

Warning to the Galatians

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians was a serious warning against false teaching. It needs to be properly understood because similar false teaching circulates in Christianity today.

The Galatians were mainly Gentiles converted from paganism (consider Gal 4:8, 5:2 & 6:12). The Apostle Paul was used by God in their conversion (consider Gal 1:8-9,4:13 &19). Paul's tone to them was very serious (see Gal 1:6-9 & 4:20). He had grave doubts about them. He marveled at how they were so soon turning from the grace of Christ to another perverted gospel.

We learn from Galatians 4:17 & 6:12-13 what the false teachers who were troubling the Galatians were like. They were ambitious for the Galatians to be zealous for them; they wanted to bring them into bondage (2:4) so they could boast, and they desired to make a good showing in the flesh. They wished to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ and did not practice what they preached (6:13). They were therefore hypocrites and boasters.

Their false message is revealed very plainly when one considers Paul's warning to the Galatians. Paul says to the Galatians in chapter 5:2-4 that if they become circumcised Christ will profit them nothing, they will have to keep the whole law, and they will be estranged from Christ because of their attempts to be justified by the law. The false teachers therefore were compelling the Galatians to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses and hence were pushing the same line as the Acts 15:5 "sect of the Pharisees who believed ... [and preached that] 'it [was] necessary to circumcise them (Gentile converts), **and** to command them to keep the law of Moses'" (my emphasis). The Jerusalem Council certainly ruled it was not necessary to so command them.

Some teachers of the view that the annual holy days (from the law of Moses) must be observed by Christians today go to great lengths to reconcile the book of Galatians with their viewpoint because it poses serious challenges to it. What *some* annual holy day proponents therefore do is to argue that Paul is not talking to the Galatians about the God-inspired Law of Moses. Instead they say that he's referring to Jewish tradition spelt out in Rabbinical enactments such as the Mishna and Gemara of Judaism (referred to below as the 'traditional law'). Alternatively, some say Paul was not referring to *all* the law of Moses, but only to certain segments of it, especially the sacrificial and administrative aspects added at Mount Sinai (referred to below as 'added' law). They refer to the troublers of the Galatians as the 'Circumcision party', and focus on the circumcision element of their teaching, and this tends to hide and nullify the significant fact that the troublers also insisted that others must keep the whole law of Moses - God's law.

Here's where I believe an obvious error occurs. The distinction they have made *in the context of Galatians* between God's law (law of Moses) on the one hand, and the traditional law and the added law on the other, is unsustainable from a reading of Galatians, let alone Acts 15, where the law being talked about was specifically identified - the 'Law of Moses' (v5). The problem with both the 'traditional law' distinction and the 'added law' distinction some have applied to Galatians I believe can be exposed by taking a walk through Galatians' references to 'law' and (for the purposes of illustration only) substituting the 'traditional law or added law' wherever the word 'law' is used. This will show that Paul was indeed referring to the law of God generally.

I will start this approach from Galatians 3:10 which says: "For as many as are of the works of the [*traditional and/or added*] law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'". Just stopping there we notice an immediate problem. Paul quotes directly from the law of God, refers to the curse of that law, and he identifies the 'book of the law', which most readers well

know is the 'law of God' and not some other 'traditional law' or just a part of the law which does not include the holy days. This book certainly included the holy days and contained the bulk of the original ordinances concerning them. The further implication is that the Galatians were seeking to be justified by that same law - the law of God.

Verse 13 continues "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the [*traditional and/or added*] law, having become a curse for us". Again it is obvious that the adding of the words '*traditional and/or added*' here would be wrong. Paul is still talking about the law of God. The Galatians were being taught by the false teachers to seek justification in keeping the law of God, and because the Galatians (despite their sincere efforts) were not keeping all of that law, they were in danger of the curse of the law of God falling upon them. Undeniably Jesus redeemed us from our sins against any part of the law of God, not just a portion of it and He certainly did not have to redeem us from the breaking of man-made religious laws (the traditional law).

