

# Paul's problem with the Churches in Galatia

To Paul, it seemed hopeless. How could he ever get them to understand. He would have to start all over again, repeating the work he'd done already:

"My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you.." (Galatians 4:19)

As usual, the problem was about the difference between the Old and New Covenants, and as usual the foundation Paul had laid in the Galatian Churches was being undermined by people who thought they knew more than he did.

But in fact they just didn't get it. They thought they understood what Paul taught, but what they thought they understood didn't match what they already believed, and what they had always believed. Which meant Paul had to be wrong. So they waited till he was out of sight, and then began to

subvert and pervert the truth he had explained to the Galatians.

Today, Paul's letter to the Galatians is something of a problem to Sabbath keepers. Because since they don't understand the New Covenant any better than the Galatians did, the letter sounds like Paul is saying the law is done away.

So they are forced to construct complex theories in an attempt to explain away a problem which in fact never existed. For example, one theory says that the Galatians had gone back to worshipping pagan gods. If that were the case, Paul wouldn't have even bothered writing to them, let alone calling them his brethren. And as we'll see, the people upsetting the Galatians were those advocating Judaism, so to suggest that they were teaching about pagan gods doesn't make very much sense.

Another theory is that the problem had something to do with the sacrifices, and that the Galatians had been told they should be still offering them. But sacrifices could only be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem, by the Levitical Priesthood, so that theory is even less believable than the pagan gods one.

Another theory is that the Galatians were thinking that by keeping the Ten Commandments they were justifying themselves. But Galatians isn't even talking about the Ten Commandments, and there has to be some fancy footwork to make that theory remotely acceptable.

Paul explains exactly what was happening in the Galatian Churches, and it was that some Christians from a

background of Judaism could not understand how the New Covenant was not the Old Covenant with Jesus Christ added. They could not believe that the religion they had grown up with had passed away, and that there was now a newer, freer religion in force:

"Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar-- for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to

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Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children-- but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all." (Galatians 4:21-26)

[This passage takes the wind out of the sails of those who believe the word "bondage" could never be applied to God's law, because Paul clearly says the Old Covenant keeps those under it in bondage. But once again, people don't understand what Paul is talking about.]

The situation in the Galatian Churches was this: Paul came to the area preaching the Gospel, and raised

up several churches. The people had no difficulty accepting and understanding anything, because it was all new to them - they didn't have to overcome any existing prejudices about it. He explained how Christ was born under the Old Covenant - under the law - but how He died to become the Mediator of a New Covenant. He told them exactly what this was, and what privileges and obligations the New Covenant conferred on them. He explained how the Old Covenant and its ministry had passed away, and were not in any way binding on Christians. Under the New Covenant, they had direct access to God, through their High Priest Jesus Christ, and there was no necessity for a priesthood or ritual form of worship.

But some time after Paul had been there and established the churches, they were visited by some of the "circumcision party" - that is, Christians from a background of strict Judaism. These people had never understood the New Covenant, and thought Christians still had to observe all the Old Covenant religion. They even taught that Gentiles had to be physically circumcised before they could be real Christians.

But don't be fooled into thinking that circumcision was the start and finish of the problem. Circumcision was just the outward show of Judaism, and the Galatian problem was that they had accepted the idea that Judaism, or at least a likeness of it, was necessary for salvation. They had been seduced into believing that salvation was not in Christ, but in Judaism *and* Christ. Now if Paul had not specifically used the word circumcision as a tag for what was going on, there is not the slightest doubt there would be groups today who would insist on circumcision as a necessary part of Christianity. (Actually there is one group we know of which does believe that.)

But since Paul made it clear circumcision was not necessary, no one who is halfway familiar with the

Scriptures claims that it is required before one becomes a Christian.

But as we said, there was much more to it than circumcision. And while no one insists that circumcision is necessary, many groups do insist that lots of other parts of the Old Covenant ministry are required. Because they don't understand that the New Covenant is new. They fool themselves into thinking the New Covenant is just the Old Covenant with a coat of paint.

The Galatians had been corrupted by people who couldn't let go of the Old Covenant Ministry. They had been fooled into believing that in order to be justified, they had to observe the "law for righteousness". That is, they had to observe the Levitical laws which made up the Old Covenant Ministry. Under that system, righteousness was achieved by the Levitical system of worship - not just sacrifices, but the whole Levitical system. [Which was heresy enough, but on top of that the circumcision party added all the man-made rules about not associating with Gentiles, which were never even a part of the Old Covenant ministry.]

