

## The End of Religion

The believers in the churches in Galatia had a problem. They had allowed themselves to be influenced by people who were trying to get them to conform to the Jewish religion as well as believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was not the same as the direct opposition which Paul and Barnabas had faced when they first preached the good news in Galatia (see **Acts 13:13-14:23**). No, this time it was more subtle.

*These people are not likely to have come in and said, "Right, you've all got to become Jews now, get in line!" Their approach may have been a bit more like this: "You've become a believer in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah? That's great, we believe in him too! Isn't it wonderful that God has sent his Messiah and that the promises of Abraham are now extended to Gentiles as well as to Jews? Of course, if you really want to go on with the Lord, there are lots of ways you can be a better Christian. How about circumcision? That way, you will have joined up completely with God's chosen people, the Jews, who were given the promises in the first place. If you are circumcised, we can really all be one together!"*

Then it would not take them long to come to the point of saying, "You can't really be a believer unless you are circumcised", as happened in **Acts 15:1**.

It was with this background that Paul wrote the whole letter to the Galatians, and **chapter 5** in particular. He has already underlined to them that they are joined to the Lord Jesus Christ, that they have become mature sons, that they have clothed themselves with Christ and belong to him (**Galatians 3:26-29**). He says they have become descendants and heirs of Abraham without doing anything else.

At the end of the previous chapter, he has very clearly said that believers in Jesus as the Messiah are the real sons of promise, like Isaac, whereas the continuing Jewish religion corresponds now to the descendants of Ishmael, in slavery. Daring statements for an orthodox Jew to make! (**Galatians 4:21-31**)

So now, he says (**5:14**), if you become circumcised then Christ will be of no value to you at all. For us, the issue of circumcision is no issue at all. We may find it embarrassing or faintly amusing, but to the Jew it was an outward sign that he was one of God's own chosen people, a descendant of Abraham, and therefore an heir of the covenant which God had made with him. In **Galatians 3:14** Paul has made it clear that the basis of being an heir of Abraham is redemption through Jesus the Christ, to be received

by faith. If you now start relying on the extras you can do, then your performance has become the basis and you have cut yourself off from Christ and the grace of God.

Don't let us think that this is just about the problems of Jewish religion in the first century. We are apt to think of 'legalism' as something imposed by others. In reality, it is self-justification, the extras that we try to do to improve our standing before God and men. We try to live to a standard. If you are doing that, says Paul, you have been alienated from Christ and make his work inoperative.

He told the believers in Rome exactly what had happened to them in **Romans 7:4**. The standards of the Jewish law had no more hold on them because, through Jesus' death, they had now died and were out of the law's reach. The same is true of us, if we are in Christ. How foolish, then, to throw it all away by trying to add our own 'improvements'!

If you do this, says Paul, you have fallen away from grace. We tend to think of 'falling from grace' as meaning the same thing as sinning – how wrong we are! Grace is the provision which God makes for us to live as imperfect humans – forgiveness, relying on what Jesus has done for us to put us in right relationship with God the Father. 'Falling from grace' is simply stopping relying on him and relying on ourselves instead. That is what you are doing, says Paul, if you start trying to add your good performance!

At this point, we may well start protesting that of course we must try to live up to some standards, but Paul is adamant. So much so that he spends much of the rest of the chapter helping the Galatian believers to see that living by standards and achievement is already spoiling their life together.

Righteousness is our aim, he says (**v.5**), but the sort that comes through the Holy Spirit by faith. Circumcision (or anything like it) means absolutely nothing. The only thing that makes any difference is faith demonstrated through love in Christ, these are the only external signs of any significance (**v.6**). A quick look at **Romans 4 13-16** shows us more. The promise to Abraham had to be by faith, so that it would 'fit' with grace.

Having started well by receiving the grace of God (see **Acts 13 & 14**), they were in danger of slipping back into dead religion. Even when he had talked in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Paul had made it very clear that forgiveness of sins was through Jesus and that everyone who believed in him was justified and released in a way that the Law of Moses could not achieve (**Acts 13:38,39**).

