

# COVENANT CHRISTIANITY: PAUL, DEFENDER AND DEFINER OF THE NEW COVENANT

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November 22, 2009

## **III. PAUL: ONE BELIEVER'S JOURNEY FROM LEGALISM TO GRACE:**

**INTRODUCTION TO PAUL:** In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, *Luke*, who appears to be the only Gentile or non-Jewish writer in the New Testament, traces the developments in early Christianity from the ascension of Jesus to the arrest of Paul in Rome and his anticipated trial before the Roman Emperor Nero. In a very real sense the instructions of Jesus to his followers to be "my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" serves as an outline to the book. It is a geographical outline, in the sense that it traces the advance of Christianity from Jerusalem all of the way to Rome, which was considered to be the center of the Roman world. But the imperative from Jesus also indicates the advance from Palestinian Jewish Christians, to the part Jew/part Gentile Samaritans, to the God-fearers (Gentile converts to Judaism, then to Christianity), and finally directly to Gentiles. Through such advancements Christianity moves from being a sect of Judaism to a religion that would make universal claims wherever it appeared. Another way to look at these developments is to see the church's understanding of Jesus as Messiah by Matthew to Jesus as the Savior of the World, as seen by Luke.

For Luke, the champion of the Gentile mission was *Saul of Tarsus, a rising young star of Pharisaic Judaism from the Diaspora*, who is introduced as one *completely dedicated to the Mosaic Law as the supreme revelation of God and the source of man's salvation*. Initially, Saul found the claims of Christianity as an intolerable offense to God and to the Law of Moses and a dangerous movement that needed to be eradicated.

**A. SAUL'S JOURNEY FROM THE LAW TO CHRISTIANITY:** Saul was a Jewish scholar who had been trained by the highly respected Jewish teacher Gamaliel, who is mentioned in the New Testament. He certainly found the claims of divine revelation from this rag tag group of fishermen, tax collectors, and common folk to be not only unacceptable but sac-religious, as well.

We all know the story of how Saul moved from being an enemy to Christianity and then becoming a believer following his experience with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Having observed the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and then with vehemence having sought out Christians in Jerusalem for trial, Saul received permission to travel to Damascus in his role as

inquisitor against Christian believers. But on the road to Damascus he is confronted in a blinding vision with Jesus and one of the most radical turnabouts in Christian history takes place, a conversion which cannot be underestimated in terms of its contributions to the Christian faith. The event is so important that Luke provides three different accounts of Saul's experience (Acts 9, 22, and 26), and Paul himself in Galatians 1, relates his version of his radical change.

Saul makes his way back to Jerusalem, where he is faced with understandable skepticism by the church leaders. However, Barnabas, the son of Encouragement who always seemed to see the good in people, stood with him and the door for service and leadership was opened to this former enemy of the Christian faith.

We all are aware of how the church at Antioch in Syria, a congregation where Jewish and Gentile believers worshipped on an equal basis, commissioned Barnabas and Saul on the first important missionary journey. After initially serving on Cyprus, the home island of Barnabas, the party crosses over to the province of Galatia. In the transition Saul's name is changed to Paul (a Latin form of his Jewish name), and he takes on the leadership role, as indicated by Luke who at this time places Paul's name first in the order of the missionaries. It is Paul who begins to preach directly to the Gentiles, opening the door for a radical advancement of Christianity. On subsequent journeys, the Gospel is preached throughout Asia, Macedonia, and Greece. Finally, Paul is arrested in Jerusalem by the Jewish authorities and subsequently appeals to have his case heard before Caesar. Acts ends with Paul in Rome awaiting trial, but his missionary work along with his significant correspondence to the churches which he founded would not be undone.

**B. PAUL'S TEACHINGS ON THE LAW AND GRACE:** Because of his journey from legalism to grace, Paul more than any other writer in the New Testament clearly and consistently recognized the radical nature of the Christian message in relation to the Law and to the covenantal relationship of Christianity through Jesus. Time and again he stood firmly and resolutely against any efforts to compromise the message of faith for a watered-down Christian legalism. He unequivocally challenged pillars of the church, when necessary, including Peter, when he suspected that the message of grace and redemption was being compromised.

Paul's earliest treatment of the relationship of faith and law is found in his letter to the churches of Galatia, one of my very favorite books in the entire Bible. With fervor and enthusiasm, and a principled passion, he stakes out the very survival of Christianity as he understands it. Drawing from his own conversion and his radical turning from the Law of Moses to unequivocal faith in Jesus, he refuses to retreat even one step backwards.

The heart of Paul's understanding is found in the marvelous Biblical principle of justification by faith, a teaching clearly enunciated in Habakkuk 2:4, Galatians 3:11, Romans 1:17, and Hebrews 10:37. The phrase "The just shall live by faith" or "The righteous shall live by faith," is often followed by the word "alone." We must give Paul his well-deserved credit for insisting that Christianity is not faith, plus. It is faith alone. Period.

