

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

The Law OR Christ?

Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Gal. 6:[1-6] My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3For if those who are nothing think that they are something, they deceive themselves. 4All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. 5For all must carry their own loads. 6Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Gal. 6:7 Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. 10So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. 11See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! 12It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised-only that they may not be persecuted for the cross

of Christ. 13Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. 14May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! 16As for those who follow this rule-peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

[Author's Notes: Paul's handwriting in verse 11ff authenticates the letter and summarizes its contents. If the terseness and many ambiguities are daunting, or the turns of phrase offensive, they must be read in the context especially of chapter five. It would be a mistake to get bogged down in some linguistic details (e.g., work, law, pride, persecution) in order to justify a cookie cutter theology. Look at the larger picture, but do not suppose that the text does not apply to you!]

DIAGNOSIS: ADD-ONS ADD NOTHING

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Devout Christianity*

Those “foolish Galatians” (3:1) were being “bewitched” (3:1) by a “different gospel” (1:6). These and many other invectives were hurled by Paul against the very “friends” (6:1) to whom Paul had originally proclaimed “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). Paul’s opponents said otherwise, that righteousness before God is by means of godly works, the outward works of the law (Torah)—and by implication not by faith in Christ alone. Devout Christianity, these opponents said, means getting circumcised and getting others to be circumcised as well. Literally so for males, figuratively for females. By altering their flesh, they

said, one shows oneself to be a good Christian, a strong Christian, a devout Christian. Does this sound familiar? What do others impose upon you, that purportedly show you to be a true Christian-and by implication others not so? Is it tithing, or laying-on-of-hands, or public prayer, or simply being good? Indeed, what do you impose upon yourself, in order to avoid ridicule or the stigma or "persecution" for being a (Pauline) Christian? Regardless of the reason for such add-ons, they add nothing to one's righteousness before God. Devout Christianity is bewitching but altogether foolish.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Sowing to the Flesh

Paul's opponents believed that all male Christians needed to be circumcised in obedience to the law of Moses; that, in effect, one must become Jewish in order to be Christian. What they failed to realize is that being Jewish or being Gentile is, in and of itself, of no consequence to faith-in-Christ (5:6; 6:15). Worse yet, they failed to see that circumcision and other such diversions (the add-ons) will always, always, seek to take the place that belongs only to Christ. Because the add-ons are always something that we do, they tend to lift us up and put others down, even if ever so politely, like adding on ministries or political correctness or church members (they do make us look good)! By this means, the old creation is perpetuated and Christ is removed, either to the periphery or altogether. Those who believe in the add-ons, Paul says, are chained to the law of add-ons (3:23). Such faith (so-called) can only sow to the flesh (vv. 7-8): piling up law upon law, without end.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Reaping Corruption

The perpetuation of the law is a "curse" (3:10, 13) reaping death's dark "corruption" (v. 8a). No matter how much Christ is preached to add-oners, Christ only becomes a de facto add-on to the add-ons, and the law continues to dominate. No wonder that

Paul, who wants his Galatian friends to reap Christ, would have his opponents “castrate” themselves (5:12, figure of speech), for the law of add-ons only “cuts us off” from Christ. Paul’s opponents no doubt had bragging rights to many pounds of flesh—their harvest of flesh. But, finally, it is corrupt flesh: without faith-in-Christ, without Spirit, without love. And, like all corrupt flesh, will die the eternal death that the law and the law’s God demands.

PROGNOSIS: CHRIST ALONE IS EVERYTHING

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *A New Creation*

God indeed has put an end to the law, but that end is only in Christ (5:18; see Rom 10:4) whom God the Father “raised from the dead” (1:1). Christ, that is, the person Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and risen and promises to return at the end of days, is himself the law’s termination and fulfillment. In him, there is no law of add-ons, period. In him, the law’s demand for uncorrupt faith is completely fulfilled. In him, the old creation and its desire for self-aggrandizement (sin) is crucified, put to death. Contrary to the add-oners, “in Christ” there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision. The only thing that counts before God is “faith working through love” (5:6) which is a “new creation” (v. 15). Such faith is entirely new. The law had heretofore merely glimpsed it by way of anticipation, as proclaiming the promise of Christ to Abraham and to Abraham’s spiritual children (3:28-29). But now that Christ has arrived, the law proves its own limitation. How “foolish” of the Galatians (and us), then, to want to add-on the law yet again!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Sowing to the Spirit*

By faith-in-Christ alone, one “sows to the Spirit” and reaps the promise of eternal life (v. 8b). Paul’s opponents were boasting

in their circumcised converts to the law. Paul, however, preferred to boast (if he had to) in the cross of Christ which ended the law of circumcision and all other add-ons. "Sowing to the Spirit" means a circumcision of the heart (4:6; see Rom 2:29), a crucifixion of the flesh's desires (5:22). It means that the old Paul is dead to the law and alive to Christ (2:20). This is true freedom (5:1), not the freedom to choose among the infinite variety of add-ons but the freedom not to be bound by them! So long as we "sow to the flesh" (v. 8a), we indeed must choose among the add-ons; but this is a false freedom. True freedom is "sowing to the Spirit" (v. 8b) insofar as we are free from the curse of the law.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Law of Christ*

For those who depend on Christ alone rather than the law of add-ons, doing good is truly "good" (v. 10) when it is exclusively for the sake of others (i.e., "for the sake of Christ," the quintessential other). Paul prefers to boast in the cross of Christ because it signifies a "work" wholly for the benefit of others; thus, Paul is "crucified" to the world, "dead" to the law's demands (v. 14). To "bear one another's burdens" is work sown in the Spirit because it is directed away from oneself. Such work, wholly removed from the law (5:22-23), is what Paul calls the "law of Christ" (v. 2). It is also called "love" (5:6)-Paul's "rule" (v. 16) or principle or guide for those "in Christ" no longer chained to the law of add-ons. Love is not an add-on because love adds nothing to one's own standing before God. But love does illicit "crucifixion," "persecution," the "stigma" of Christ, the "marks" of Jesus (6:17), which Paul's opponents so desperately sought to avoid.