Verse 17 continues "And this I say, that the [*traditional and/or added*] law, which was four hundred and thirty years later (after the promise to Abraham), cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect". Again, anyone with some biblical knowledge would know that putting the words 'traditional and/or added' here would be absurd, as obviously the law being referred to that came 430 years later is the law of Moses, including the 10 commandments and the holy/feast days.

Continuing in verse 19-24 : "What purpose then does the [*traditional and/or added*] law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made ... Is the [*traditional and/or added*] law against the promises of God? Certainly not. For if there had been a [*traditional and/or added*] law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the [*traditional and/or added*] law ... But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the [*traditional and/or added*] law, kept for the faith which would be revealed. Therefore the [*traditional and/or added*] law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith".

The reader by now should see that any attempts to argue that Paul in Galatians is referring to the Mishna - traditional law, or alternatively just the added sacrificial and administrative aspects of God's law do not fit at all well with the context of Galatians or indeed Acts 15:5. It is an unnecessary and misguided twist to so argue. In no way for example could it be said that the Mishna etc was the tutor to lead the Galatians to Christ. In no way could just the added law be so either. God's Old Testament law *in its entirety* is in full view in Galatians and is even specifically identified in the chapter where a difficult interpretational problem for those insisting that others must keep the OT holy days exists. I will get to that in a moment, but first we must be clear what effect the false teachers were having on the Galatians.

Well, we now know what the false teachers taught. They were teaching a heresy that mixed elements of Judaism and Christianity. They were not teaching the formerly pagan Galatians to go back to pagan superstition. They were insisting that the gentile Galatians had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. I think we can all agree that the false teachers in Galatia would have been disgusted if the Galatians had gone back to pagan practices or worshipping various God's, because in their religion the fact of there being only one God and having no idols was paramount. And indeed they were successful in what they taught. They were so successful that Paul had doubts about whether the Galatians were still in the grace of God.

Now let's get to what I believe is problematic in Galatians 4 for those insisting on the need for gentile Christians to observe annual Jewish holy days. Verses 8-11 say: "But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to bondage. You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have laboured for you in vain".

"Aha! say some annual holy day proponents. See, it says in verse 9 that they are turning again to the weak and beggarly elements. Therefore the days and months etc mentioned in verse 10 can't include the annual holy days, as the Galatians were pagans and had never observed them. Therefore v10 must be referring to the Galatians literally returning to pagan practices and pagan days and ritualistic ways of worship".

If one emphasizes the words 'turning again' and isolates these verses from the surrounding verses, the rest of the chapter, and the entire book of Galatians there seems to be good logic in this point. However, in context this interpretation is seriously flawed. To see this, just ask the questions again which have already been answered - what were the false teachers teaching the Galatians and were they effective in teaching them this? They were teaching them to be circumcised *and* to keep the law of Moses (for the purposes of their justification), and they were effective in having some of the Galatians attempt to do this. They were not teaching them to return to pagan days! That's about the last thing they would have ever taught them!

Even if the reader for some reason still thinks that Paul was not referring to the law of Moses in Galatians and thinks that the false teachers were teaching the Galatians to keep the 'traditional law' you would have to admit that this would not include the keeping of superstitious pagan days, given the so-labelled 'Circumcision Party's' abhorrence of idolatry. The suggestion that the Galatians in verses 9-10 were literally returning to their pagan observances must therefore be flawed.

What does it mean then when it says they were 'turning again' to the weak and beggarly elements. Quite simply it means that just as how in paganism they relied upon ritualistic ways to worship God and to have justification, they were now doing the same in Christianity. Even the ritualistic/ceremonial elements of the Law of Moses were now so to speak 'weak and beggarly' as a way of justification as compared to the salvation and unparalleled light ushered in by Christ. Indeed, as Peter himself, and Paul show in 1 Peter 1:10-13 and 1 Corinthians 2:7-10, compared with the light brought through Christ, all light previous to this, including the light of the Old Covenant, was very, very dim.

