11. It also fits the pattern of chapters 6–8 where sanctification is the purpose and result of the objective work of Christ and our death with him. Finally, it fits Paul’s usage of the verb “fulfilled” which refers to Christian love in three other places.

5. Objection: Do Christians fulfill the law perfectly? The most common argument against the Christian obedience reading of 8:4a is the objection that Christians do not perfectly fulfill the righteous requirement of the law

³² Cranfield, *Romans* 384.

³³ Ziesler offers the fascinating suggestion that Paul refers here to the tenth commandment with his use of the singular δικαίωμα—“you shall not covet.” (J. A. Ziesler, “The Just Requirement of the Law [Romans 8.4],” *Australian Biblical Review* 35 [1987] 77–82). This makes sense in the context of Romans 7, where that command is signaled out, and in light Paul’s identification of covetousness with idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). However, in Romans 7 the command is used as an illustration, and it seems unlikely that Paul considers fulfillment of this command as the comprehensive fulfillment of the righteous requirement of the law. Further, by using the language of fulfillment Paul points forward to his discussion of love in chapter 13, even if he has not yet made this explicit.

³⁴ This is not to say that the theological concept of Christ fulfilling the law is absent in Paul. I do think that Paul’s theology includes the concept of imputation and Christ’s obedience to the law. On this, see Brian Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

³⁵ I say “by the empowering Spirit” because the verb is passive, indicating that *God* fulfills the righteous requirement in us (the divine passive is stressed by Fitzmyer, *Romans* 487–88). Moo objects to the Christian obedience reading because of the passive verb: the passive “points not to something that we are to do but to something that is done in and for us” (*Romans* 483). In response, Paul refers in other places to sanctification as a work of God in the Christian which must be held in tension with the work of the Christian. The classic example of this tension is found in Phil 2:12–13: “work your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the one who works in you even to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Romans 8:4 follows this pattern—God fulfills the righteous requirement of his law in us (divine agency) who *walk* according to the Spirit (human agency; cf. Col 1:29).

because they continue to sin. This objection is also the most prominent argument used to support the imputation of Christ's righteousness in 8:4a. Calvin has penned the classic statement:

the faithful, while they sojourn in this world, never make such a proficiency, as that the justification of the law becomes in them full or complete. . . . this then must be applied to forgiveness; for when the obedience of Christ is accepted for us, the law is satisfied, so that we are counted just.³⁶

Gill expressed the same objection two centuries later:

This is not fulfilled by us in our own persons, nor can it be; could it, where would be the weakness of the law? . . . There was never any mere man that could fulfill it; for obedience to it must not only be performed perfectly, but with intensesness of mind and spirit; a man must be sinless in thought, word, and deed."³⁷

And among recent commentators Moo notes that

the always imperfect obedience of the law by Christians does not satisfy what is demanded by the logic of this text. The fulfilling of the "just decree of the law" must answer to that inability of the law with which Paul began this sentence (v. 3a). As we have seen, "what the law could not do" is to free people from "the law of sin and death"—to procure righteousness and life. And it could not do this because "the flesh" prevented people from obeying its precepts (see 8:7 and 7:14–25). The removal of this barrier consists not in the actions of believers, for our obedience always falls short of that perfect obedience required by the law.³⁸

This objection provides a helpful transition into the second part of this article: the nature of Christian obedience in Rom 8:1–4.

II. THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE IN ROMANS 8:1–4

We will begin with the objection: how can Christian obedience be in view if human beings, even Christians empowered by the Spirit, do not perfectly fulfill the law? In answering this objection, we will observe that our corrected reading of 8:4a does not support a shift in certain aspects of the Protestant understanding of Paul's soteriology as some interpreters now claim. Historic Protestant theology has correctly interpreted Paul's soteriology in terms of the law's requirement and the basis of Christian acquittal in 8:1.

1. *Christian obedience and the law's requirement.* Protestant interpreters have traditionally understood the Mosaic law to require perfect obedience, but this consensus has been challenged by Paul's recent interpreters. In his important book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, E. P. Sanders emphasizes the significance of the covenant in Judaism and argues against models of legalistic

³⁶ Calvin, *Commentary* 283.

³⁷ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Newport Commentary Series; Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002 [1746]) 247.

