

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Remember, Don't Mix Up Your Covenants! (Part I)

Hardly anything is more striking," wrote William Plumer, "than the obstinate attachment of men to their own works, and their consequent aversion to the grace of God. The great mass of unrenowned men, even in Christian assemblies, have really no idea of ever being saved otherwise than by *becoming good*, and that in their own strength. They generally suspect that they are not now what they ought to be, but they intend to do better hereafter. They seem very ignorant of the extent, spirituality and holiness of the law; and thus while conscience does not flame out against them, they rest in the delusion that they are not very bad, and may easily improve. The very last thing which a sinner under conviction does, is to give up his self-confidence. He cleaves to it as if salvation depended upon his good opinion of himself. Indeed, till God's Spirit enlightens his mind, he will not see that salvation can never be compassed by his own power or merit. So that the very process, by which a sinner is led to the Saviour, is usually one of extreme sadness. He has less and less, in his own esteem, worthy of honourable mention before God, until at last he finds out that he is nothing but a guilty, vile, lost, helpless, perishing sinner."¹

What is legalism? Many Christians are inclined to believe that stressing the need for obedience in the Christian life is tantamount to legalism. This common but completely erroneous view is refuted over and over again in the New Testament (cf. Romans 6:17; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10; Galatians 5:13, 14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:14; James 2:8-13; 1 John 3:21-24). Legalism has very distinct features. William Bates, the old English Puritan (Puritans are often called Legalists simply because they were rightly concerned with holy living), *correctly* noted that the natural inclination of the human heart is prone to seek acceptance with God by merit. "As pride at first aspired to make man as God, so it tempts him to usurp the honour of Christ, to be his own Saviour. He is unwilling to stoop, that he may drink of the waters of life. Till the heart by the weight of its guilt is broken in pieces, and loses its former fashion and figure, it will not humbly comply with the offer of salvation for the merits of another."² James S. Stewart has identified the three main marks of legalism: (1) *Redemption by human effort*. We earn God's favor by works, a direct contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-10; (2) *It obligates God*. A person points to their works and demands that God reward them, a direct contradiction of 1 Corinthians 4:7; (3) *Fondness for negatives*. This mindset simply thinks that religion consists of rules that in reality produce pride and false humility, a direct contradiction to Colossians 2:18-23."³ In essence, legalism is defined as the doctrine that one may by one's own effort (or with some assistance from God) gain favor before God. In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul concludes his appeal and argument by directing the Galatians back to the story of Abraham's two sons and the conflict between Sarah and Hagar.

I. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Paul begins this section with an interrogation. He is aware that his letter will be read aloud to the congregations and that the Judaizers will be present. "So you want to be under the law, do you? Well, listen to the law! It will be your judge and will condemn you!"

A. The Illustration

The account of Abraham and his seed becomes the focal point in Paul's argument. Abraham had two sons by two different women. The birth of the first son Ishmael was by Hagar, the bondservant of Sarah. This took place when Abraham was 86 years old (Genesis 16:4-16). The second son Isaac, the son of promise, was born to Sarah when Abraham was 100 years old.

II. PAUL'S APPEAL TO ALLEGORY

Allegorizing Scripture is risky business. First off, we need to recognize that the Apostle is not denying the historicity of the Old Testament narrative. The word translated "allegory" is, in fact, the word from which we get allegory, ALLO GORE. It comes from ALLO AGOREU which means "say something else." Even

though our English word comes from this Greek word, Paul is not using the word in the same sense. We think of an allegory and Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress or Carroll's Alice in Wonderland comes to mind. That is *not* what Paul has in mind. In the opinion of J. B. Lightfoot, Paul's use of the word is quite close to his use of the word "type," as in 1 Corinthians 10:11.⁴ What is a type? A type is an event or a person or even an institution in the Old Testament that foreshadows or corresponds with a New Testament person, event or institution.

