

Paul Destroys their Error

It is in the letter to the Galatians where the apostle laid out his fullest argument against the doctrine of the law-men. Having written elsewhere at length about the real nature of the problem at Galatia, and the vital way Paul dealt with it in his letter,¹ I confine myself here to say that to limit Paul's teaching in Galatians to justification – which has been the dominant view taken of Galatians ever since Martin Luther – is to miss the letter's main emphasis, and miss it by the proverbial mile. What is the chief emphasis in Galatians? Not justification, but progressive sanctification. Not only has the wholesale evangelical adoption of Luther's teaching on the book, which was so drastically coloured by his own experience in his deliverance from Romanism, virtually obliterated this vital point, it has, above all, skewed the reading of Galatians so that many have utterly failed to see how the least contamination of the new covenant by any imposition of the old covenant, the law (and/or paganism), spells ruin to it.² Ruin? Yes, indeed! For a start, it ruins the gospel – producing 'a different gospel – not that there is another one' (Gal. 1:6-7). Not only that. It detracts from Christ. Moreover, as history has shown,³ it ruins the *ekklēsia*! And all this spells severe losses for both believers and unbelievers: in short, as Galatians 2:4 makes clear, it leads to

¹ See my 'Getting Galatians Right' on my sermonaudio.com page; *Christ* pp123-127,416-419. See also my *Sanctification in Galatians; Three*.

² Of course, the new covenant uses the old covenant to illustrate the gospel, but only when scripturally nuanced. See, for instance, my 'Separation Essential: No Mixture! Deut. 22:9-11' on my sermonaudio.com page.

³ I am speaking of the Fathers and the invention of Christendom. See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 'Christendom' in my *Relationship*. See earlier note, where I quote 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-8; 4:3-4.

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slavery. Of course it does. It must! Was it not – as Paul had exposed for all to see – the secret agenda of the law-men?

None of this should be a surprise. I remind you that adulterating the new covenant by the old is a direct contradiction of Christ's explicit teaching, albeit in parable form. It merits repetition. It demands putting into practice:

No one puts a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matt. 9:16-17).

Yes, of course, Galatians does deal with justification by faith alone in Christ alone, by grace and not by the law (Gal. 2:1-21; 3:6-13; 5:1-12), yes, indeed. And a vital matter it is, too. So much so, it is one to which I will return. *But setting out the doctrine of justification was not Paul's purpose in writing Galatians.* His purpose was to destroy the teaching of the law-men. Of course, this meant he had to show that justification is not by the law, yes. But he had to go further – much further. He had to show that neither is progressive sanctification by the law. And that is what Galatians is about.

Let me just remind you of the relevant passages which prove beyond all question that Paul was also including progressive sanctification in his rejection of the imposition of the law on believers. Indeed, that he was majoring on it. Progressive sanctification, like justification, is not by the law. That is the doctrine of the gospel. That is the teaching of the new covenant. In particular, that is the teaching of Galatians. Teachers who claim that progressive sanctification is by application of the law (of Moses)⁴ – however nicely it might be dressed up, however heavily sanctioned by big names (John Calvin and the Puritans), tradition and hoary Confession

⁴ I remind you that by 'law', I am referring, as the Judaisers did, to the law of Moses, as a whole or in part. Of course the believer is under the law of Christ.

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– are pedalling false doctrine, the stock-in-trade of the false teachers. Wherever Paul found law-men at work, he deplored it. And he would always set about exposing and demolishing their teaching. Specifically, he knew that to be successful in this, he had to set out the gospel, and do so in a way that would leave nobody in any doubt. His strong words to the Galatians, his passionate pleas to them, could not be more explicit:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you...?... Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now⁵ being made perfect by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-5).

They were, said Paul, ‘bewitched’. The root of the word is ‘slander’, then ‘bring evil on someone by pretence, mislead, charm, bewitch’, used here in a figurative sense to delude into false doctrine. The air is thick with deceit, trickery, even a tang of spell-binding. What a motive. And the Galatians were succumbing!

Now for the doctrine itself. This is the key passage. Paul was going to sweep away the smoke and mirrors by letting in the light of truth. He was going to make the Galatians think, and think straight. They had begun in the Spirit – that is, they had begun their spiritual experience by the Spirit. They had been regenerated by the sovereign Spirit and justified by faith in Christ alone without the law. All by the Spirit. Now what about their perfection – that is, their progressive sanctification? While they were not under the law for justification, was the law the essential perfect rule for their progressive sanctification? Clearly, Paul’s rhetorical questions can have only one answer – a resounding ‘No!’ Luther, alas, failed to see this; he was all at sea over Galatians 3:3. He thought that Paul was still arguing about justification! Luther:

‘Are you so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh?’ Paul now begins to warn the Galatians against a twofold danger. The first danger is: ‘Are

⁵ Note the ‘now’. Having been justified, ‘now’...