³⁸ Moo, *Romans* 483.

works-righteousness. One model he opposes is a Judaism that requires perfection—that is, salvation through perfect obedience to the law.³⁹ Almost any transgression could be forgiven through the atoning sacrifices so long as the covenant member repented. Gathercole observes on this point that Sanders is left with a model of intention—the requirement of the law is an intention to remain in the covenant through repentance.⁴⁰ Yinger builds on Sanders's work and argues that both Judaism *and Paul* had a “holistic or unitary view of human works. It is not a deed for deed inspection, but rather one's entire pattern of life is in view, one's ‘way.’”⁴¹ Thus Yinger denies the requirement of perfection in both the Mosaic law and in Paul's understanding of Christian obedience.

This short article cannot address the Jewish texts carefully sifted by both Sanders and Yinger, but in order to answer the common objection to the Christian obedience reading of Romans 8:4a, we must ask whether Paul even thought of the “righteous requirement” of Mosaic law to be perfection. To answer this we will first consider the requirement of the Mosaic law in Rom 7:7–10, where Paul argues that the problem of the law was human disobedience. Where the law said “you shall not covet,” sin worked all kinds of covetousness—that is, sin caused the person to disobey the command (7:7–8). And when this disobedience came alive, the command that was supposed to lead to life instead led to death (7:9–10). Paul later explains that people fail to obey the command because “the mindset of the flesh . . . does not submit to the law of God; indeed it cannot” (8:7). In 8:3, then, when Paul speaks of the impotency of the law to accomplish its goal because it was weak through the flesh, we should understand this terse statement in light of these other passages—the flesh prevented the law from being obeyed. Thus, to Paul, the Mosaic law required obedience in order to accomplish its goal, not merely the intention to obey as in Sanders's model.⁴² This required obedience, of course, could be understood in terms of a holistic pattern of human deeds as in Yinger's model, rather than a perfect obedience to the law. But in light of the arguments of recent scholars on texts like Gal 3:10 and 5:3, it is far

³⁹ For example, “Human perfection was not considered realistically achievable by the Rabbis, nor was it required” (E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977], 137). Another model Sanders opposes is a Judaism that taught a weighing of deeds—that is, salvation through fulfilling more commandments than transgressions (ibid. 233). Most of Sanders's argument addresses this weighting of deeds model.

⁴⁰ Gathercole, *Where is Boasting* 183.

⁴¹ He is speaking specifically about the Jewish motif of “judgment according to deeds” (Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds* [SNTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999] 284; cf. p. 288).

⁴² Sanders would argue that what Paul says about the law in Romans 7 is “inconsistent with what he says elsewhere” (Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* 77), but surely the charge of inconsistency should be a last resort when interpreting any author, and many other Pauline scholars have understood Paul's discussion of the law to be coherent (e.g. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*).

more likely that Paul understood the righteous requirement of the Mosaic law to be perfect obedience.⁴³

What is more, Paul gives us no reason to expect that the moral requirement of Christian fulfillment of the law is less than perfection. Paul certainly redefines the requirements of the Mosaic commands in ways that demonstrate his deeper insight into the divine intention for the law. Thus Christians are not required to be circumcised: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing; but keeping the commands of God is everything" (1 Cor 7:19; cf. Rom 2:26). He also focuses the requirement of the law on the positive command to love rather than the many prohibitions of the Mosaic law.⁴⁴ Paul does not, however, indicate that the moral requirement of the law is lessened in any way. In fact, as Westerholm notes, "to 'fulfill' the law . . . implies that the obedience offered *completely satisfies* what is required."⁴⁵

This leads us again to the objection, for we know from experience and from Paul's letters that Christians do not in fact perfectly fulfill the law. This problem, however, is not confined to Rom 8:4 but also exists in 13:8 where Paul says a Christian who loves fulfills the law. There he is not contemplating believers who *always* act in love toward their neighbors, or he would have no need to command them to avoid walking in "strife and jealousy" a few verses later (13:13). Rather, to the degree that Christians genuinely love one another, they have fulfilled the law (13:8). In the same way, to the degree that Christians genuinely obey, they have fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law (8:4). But we must view all of this, I will now argue, in light of the resurrection, for it is only at the resurrection that Christians will be completely liberated and thus will completely fulfill the requirement of the law.

Christian fulfillment of the law in Romans 8 falls under the rubric of the Spirit's liberating work from sin and death (8:2). Ethical behavior is bound up with life, that is, resurrection life. The Spirit who set Christians free and

⁴³ For arguments in favor of perfect obedience see Schreiner (Thomas R. Schreiner, "Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Possible? A Re-examination of Galatians 3:10," *JETS* 27 [1984] 151–60; *idem.*, "Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E. P. Sanders," *WTJ* 47 [1985] 245–78); and Das (*Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* 145–70).

