

## TRUE CONFESSIONS

As we were saying, Biblical faith is no mere assent to propositions.

Those confessing Scripture as their highest standard should engage in our discussion on that basis. We admit to being surprised at some responses to the recent series published in *Messiah's Update*. While we welcome correction, and need it all too often, we feel justified in expecting theological differences to be settled by appeal to the Bible. After all, that's what the Reformed standards demand. The Westminster Confession, for example, insists that "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions... (and) doctrines of men... are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture" (1:10). Yet some harsh critics have simply been bypassing the array of Biblical texts adduced in support of our contentions. It is discouraging to see people ignore Jesus' words (and Moses' words, and James' words, and Paul's words, and Ezekiel's words, and...). Yet I know that *in other contexts* these same men properly press these very words upon their hearers with earnestness. Why stop? If the Bible stresses the *necessity of obedience*, we should never be shy to do the same. (And if ever a generation needed to hear this message, surely it is ours.) Some have ascended pulpits, and others have distributed e-mails, attacking our views as unconfessional. On bended knee, we plead with these brothers: slow down a moment. Let us reason together.



Every Christian inescapably identifies himself in terms of a particular segment of Christendom. Broadly speaking, the biggest division in Christianity is between the Eastern and Western churches. The next great separation, at the Reformation, was all of Protestantism from Rome. From then, in the words of A.A. Hodge, "the entire Protestant world has been divided into two great families of Churches—the Lutheran and the Reformed" (*The Confession of Faith*, p.8). It might be fair to characterize our present series as an explanation of why we are *not* Lutheran, accompanied by a deeper challenge to the Reformed to root out certain distortions of Scripture which continue among us. Are we Reformed beyond growth? Beyond sanctification? We have a mixed legacy from that great man, Martin, and it behooves us both to retain the good *and* to expunge the bad. Luther did not give us the last word concerning Reformation; Calvinism, as a distinct branch of Christendom, testifies to that fact.

Now, some will say, "Yes, but what you are arguing for, Schlissel, contradicts that portion of truth which we Reformed *share* with Lutheranism." To this we reply: Not really. The Lutheran Law/Gospel dichotomy lies near the root of much that we've been discussing, and the Reformed have a noble history of distinguishing themselves from those who hold to that very error.

## TRUST AND OBEY: THERE'S NO OTHER WAY

Further, it is evident throughout our Confessions that we recognize the necessity of covenantal *obedience* (not works-righteousness) for salvation. Consider, for example, a statement made in the Westminster Confession of Faith at 1:7. Dealing with the perspicuity of Scripture, the Confession teaches that "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and *observed* for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." Note carefully: salvation, according to this, requires knowledge, belief *and observance*; all, it says, are *necessary*.

Again, the Confession at 14:2 expounds saving faith as that which "yield(s) obedience to the commands" of God. While faith is extolled as the alone *instrument* of justification, it is freely and plainly admitted in the Westminster Confession (11:2) that such faith never appears on planet earth by itself. If you want life, you don't choose between heart and lungs: you need both. Faith is never "alone in the person justified, but

is *ever* accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.” Well, there ya go.

We ask you to remember John Owen’s explicit statement on this very point. He said, “We absolutely deny that we can be justified by that faith which *can be alone*; that is, without a principle of spiritual life and *universal obedience*, operative in all the works of it, as duty doth require” (*Justification By Faith*, p. 73; italics his). Owen categorically rejects the idea that justifying faith can be separated from “holy obedience”: “We allow no faith to be of the same kind or nature with that whereby we are justified, but what virtually and radically contains in it universal obedience.” Note what Owen is asserting: Obedience is not merely a test or evidence of saving faith; it is inseparably bound up in its character. There is no disobedient yet saving faith. It is not faith + obedience, but the obedience of faith.

Further still, Westminster Shorter Catechism (85) asks, “What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?” The answer? “To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.” Repentance unto life is defined in Answer 87 as a saving grace whereby a sinner turns from sin to God “with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.” This, the Westminster Standards affirm, is *required* for salvation, for “it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.” There is no such thing as an alone faith. Period.

If any doubt remains, Heidelberg 87 tries to remove it: “Can they be saved who do not turn to God from their unthankful, impenitent life?” Answer? “By no means, for, as Scripture says, no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God.” Methinks this is plain enough.