So Paul attempted to explain it all again to them, because if they held on to the perversion they had accepted, Christ would be of no use to them. That is, they would have no salvation:

"Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing." (Galatians 5:2)

And he explained that if they were going to keep any of the laws of the Old Covenant ministry, they had to keep them all. But even if they *could* do that, they would have still lost Christ:

"And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You

have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:3-4)

They had lost the freedom which the New Covenant had given them, and taken on the bondage of the Old Covenant:

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1)

Paul reminded them that before they ever knew God they had served pagan gods, which are weak and useless. Now he accuses them of once again turning to weak and useless things - not the same things they were involved with before, but the weak and beggarly elements of the Old Covenant ministry. Weak and beggarly because they had no power

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to save anyone - they merely looked forward to what *would* come and *could* save - Christ:

"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 which you desire again to be in bondage? You

observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have laboured for you in vain." (Galatians 4:8-11)

The days, months, seasons and years Paul refers to here are not pagan things, they are things the circumcision party had taught them - but they are parts of the Old Covenant Ministry which are not a part of the New Covenant, and should not be observed by Christians. Because as Galatians 3:23-26 says, they were just the tutor that kept us safe before Christ came:

"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."

This doesn't mean that there are no laws to be observed under the New Covenant, but the New Covenant laws are not the same as the Old. Which is why Paul tells them they should not be observing things like New Moons (months), and the Days of Trumpets and Atonement. [Under the New Covenant, there are only three Festivals - Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.]

The Galatians had come to think it was necessary to duplicate Judaism in the Church of God. Not that they believed they had to have a Levitical priesthood, but they took all the Levitical laws and methods of worship, and called them Christian. They adopted things like holy convocations, and places "where God puts His Name", and tithing and so on. They turned Christ's freedom into the same old bondage, but worse, they

thought all these things were necessary for salvation. They had come to believe they were doing what God wanted.

The Galatians were beginning to believe the same things that all Judaism believed: that the Old Covenant Ministry - the law for righteousness - could make things right with God. The difference was they added Christ to the equation, but Paul said they couldn't have both the Old and New together and still be saved.

In the Book of Romans, Paul lays it out very clearly:

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they

issue - everyone Paul ever taught knew they had to observe them.

What the law for righteousness means is the religion, or the system, or the ministry, or the way God was approached, or however you want to term it - the way the gulf of sin between God and man was bridged. Which was why the law for righteousness was added to the Old Covenant in the first place - as Galatians 3:19 says:

"What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made;.."

## **“Whenever the truth comes anywhere near most religious people, they retreat behind their doctrines and start shooting proof Scriptures at it to make it go away”**

may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:1-4)

That sentence "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" means exactly what it says. It's another verse Sabbath keepers go to great lengths to explain away, because they suspect it might be referring to the Ten Commandments. But it isn't, and in fact Paul rarely talks of the Commandments because keeping them was simply never an

The law for righteousness had a form and method by which sin could be forgiven - that is, a method for establishing righteousness - but it wasn't effective. Because all the law for righteousness could ever do was look forward, and *act out* the real forgiveness and righteousness which would not be truly available till Christ died - "till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made." When Christ came, that law for righteousness ended, because it had fulfilled its purpose - it had been the tutor for God's people till they grew up.

But the circumcision party were having none of that, and still hung on to the old, ineffective, way of attempting to establish righteousness.

And they attacked the true way of righteousness whenever and wherever they could, which is why they descended on the Galatians and turned them into what Paul called "foolish Galatians".

And are there foolish Galatians around today? Yes, thousands of them. People who have been fooled by their leaders into adopting a perverted Gospel, just as the Galatians were fooled. Do they think they are doing what God wants? Of course they do - as Paul said in Romans, they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. And because they are not willing to submit to the righteousness of God, Christ is of no use to them at all. Using Christ's name all the time doesn't make the slightest difference - the Galatians also talked of Christ, but Paul said they were estranged from Him.

No one's demanding circumcision today of course, but they are demanding observance of shadows such as the Day of Atonement. And like the Galatians there are thousands of people who are extremely selective about which Old Covenant laws they observe. Not that those laws are effective in the least for salvation, but as Paul said, if you keep any, you've got to keep them all.

And just as in Paul's day, there are those now who spend their time attempting to undermine the truth about the New Covenant. Because whenever the truth comes anywhere near most religious people they retreat behind their doctrines and start shooting proof Scriptures at it to make it go away.

But the truth won't go away, and the New Covenant won't go away. What will eventually crumble though is people's resistance to it. The tragedy, however, is that it won't happen until God's people are scattered into captivity.#