Gathercole rightly seeks to move the discussion forward by avoiding the "ideologically loaded categories of 'legalism,' or 'works-righteousness'" (*Where is Boasting* 92). He also rightly notes that the claims to righteousness in Second Temple Judaism may not presuppose perfection (*ibid.* 188)—that is, Paul's opponents who claimed that their keeping the law would lead to eschatological vindication would have seen atoning value in the sacrifices. But Paul the apostle had a "new perspective" on Judaism, as Longenecker observes (Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1998] 181–82). And this "new perspective" likely included an understanding of the sacrificial system similar to the author of Hebrews: "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb 10:4). Paul only uses the language of atoning sacrifice to refer to the death of Christ, the later salvation-historical answer to the failure of the Mosaic law (8:3), and he makes no mention of atonement in connection with the Mosaic covenant.

⁴⁴ Again, Paul departs from the plural δικαιώματα found in the LXX because "the law's requirements are essentially a unity" (Cranfield, *Romans* 384), which he later explains as the command to love.

⁴⁵ Westerholm, *Perspectives* 436.

according to whom Christians walk is the Spirit who confers life.⁴⁶ And in Rom 6:4 (quoted above), our walk in newness of life parallels the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Thus, the liberating work of the Spirit in believers is a work of resurrection life.⁴⁷ Indeed, in some texts Paul speaks of believers *already* being raised with Christ (esp. Eph 2:5–6; Col 2:12–13), although we await the resurrection of our bodies.

This leads to an important observation: the liberation of the Spirit is a past work that will only be consummated at the resurrection. Paul says our liberation from death is already accomplished (8:2), but he also says that the body is dead because of sin (8:10) until the Spirit who dwells in us makes our mortal bodies alive at the resurrection (8:11). The creation eagerly awaits our resurrection (“the revelation of the sons of God” 8:19), because its liberation from slavery to corruption follows our resurrection (8:21). Until that liberation, its existence is characterized by groaning as it awaits this hope (8:22, 20). Furthermore, we who have the Spirit live lives characterized by groaning as well, as we await the resurrection in hope (“the redemption of our bodies”; 8:23–24a). This groaning suggests that Christians await liberation from our mortal bodies in the same way creation awaits liberation from corruption. Therefore, Paul views our liberation from sin and death by the Spirit as in one sense completed (8:2) and in another sense a hope to be awaited with perseverance (8:23–25).⁴⁸

Since the liberating work of the Spirit is not complete until the resurrection, the righteous requirement of the law will not be perfectly fulfilled in us until the resurrection. But when our liberation is complete, it will be perfectly fulfilled, answering the objection of Protestant interpreters to Christian obedience in 8:4a, an objection that has rightly affirmed the Mosaic law’s requirement of perfection in Paul’s soteriology.⁴⁹

2. Christian obedience and acquittal. Protestant interpreters have also understood that Christian obedience, although necessary, is not the ground of our acquittal or justification (“no condemnation”; 8:1) in Paul’s soteriology.⁵⁰ But a few recent interpreters, following the Christian obedience reading of 8:4a, have claimed that Rom 8:1–4 actually grounds the verdict of no condemnation in the liberating work of the Spirit producing sanctification. Chuck Lowe has argued the position most extensively, claiming that in 8:1–4, Christian obedience is the only ground for acquittal in view. Whereas in

⁴⁶ This is what Paul means by “the Spirit of life” (so Moo, *Romans* 475, n. 28; cf. Ezek 37:5[LXX]).

⁴⁷ I am indebted to Richard Gaffin for this observation (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* [Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006] 68; see also idem, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1978] 41–62).

⁴⁸ See Keck who speaks of the “believer’s liberation in the present” and “the future consummation of liberation” (“The Law of Sin and Death” 50).

⁴⁹ Melancthon, commenting on 8:4, observed this centuries ago: “This newness will be perfected, righteousness and obedience will be made complete, and the Law will be fulfilled when this infirmity of the flesh will have been completely destroyed and we are clothed with entire spiritual newness, which is complete righteousness and obedience without sin” (*Romans* 167).

⁵⁰ For example, Calvin, *Romans* 277; Westminster Confession XI.1.

