

The Year of St. Paul



The Letter to the Galatians

FAITH and WORKS

This issue for the Galatians has always been strong: either the Judaizers are correct and Paul is a gross heretic, or Paul's gospel is from God and the Judaizing legalists are confusing the Galatian converts. Yet, Christians since the Protestant Reformation have used Paul's argument in this letter to understand the relationship of *faith* and *works*. One would have to bend Paul's logic and terminology to argue that living the essential gospel does not entail any form of religious action. Certainly he sees baptism, the laying on of hands, conduct-changing repentance, and other vital acts as key to living a Christian life.

Christians should be cautious of both legalistic additions to the message of Christ and an attitude of lawlessness. The correct understanding of the nature of saving faith and Christian liberty is at stake in (Gal. 3). And Paul asks who has tricked the Galatians into questioning the clear gospel in which he instructed them. He also asks whether or not the supernatural life, Spirit and miracles he offered them are more convincing than the new philosophy of the Judaizers.

The phrase "the works of the law" does not mean obedience to the law. A negative term in this context, Paul instead rebukes a reliance on self-justification through good works to gain access to salvation and absolve sins. The true Christian admits his/her weaknesses and wholeheartedly trusts in Jesus, despite faults rather than try to manipulate a legal system in order to gain eternal life by his/her own actions. More important than the acts themselves are one's motives and intent.

Paul always sought to bring about obedience to God through faith among the Gentiles.

The relationship of faith and works bears significance to all Christians,

but in a special way to Mass-attending Catholics. The difference between clocking in and out of Mass and offering one's total self in

faith and humility with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and receiving His body and blood is the difference between an act of legalism and an act of faith.

Leave the church with the community and take the time to greet and listen to the folks who wish to say more than "hello". Remember, listening helps those in need. Doing this is what building community is all about.

The Judaizers insisted on the necessity of following certain precepts of the Mosaic Law along with faith in Christ. They continued to undermine St. Paul's authority, asserting that he had not been trained by Jesus himself, that his gospel did not agree with that of the original and true apostles in Jerusalem, that he had kept from his converts in Galatia the necessity of accepting circumcision and other key obligations of the Jewish law, in order more easily to win them to Christ, and that his gospel was thus not the full and authentic one. Christians in Galatia certainly faced a major problem. Should they embrace the Jewish law? Should they follow blindly the teachings of Paul?

Paul emphasized the importance of faith and warned about the danger of emphasizing law, above faith. Paul taught that if you begin to keep the Law, you are obligated to keep all of it. Instead, Christians ought to

GOD FIRST

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trust Jesus who makes them righteous. Of course, this was a new slant on an old teaching but Paul, through his faith in the Holy Spirit was certain that he was interpreting the gospel of Christ for the times.

THE TRUTH (CHRIST) WILL SET YOU FREE

St. Paul makes one more attempt to convince the Christians in Galatia that following the Mosaic Law will not bring them any benefits they do not already enjoy in Christ. His thesis (Gal.4: 21-31) is based on a comparison of two of Abraham's wives and their sons. Abraham's wife, Sarah, bore Isaac; earlier, her slave, Hagar, bore Abraham a son named Ishmael. Through these events, Paul believes, God gave a symbolic foreshadowing of the situation that Jesus has brought about through his death, resurrection, and gift of his Spirit. The two mothers and their sons symbolize two communities, one characterized by freedom, the other by slavery. Isaac, the son of the free woman, Sarah, symbolizes those who believe in Jesus and experience freedom from the posers of evil at work in the world and within themselves. Ishmael, born of a slave woman, symbolizes those who are bound to the Mosaic Law, which does not bring freedom from the deepest evils that afflict humankind.

(Free in Christ—by Kevin Parrotta)

Paul became stricter again in this epistle. He was a Jew. He had studied the Jewish law. He understood it very well. He knew about the law's strict demands on people who obeyed it. The law did not make people better Christians. Instead, it made them slaves. Not all the Christians believed the false teachers. But Paul wanted to make sure that all the Christians understood the truth.

SITUATION: Paul now applies this “freedom in Christ” to everyday life and behavior. He

Wheel taken from “Reading the Acts, Epistles and Revelation by Kingsley E. Dalpadado, OMI, St. Paul Editions

tells them to: “serve one another with love” and sums up the law in one single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He calls on Christians to be led by the Spirit, not by the law.

OBSERVATION: God transformed you into a new person. Live like it!

APPLICATION: Both legalism and sin end in frustration. But your freedom from sin and your desire to please God frees you to do your best at all times. You can reach out and help others. Join a parish ministry.

REFLECTION: Is my faith strong enough to enable me to do good works beyond my family, friends, and personal interests? Do I really seek the Truth and allow it to do the works provided by the Spirit every day?