To further confirm that Paul was talking about the Law of Moses (God's law), one need only carefully read the rest of the chapter. In it, **the law Paul is talking about that we should not attempt to be justified by is clearly identified – the whole law codified at Sinai**. In verse 24 he likens the Sinai covenant, of which Moses was the mediator (commonly referred to as the Old Covenant and including the law), to the bondage of Hagar. He then instructs the Galatians (and us) to cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.

In recognizing just how deceptive and successful the false teachers were it is also interesting to note that even the Apostle Peter and Barnabas were caught up in the same false way as the Galatians when they had encountered similar teachers. In Galatians chapter 2 Paul mentions how he also had to rebuke them. Paul said to Peter in v14-16 "*If you being a Jew live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews ... knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith*". The italicized portion is interesting to note. Apart from this brief moment of hypocrisy of Peter's for which he was rebuked, Peter the Jew had changed. He lived in the 'manner of the Gentiles'. This hardly sounds like someone who wanted to hold onto the way of the Old Covenant, and *all* of its rituals and laws, let alone someone who compelled others to do so, or queried others' standing in Christ or future position/reward in the kingdom because they did not teach others to observe annual holy days.

Conclusion

Paul is teaching us that reliance on any law for justification is heresy. He also teaches that Christians are no longer under the Old Covenant system. Nevertheless, just as he does in Romans 3:31, 6:1-2, and 7:25-8:4, Paul expects Christians to fulfill the *righteous requirements* of

the law by walking after the Spirit and not according to the flesh (Gal. 2:16-21, 5:18-26). We must not build again the sinful things in our lives that we renounced when we accepted Christ.

I believe that the false Jewish teachers in Galatia would have been less offensive to Paul if they had simply followed their own convictions about observing days etc (Rom. 14:5-6), if they had not done so for justification, and if they had not tried to compel others to do what they themselves could never do, namely observe the entire law of Moses to be justified before God (Gal 6:13).

Epilogue

Where does this leave 7th day Sabbath observance?

Man's need for a weekly physical rest and for a set time for the concentrated and communal worship of God has not changed. No other day for this other than the 7th day is sanctified in scripture. This blessed day was made for man at Creation, before Sinai. Getting much-needed rest, finding special time to worship God and learn more of Him and His ways, and being together with our brethren and families are important blessings we share on the Sabbath.

It's also interesting that God blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it from the beginning (Genesis 2:1-3) . It is therefore likely that Adam enjoyed Sabbath blessings too, as why would God on the seventh day of earth's history bless the day for man's benefit (Mark 2:27), set it apart for holy purposes, and then wait thousands of years until the time of Moses before sharing the Sabbath's blessings with anyone? I am sure that from the beginning Adam and Eve also enjoyed Sabbath rest and fellowship with God and each other, just as God wants us to.

A dear and learned brother in Christ (Calvin Burrell) came across similar arguments to those examined in this article. He wrote:

"I remember discussing Galatians with a good friend and fellow pastor who taught the obligation of the annual Hebrew holy days. His argument was exactly the one that you are exposing in this article. I could never understand where he got the idea that Paul was warning the Galatians about going back to pagan observances. Evidently you have run into the same argument more than once.

Having fully renounced the Old Covenant law as a method to righteousness before God (Romans 3-5 teaches the same truth), I want to try to make a distinction that many Bible students, particularly dispensationalists, seem unable to grasp or admit. Although Galatians dispenses with the law of Moses for a certain purpose, other writings of Paul help us to see that he did not broaden that into a total abrogation of Old Testament law for every purpose. Romans 6-8, 1 Timothy 1:8ff, and other texts approve the use of the law for good and proper purposes, even under the New Covenant.

I would argue that the constitutional (moral) elements of the Old Covenant find their way into the New Covenant, not as a method to right standing with God, but as a standard (or principle) of life practiced and taught by Jesus Christ the mediator of the New Covenant.

The best summary of the constitutional/moral part of the Old Covenant is found in the Ten Commandments. In the Old Covenant, the Decalogue (written in stone) has a few small elements that are uniquely Hebrew. In the New Covenant, the same principles (written on the heart) have been perfectly magnified by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. To these standards we aspire, as we follow Christ and are justified only by faith in his death and resurrection for us."