Romans 1–5 condemnation is averted “through the substitutionary death of Christ,” in Romans 6–8 condemnation is averted “through righteous living.”⁵¹ As he reads 8:1–2, “Christians escape condemnation because they have been transformed by the Spirit; that is, because they now live in such a way that condemnation is no longer warranted.”⁵²

Lowe’s view fails to see that when Paul explains 8:1–2 in 8:3, the ground of the verdict of “no condemnation” is the condemnation of sin in the flesh of Jesus. Sin was condemned in his flesh so that those “in Christ Jesus” would not be condemned.⁵³ The sending clause that modifies God’s act of condemnation is significant to Paul’s explanation: “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering.”⁵⁴ The Son had to be sent in the “likeness of sinful flesh” in order to take care of the problem, which was the flesh (8:3a)—that is, he had to participate “fully in the old age of the flesh.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Lowe, “No Condemnation” 237. See Cosgrove for a similar argument (Charles H. Cosgrove, “Justification in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Reflection,” *JBL* 106 [1987] 667–69). See also Rainbow who observes of 8:1–4 that “it is now from [Paul’s] doctrine of sanctification, in union with his doctrine of imputation, that Paul infers that believers will not be condemned” (Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* [Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005]) 186.

⁵² Lowe, “No Condemnation” 232. This is the thrust of his argument throughout: there is no condemnation “not because of his death as their substitute, but because he gives the Spirit of life to transform them” (ibid. 242). We should note that Lowe claims to view sanctification as *necessary* but *not meritorious* (ibid. 246–49), a statement with which I think Paul would agree (see Rom 6:22; 8:12–13). Unfortunately, however, Lowe seems to argue that Paul views sanctification as in some sense meritorious, inasmuch as Christian behavior does not merit condemnation.

⁵³ Dodd (*Romans* 120) and Wright (*Climax of the Covenant* 213) emphasize that God condemns sin here and not Jesus. But this is a false dichotomy, for as Gathercole observes, God condemns sin in the flesh of his Son (“Justified by his Blood” 177; so also Fitzmyer, *Romans* 487).

There has been some debate over the words κατάκριμα (8:1) and κατακρίνω (8:3) in this passage. Because the word group is contrasted in this context with freedom from sin’s power rather than penalty (8:2), many commentators argue that “condemn” means to break the *power* of sin rather than declare a *penalty* on sin (Murray, *Romans* 274–75; Käsemann, *Romans* 218; Schreiner, *Romans* 402). This was a difficulty for the Fathers as well, who often glossed κατακρίνω in this passage with the verb καταργέω (see St. Lyonnette, S.J., “Le Nouveau Testament à la lumière de l’Ancien: à Propos de Rom 8, 2–4,” *NRT* 87 [1965] 571–73). The meanings of words must certainly be determined in context, but in my view we should see these words carrying their usual forensic meaning, related to the verdict of a court. Yet I also follow Büchsel’s conclusion that the verb κατακρίνω includes both condemnation and execution when God is the judge (note especially his discussion of 2 Pet 2:6: *TDNT* 3.951; so BDAG, s.v., “κατάκριμα” 518). Thus I agree with Moo that Paul speaks of the judicial action of condemnation here and that the necessary implication of that condemnation is breaking the power of sin (*Romans* 480–81).

⁵⁴ Thornton connects the phrase καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας with the verb “condemned” rather than the participle “sending.” Thus, he translates it “even because of sin God condemned sin” (T. C. G. Thornton, “The Meaning of καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας in Romans viii.3,” *JTS* 22 n.s. [1971] 516). But why would Paul need to use καὶ if this were the case? It seems more likely to me (and most commentators) that Paul uses καὶ to coordinate the two prepositional phrases.

⁵⁵ Schreiner, *Romans* 403. Gillman has convincingly demonstrated that the phrase ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας expresses “full congruence between Christ and sinful flesh” (cf. Phil 2:7; Florence Morgan Gillman, “Another Look at Romans 8:3: ‘In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh.’” *CBQ* 49 [1987] 602). This is not to say that the Son sinned (contra Branick, “Sinful Flesh” 246–62) and ὁμοιώματι still implies that there was some difference between the Son and other sinful human beings (Schreiner, *Romans* 403) as many Christian interpreters have noted.

The Son also had to be sent “as a sin offering” in order to be a means of dealing with the problem of the flesh.⁵⁶ Paul teaches that the condemnation of sin was an atonement for sin. And since the condemnatory atonement was made in the flesh of his Son instead of us (8:1), we can say that it was a substitutionary atonement. Thus, the verdict of acquittal in 8:1 rests upon the grounds of the substitutionary atonement of Christ just as it did in Romans 1–5.