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you so foolish, that after you have begun in the Spirit, you would now end in the flesh?’ ‘Flesh’ stands for the righteousness of reason which seeks justification by the accomplishment of the law... ‘The righteousness of the law’ which Paul also terms ‘the righteousness of the flesh’ is so far from justifying a person that those who once had the Holy Spirit and lost him, end up in the law to their complete destruction.

This is wrong, quite wrong. Luther allowed his deliverance from Romanism to make him tinker with what Paul said. Paul’s needle on the record was not stuck on justification; justification was not even in the track! Nevertheless, most evangelicals these past five hundred years have gone along with it being all about justification, and, as a consequence, they continue to promulgate the wrong view of Galatians. In addition, ‘flesh’ does not stand for ‘the righteousness of reason which seeks justification by the accomplishment of the law’!⁶

The *Reformation Study Bible*,⁷ for example, more or less repeats the thought of justification. On Galatians 2:4, it states:

Paul considered the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone [that is, in the RSB’s terms, justification – DG] to be so important that he excluded from the church all who did not hold to it.

Well, I can’t myself see that that is what Galatians 2:4 teaches. When Paul spoke of ‘slavery’ in that verse, while he would have included justification, he was surely thinking of a life-time’s experience – progressive sanctification, no less. But I let it go. Because, in a woefully weak comment on

⁶ As I have said, I will come to this.

⁷ A Study Bible published by the Reformation Trust Publishing, a division of Ligonier Ministries. Keith Mathison: ‘All of the contributing scholars would be able to agree with one or more of the major Reformed Confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, or the London Baptist Confession’ (Keith Mathison: ‘So What Makes the Reformation Study Bible Different?’, Ligonier website).

Galatians 3:3, which, as I have said, might well be considered the key verse in the entire letter, the RSB showed its utter misunderstanding of Paul's doctrine, and simply exposed its own ignorance in making the following weak comment:

Perhaps Paul has in mind not simply attempting to keep the law without the Spirit (Rom. 7:7 – 8:17)⁸ but also the attempting to gain favour with God by cutting the flesh in circumcision (Phil. 3:2-3). In either case, Paul warns his readers against the attempt to win salvation [that is, in the RSB's terms, justification – DG] by performing some work. Salvation [that is, in the RSB's terms, justification – DG] comes only through God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:16).

As can be seen, even though it has reached Galatians 3, the RSB is still talking about justification – which it calls 'salvation' – as though justification is the sum of redemption, with no thought of progressive sanctification. Indeed, with its dismissal of 'work', it might even be preventing its readers thinking of progressive sanctification! When all the time, that is precisely what the apostle was speaking about!

Naturally,⁹ the Ligonier website itself maintains the standard Reformed misunderstanding of Galatians:

The body of Galatians begins with [Paul] castigating the churches of Galatia for following another gospel (Gal. 1:6). It is clear that Paul believes this 'different gospel' cannot provide salvation as its content differs from the gospel he received from Christ. Instead, this other 'gospel' is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:7). If, as the New Testament declares, the gospel is the good news that God's kingdom has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:14–41; Rom. 1:1–6), then works of the law cannot be added as a requirement for salvation [that is, in Ligonier's view,

⁸ Perhaps? In Gal. 3:3, Paul was not talking about 'keeping the law', whether or not by the Spirit. As for Rom. 7:14-25, the usual Reformed view about 'the wretched man' produces misery for countless believers. It is quite wrong. See my *Christ*. I will have more to say on this.

⁹ See earlier note (quoting Keith Mathison) for my use of 'naturally'.

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justification – DG]. Jesus has done all that is needed to redeem his people; therefore, the only way to enjoy redemption is to trust him and what he has done, without resting on our good deeds at all.¹⁰

Of course, no sinner can earn justification by his law-work. But Paul was going much further than that!

And the website is wrong on Galatians 3:1-3:

Along with the lifting of the curse comes the gift of the Holy Spirit, which the Galatians experienced, according to today's passage (Gal. 3:1–2; see Joel 2:28–32). Tragically, they had forgotten that the Spirit, and thus justification and freedom from the curse, came from believing on Christ crucified, not works of the law (Gal. 3:1–2). Evidently, the false teachers had convinced the Galatian churches that the Spirit was not enough; obedience to the Mosaic law was needed to make them a real part of God's people (Gal. 3:3). But to view one's justification as dependent upon one's own works is to look to a law that will bring with it the curse.¹¹ Paul's audience had heard his gospel and knew better, and his harsh rhetoric is designed to wake them up from their spiritual stupor.¹²

Justification, justification, justification, when Paul was so obviously speaking about progressive sanctification!

Moo (in his 2013 *Commentary*) got much closer:

Can you be so foolish that, having begun your Christian journey by means of the Spirit, you are now trying to finish it by means of the flesh?' The aorist participle... 'having begun' refers to the inauguration of Christian experience (as in its only other New Testament occurrence (Phil. 1:6),

¹⁰ 'False Teachers Accursed' (Ligonier website).