In case they were in any doubt, Paul makes it clear that this pull to self-justification does not come from the Lord Jesus and that a little of it

affects everyone. (More of that in a moment.) But still he remains confident that they will see it properly in the end. In the meantime, the one who has started this infection of religion will face the Lord's dealings with him, whatever position he may hold. (**v.7-10**)

If I am still proclaiming circumcision, says Paul, why am I still getting attacked? (**v.11**) There are two opposing messages here – the cross or self-justification. If I preached circumcision (i.e. homemade justification), then the cross would be put out of action.

The message of the cross is central to all of Paul's life and right at the heart of his teaching. The first aspect of it is that there is nothing that I can do to earn forgiveness from God; I have to receive forgiveness through what Jesus has done, paying off my debt of sin and failure by his death on the cross. Nothing I can achieve can put me in right standing with God. This cuts right across any efforts I may try to make to justify myself. (See **Romans 3:21-24**)

As they were trying to justify themselves, things were going wrong in the Galatian churches. Some people were latching hold of the teaching of freedom and using it as an excuse to just do whatever they felt like, without any thought for anyone else (**v.13**). "Do you really want to follow the Law?" asks Paul, "Then love in practice is the way it shows!" (**v.14**)

But it was not only selfishness which was showing; these believers had started to 'bite and devour' one another. They had become so competitive in their self-justification that personal attack was used to bring others down. Watch out, says Paul, or you will destroy each other! (**v.15**)

The second aspect of the message of the cross goes even deeper and Paul has already written about it in **Galatians 2:20**. Anyone who is joined to Jesus has been joined to his death and resurrection. (See **Romans 6:1-11, 8:1-17**) By his death, the old life is dead and gone, and we are dead to both the control of sin and the demands of laws and standards (**Romans 7:16**). By his resurrection, we are 'alive to God', with the Holy Spirit living in us and able to express the life of Christ through our lives.

If you live in this way, says Paul, two things will happen. First of all, you will not gratify the desires of the old life. It is a result of the life within, not of great effort on your part (**v.16**). Secondly, if you are led by the Holy Spirit, you are not under law, not doing 'religious' things because you feel you ought to (**v.18**)!

Yes, there is a battle going on (**v.17**). On the one hand, Satan will use the pulls of the old life to try to keep us in sinful disobedience. If he cannot succeed with that, he will settle for religious observance and self-justification.

The next few verses (**v.19-23**) are too familiar, so let's take a fresh look at them! This is not a nice little reference passage about 'the works of the flesh' and 'the fruit of the Spirit'. Paul has already seen that the Galatian believers are starting to be competitive in their self-justification, and to attack one another as a result. "So where does all this come from?" he asks, "Isn't it from the same source as all these other things which I told you about before? People who live like that are not heirs of the kingdom of God!"

"Then how about these things which spring from the life of the Holy Spirit in a believer? Where are they in your lives? Oh and, by the way, as you're so concerned about laws, there are no laws against any of these qualities." Nice touch of irony!

In case either the Galatians or we are still in any doubt, he spells out again the central issue of the message of the cross in **v.24**. If you belong to Jesus Christ, then you have crucified the old life, along with all its passions and desires.

"Have I?" we ask, "It doesn't feel much like it. I still do things wrong, give in to strong desires and try to build up my credit with God. If God says I'm dead to sin, why do I still do it?" It is impossible to commit suicide by crucifixion, so how can we have crucified the old life? We have seen in this chapter and other places that God has included all believers in the death of Jesus, so how can it begin to work out? **Romans 6:12-23** may be useful to us.

When we know that we have been joined to Jesus' death, we can begin to count on it when faced with temptation – we are set free from having to give in to it. We may not succeed every time, but there is forgiveness through his blood and the full provision to face the next attack.

Since our life is by the Holy Spirit, says Paul, let's also walk in line with him. This too is part of God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus. He has given us forgiveness through his blood, freedom from the slavery of sin and law through his death and, through his resurrection, a new life that is pleasing to God.

There is no room in this new life for boasting, competitiveness or envy – those belong with dead religion.

Dave Taylor . . . . . October 2000

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