Why, then, does Paul say that the liberating work of the Spirit (8:2) is the reason “there is now no condemnation?” (8:1). According to Paul, it seems, if a person is still under the powers of sin and death, then he or she is still under the verdict of condemnation. The Spirit’s liberation and the obedience that flows from it are the *necessary result* of Christ’s death (ἴνα, 8:4), which is why Paul says the Spirit enacted liberation “in Christ Jesus” (8:2).⁵⁷ Thus the Spirit’s liberating work is not the ground of our actual acquittal but rather the ground of Paul’s statement in 8:1—we can know that “there is now no condemnation” because the Spirit has set us free from sin and death resulting in our new ability to fulfill the law. The traditional Protestant language of “evidence” is thus an appropriate way to view Christian obedience—it proves our justification. Protestant theology has rightly affirmed that our acquittal is not based upon the obedience wrought in us by the Spirit but upon the death of Christ which necessarily results in Christian obedience.

III. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Romans 8:4a refers in its context to the new Christian obedience, empowered by the Spirit, that fulfills the righteous requirement

⁵⁶ Some commentators translate *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* “with reference to sin” or “to deal with sin” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* [Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936] 505; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [HNTC; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957] 156; Murray, *Romans* 280; see also Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* 127–32), but *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* is a customary way to render the sin offering in the LXX, a translation with which Paul was surely familiar. Wright has made the best recent argument of this familiar point (*Climax of the Covenant* 221–22). In my examination, it seems that every use of *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* in the LXX (66 times, including Apocrypha) refers to the sin offering. See in particular the repeated uses in Numbers 7 and 29. But note that in Isa 53:10 *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* translates *דָּשָׁן* and that in the MT, Num 28:30 and Job 1:5 do not include the word that the LXX translates *περὶ ἁμαρτίας*, “sin offering.”

Some object that there is a lack of other sacrificial terminology in the context, but Greene notes that “when Paul speaks of Jesus’ death using sacrificial concepts, the references are invariably brief” (M. D. Greene, “A Note on Romans 8:3,” *BZ* 35 [1991] 105). For example, 1 Cor 5:7; 10:16; 11:23–25; Rom 3:24–26; 5:8–11; 8:32. Surely, this is a better answer to the objection than Wright’s view that Paul is answering the sin of ignorance in the context of 7:7–25 with the Levitical sacrifice prescribed for unwilling sins, the sin offering (*Climax of the Covenant* 223–25). Paul is not suggesting that the Son is a literal “sin offering” within the Mosaic covenant but that the atonement provided in those sacrifices prefigured the atonement of Christ. And he is not describing the death of Christ in 8:3 as the answer to sins of ignorance but as the answer to human condemnation in general (8:1).

⁵⁷ Most commentators take *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* with the verb *ἠλευθέρωσέν* because it fits the context of verses 3–4 (Cranfield, *Romans* 375; Hendrickson, *Romans* 245, n. 208; Fitzmyer, *Romans* 482; Moo, *Romans* 473, n. 21; Schreiner, *Romans* 401). Classical Greek would require an article before the prepositional phrase for it to modify *τῆς ζωῆς*, but this is a grammatical possibility in Hellenistic Greek (so Moule, *Romans* 210), although doubtful.

of the law. This obedience is not yet perfect, but it is the beginning of our complete liberation and perfect obedience at the resurrection.⁵⁸ Thus the Protestant tradition, although reading this verse incorrectly, has rightly stressed the law's requirement of perfect obedience. They have also rightly seen that Paul roots the verdict of "no condemnation" in the atoning death of Christ. Christian interpreters must always go back to the Scripture to see "whether these things are so," but we will often find that our forebears were careful readers of the Bible and in many cases had a profound grasp of its theology, theology that we are now learning as well.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Note Cranfield here: "the present effectiveness of the authority of the Spirit in those who are in Christ is the pledge of their future complete freedom from the authority of sin" (Cranfield, *Romans* 1.378).

⁵⁹ This article was originally presented as a paper in the Romans Ph.D. seminar at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in October 2008. I want to thank fellow students for their feedback, and particularly Micah McCormick and Tom Schreiner for helping me think through Rom 8:1–4. Also, thanks to Jason Maston for reading a draft of this article and making several helpful suggestions for improvement.