A. Paul's Exposition

The two women, Sarah and Hagar, represent two covenants (the Abrahamic and the Mosaic). Hagar, the bondwoman, stands for the Mosaic and her children are in bondage. Further, the apostle goes on to identify Hagar with Mt. Sinai in Arabia, far removed from the promised land. The very place where the Law was given is connected with the slave woman, Hagar, for she went south to Beersheba, and Ishmael dwelt near Sinai. Thus, Arabia becomes the land of bondsmen. As S. Lewis Johnson has written, "Hagar and Ishmael left the land of blessing for a desert. Thus do all who abandon grace?"⁵

B. Paul's Scriptural Support

The apostle illustrates his allegory by appealing to Isaiah 54:1. The prophet in 51:2 had pointed to God's covenantal dealing with Abraham and Sarah as a *type*, and in 54:1, after he had unfolded the mystery of the Suffering Servant of the LORD (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), he calls upon Israel to sing with joy over God's gracious salvation (Romans 11:11-24). Paul sees the prophecy of Isaiah as having its fulfillment in the salvation of Gentiles.

III. THE PERSONAL APPLICATION

Note how Paul presses home his point. The gospel that he preached to them, the one that they received solely by faith, made them *children of promise*.

A. The Correspondence

Believers, like Isaac, are born again by divine interposition (John 3:3, 7). The flesh persecutes the Spirit. There will always be the hostility between the two. Therefore, the apostolic admonition, "Cast out the bondwoman," is God's judgment on the legalist—so Paul is telling the Galatians, "Get rid of those legalists!"

CONCLUSION: John Owen, in commenting on the passage in Heb. 12:18-24 that closely parallels Gal. 4:21-31 drew these conclusions. "Wherefore the apostle, allowing all this communication of privileges unto them at Sinai, observes, that it was done in such a way of dread and terror as that sundry things are manifest therein; as, (1) That there was *no evidence*, in and by those things. The whole representation of him was as an absolute sovereign and a severe judge. Nothing declared him as a father, gracious and merciful. (2) There was no intimation of any *condescension* from the exact severity of what was required in the law; or of any relief or pardon in case of transgression. (3) There was *no promise of grace*, in a way of aid or assistance, for the performance of what was required. Thunders, voices, earthquakes, and fire, gave no signification of these things. (4) The whole was hereby nothing but a glorious *ministration of death and condemnation*, as the apostle speaks, 2 Cor. iii. 7; whence the consciences of sinners were forced to subscribe to their own condemnation as just and equal. (5) God was here represented in all the outward demonstrations of infinite holiness, justice, severity, and terrible majesty, on the one hand; and on the other, men in their lowest condition of sin, misery, guilt, and death. If there be not, therefore, something else to interpose between God and men, somewhat to fill up the space between infinite severity and inexpressible guilt, all this glorious preparation was nothing but a theatre, set up for the pronouncing of judgment and the sentence of eternal condemnation against sinners. And on this consideration depends the force of the apostle's argument: and the due apprehension and declaration of it are a better exposition of verses 18-21 than the opening of the particular expressions will amount unto; yet they also must be explained."⁶ Believers need to first of all know the Gospel of Grace and to stand firm, and this requires constant watchfulness. We are naturally prone to works-righteousness. So, remember, don't go mixing up your covenants!

ENDNOTES

¹ Wm. Plumer, The Grace of Christ (rpt. Odom Publications, 1981) p. 92.

² The Complete Works of William Bates I (rpt. Sprinkle Publications, 1990), p. 399.

³ James S. Stewart, A Man in Christ: The Vital Elements of St. Paul's Religion (MacMillan, 1935), pp. 84-88.

⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (MacMillan, 1869), p. 180.

⁵ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., Believer's Bible Bulletin: Galatians (Believer's Chapel, 1978), No. 12, p. 4.

⁶ J. Owen, An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews VIII (rpt. Baker, 1980) p. 307.