In his correspondence to the churches of Galatia Paul defends his apostolic authority. He equates his experience on the road to Damascus as equal to that of the other apostles. He points out how he stood up to Peter and to others who were willing to do the expedient thing and thus compromise the faith. They relegated Gentile converts to the role of second class citizens by separating themselves from others at the tables, so as not to offend Jewish Christians who still insisted that these new converts to Christianity keep the Mosaic law.

The most significant issue in the debate over law and faith was *circumcision*, the sign of the Hebrew covenant with God. The *Judaizers*, who I consider to be Gentile converts to Judaism and who underwent circumcision, and then who later became Christians, were insisting that all Gentile converts to Christianity be circumcised. What they were demanding was that Gentile converts to Christianity had to be proselytes to Judaism. A Gentile had to submit to the Jewish law, especially in terms of circumcision, in order to become a Christian. Do not miss the importance of this demand. The question then is this "Are Christians who believe in Jesus as their Savior required to commit to the keeping of the law." Paul says unequivocally "No, not now, not ever, not just a teeny little bit!"

Out of these experiences Paul formulated the main principles of his understanding of faith in Jesus. In chapters 3 and 4 he elaborated on the relationship between law and faith in the most theological section of the writing. He pointed out that the Law never was intended to save anyone because no one could keep it. Rather the Law was a teacher to show the need for faith. He interpreted Abraham as one who was considered righteous before God long before the Law appeared and on the basis that he believed God. He uses a comparison of Ishmael and Isaac as examples of the Law and of faith, respectively. Ishmael is the child of a slave, Isaac the child of promise and the child of a free woman. When Isaac comes along, Ishmael is set aside as the heir of Abraham. So it is with law and faith, which supersedes the law.

One of the most powerful statements on the consequences of faith is found in Galatians 5:1. Paul, having vehemently defended justification by faith alone, then proclaims the result of that doctrine. He writes to the Galatians who had been so troubled over this issue that "It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." How powerful, how

significant is this passage? Through faith alone Christ set us free in order for us *to be free*. Why in the world anyone would want to submit again to any yoke of slavery?

Let me risk a small uprising and possible lynching. Paul would be proud if this takes place, given his record. Why are we as Christians so enamored with the Ten Commandments? We want to post them everywhere? In schools, in courthouses, in public parks, in the back of pick-up trucks, and on the lawn of the Methodist church in Brookfield, Missouri. Have we missed the message of the Gospel? The Ten Commandments never saved any of us. None of us have ever been able to keep them. We are all saved by grace alone through simple, confident faith in Jesus Christ! Period! Maybe we should have a monument in our church yards that say "For by grace you/I have been saved through faith." And add to that "It is for freedom that Christ has set us/me free."

What does this mean in terms of our covenant as believers with God and one another? It means that we are free through faith to be God's people, not through the keeping of any law. We are free to determine what is acceptable ethically in the world in which ethics are constantly changing. That is a dangerous proposition, I know. But as times change so do our values and ethics. There was a time not too many years ago when women couldn't wear pants in church, when people of different races were prohibited from marrying or even dating, when people of different races were considered second class citizens, when eating out or shopping on Sunday was completely taboo, and so on. What I am saying is that freedom in Christ enables us to adapt our message without necessarily compromising it. I believe that ethics based upon faith in Christ can be adjusted without having to compromise the foundation of covenant with God. We are free to change our approach to worship, to ministry, to evangelism, to missions as we attempt to have a relevant faith and a relevant message in the 21st century. For freedom Christ has set us free! Enough said! Scary, isn't it!

Read the rest of Galatians 5. Paul says that through the freedom that comes from faith in Jesus we are free from *legalism*. Makes sense to me. I am not under the law. I don't want to be under the law. I choose through faith to be under the Lordship of Jesus. But through faith I am also free from *libertinism* or antinomianism (against the law). My freedom in Christ does not mean that I can do anything that I please to do. Read Paul's list of the deeds of the flesh – such as immorality, sensuality, dissension, strife, jealousy. Then read his list of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Note what he then says, "against such there is no law." The law cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit, faith alone can.

So, maybe in order to have a little alliteration and to validate this as at least sermonically in tone, faith frees us from legalism and libertinism, to live by the law of love.

**CONCLUSIONS:** So, what have we learned from the new covenant? We have learned through the teachings of Jesus that the best expression of our faith in Him and as citizens of the kingdom of God has significant ethical implications. Our actions must be founded upon our attitudes and our motives, not upon any legalistic system.

We have learned from Paul that we are justified before God through grace based upon simple, confident, trusting *faith in Jesus alone*. And we have learned through Paul that our faith in Jesus has set us free to be followers of Jesus, to avoid both legalism and libertinism, and to experience the fruit of the Spirit. For me, the bottom line is that I really like it this way. I'm not much of a rules guy anyway!