¹¹ But since the Reformed are so convinced that progressive sanctification involves obedience to 'the moral law', it is only right that they should appreciate that Ligonier seems to have shot itself in the foot. Is it not fair to say: 'But to view one's [progressive sanctification in the Reformed system]... is to look to a law that will bring with it the curse'? Progressive sanctification by a system which brings the curse?

¹² 'The Gift of the Spirit' (Ligonier website).

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which, with an allusion back to Galatians 3:2, Paul claims to have taken place... 'by means of the Spirit'... Despite this good beginning (see also Gal. 5:7), the Galatians are being tempted by the agitators [that is, the *pseudadelphoi*] to shift to another means of completing their Christian pilgrimage... 'are you trying to be perfected?'... but it is more likely to be... with the sense 'finish', 'bring to completion'. Paul expresses the same basic idea with the same verbs in Philippians 1:6: 'He who began... a good work in you will carry it on to completion... until the day of Christ Jesus'.¹³

Justification – a one-off experience – leads to the life-long experience of progressive sanctification. And neither is by the law. This is what Paul teaches in Galatians. No choice between the two has to be made, of course; it is not either/or; it is both. But I think it is fair to say that, from at least this stage in the letter, it was progressive sanctification which was uppermost in the apostle's mind. Of course, justification kept coming up. I do not deny it. But the overwhelming thrust of the apostolic teaching until the end of the letter is progressive sanctification.

Having laid down the principle, Paul let loose a torrent of teaching in order to drive home the point: neither justification nor progressive sanctification is by the law. Going under the law is slavery, something unthinkable for a child of God (*cf.* John 8:34-36), the one who has the Spirit. The believer is justified:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13-14).

Now that faith [that is, the faith; that is the gospel] has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were spiritually immersed¹⁴ into Christ have put on Christ. There

¹³ John Brown, alas, although generally superb in his commentary on Galatians, failed at Gal. 3:1-3.

¹⁴ See my *Infant*.

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is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:25-29).

Being justified, the Galatian believers were adopted sons of God, and:

...because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying: 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:6-7).

Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God... Brothers... my little children... (Gal. 4:9,12,19).

'So why are you listening to the *pseudadelphoi*?, Paul asked them. 'How can you do it?':

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain...

Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They [that is, the false teachers, the Judaisers]¹⁵ make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them... My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you [that is, until you are completely transformed into Christ-likeness by progressive sanctification – see Romans 8:29]! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is

¹⁵ And (to coin a word) paganisers.

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Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman'. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... You were called to freedom, brothers (Gal. 4:8-11,16 – 5:13).

Do not miss the apostle's plain speaking about the two covenants. It is clear that mixing the covenants was the root of the problem, and he wasn't going to put up with it – no, not at any price:

[We are talking about] two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise... 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman'.

He went on:

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh... If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are... But the fruit of the Spirit is... Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in [or by] the Spirit... He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life...

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may

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boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 5:16-25; 6:8,12-16. See also Rom. 8:1-17; 13:14; Gal. 4:5-6).

Why is it so important not to limit the teaching of Galatians to justification? Apart from it preventing a proper understanding of that book, remember what the Judaisers were saying: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:1). Salvation was at stake. Mingling the covenants leads to another gospel, and this spells the ruin of salvation. Salvation. What is this ‘salvation’?

What is more, do we have false brothers today? If not, do we have any teachers who get close to being fellow-travellers? If so, who are they? And should we think of them as Paul did in his day? Are they still the threat that he thought them? Or have they gone away?

In order to answer those questions, we shall have to go back to square one and ask even more basic questions: What – precisely – is salvation? And when are sinners saved? And it will be no use assuming the answers. What does Scripture teach us?

Why do we need to spend time on such basic questions? For two reasons.

First, because the Judaisers were making salvation the issue:

Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:1).

Do not miss the Judaisers’ use of ‘saved’. I am not concerned with how much the law-men understood about the meaning of the term, but only with Paul’s understanding of salvation. He could read what was at stake as plainly as if he were reading on the top line of the optometrist’s chart. And he, realising the

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absolute importance of the issue, made sure he set out in the fullest possible detail what we must understand by ‘salvation’.

Secondly, I am afraid that many believers today are growing extremely weak – and weaker by the month – when it comes to scriptural understanding.¹⁶ But unless we have a good grasp of what Paul meant by ‘salvation’ we shall never see why he made such an issue of the *pseudadelphoi* and their attack on Gentile believers. And that would be to make a very expensive mistake.

So, what are we to understand by ‘salvation’? And when are sinners ‘saved’?

¹⁶ So marked is this, I find it is often well-nigh impossible to have a doctrinal conversation with many believers. I am not alone.