Yet the value of the Reformation’s rediscovery of Scripture’s authority is mitigated by the insistence that the Bible be read through the lens of downstream systematics. We must learn to read Scripture according to its own categories rather than sifting it through ours. A curse be on abstractions!

As some have interacted with us, this point has shown itself to be a vital one. We’re using different filters. Why are our words not clear to a few? I suspect it is because we are speaking Hebrew and they are listening in Greek.

Or German. I’m afraid that what God has actually written cannot be clearly read in Luther’s shadow. The cure? Our post-Reformational obsession with the question “What must I do to be saved?” must be replaced by “What does God require?” (as the Shorter Catechism does at #85). The latter includes the former. By reading the Bible with the larger question we have better opportunity to hear its comprehensive answer. Thus, profitable reading begins with a heart disposed to hear the *whole* message. Too, too often the Bible is read as a mere set of texts, a collection of 31,173 propositions (verses), dropped from heaven as a “personal promise toolkit,” or as a convenient sourcebook for human systematics.

It is vital to remember that God has given us His Word to *reveal* Himself, not to hide Himself. Some systematians seem to expect—without warrant—that simple readers of the Bible would or could read it through Hellenic, slice-and-dice presuppositions. The Book of Hosea, by itself, shatters the demands of these systematians. God is Israel’s passionate and jealous Husband. Jealousy seeks the flesh and blood return of the object of its desire; it is not satisfied with a flowery description of abstractions and conceptions. Just so, God demands that all sinners present *themselves*—not merely their ideas—to Him through Jesus Christ. That is not done by mental assent to neat propositions, but by a life lived in and with

God. “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” This is unchangeable truth.

## FIRM FOUNDATIONS

In discussing his conversion from agnostic rationalism to Christ, Phillip E. Johnson said in a recent interview that he rejected rationalism when he realized it couldn’t rationally account for itself. “There is an instinct, or revelation, or whatever you want to call it, that underlies your thinking, and the only interesting thing in philosophy is how you get *that*.” That is to say, since presuppositions govern all subsequent interpretation, a man had better make sure his presuppositions are firm and in order.

What we are trying to accomplish in these essays is difficult: a reassessing of the mindset—the presuppositions—we bring to the Scripture-reading enterprise. But though it be difficult, it is do-able. We must continually seek from God (through His Word and prayer) an exchange of our concerns for His. We need to reorient ourselves so that we learn to see Him and ourselves from *His* revealed perspective. And we need to repent of our insistence that the Lord conform to ours.

A problem with some modern Reformers is that they have no abiding interest in reforming. They have come to equate “continuing reformation” with liberalism, a petrifying error. Such brothers are more tightly wrapped up in their traditions than any arch-Romanist opponent of their ancestors, yet they deny it. Chanting *sola scriptura* rings hollow when what is really meant is “*sola-those-parts-of-scriptura* that serve the system I bring to the Bible.” Johnson saw how premises (and, we must add, methods) determine conclusions. The difficulties we’ve been addressing involve that same dynamic. What is the “*that*” which we are bringing to our Bible reading? More to our point, are we allowing Scripture to refine our “*that*”? Or do we simply go again and again to the Word with the demand that it confirm our grids? The Reformers at their best urged continual, wholesale exchange of man’s premises for God’s. But no single generation can complete that work.

It would be good if our generation at least resolved to learn from Scripture to ask the right questions. That would be progress. For we have spent 400 years breaking the Scripture down into propositions. It’s past time for us to see all the Word’s words as comprising *one* perfect story. It is unfair to criticize Dispensationalism while refusing to recognize the distorted view some of us share with them. The *unity* of the Bible is an indispensable starting point. The New Testament church read the Old Testament Scriptures as their Bible. That is significant. It did not view any of its doctrines as departures from that which had previously come from the mouth of God.

Just because we’re good at spotting specks in the eyes of others doesn’t mean we’ve purged all the logs from our own. We tend to think that doctrinally, at least, we have arrived. Yet too much of our thinking about doctrine is predicated on the very wrong notion that the New Testament repudiates the Old. Deep down (sometimes not so far from the surface) we suspect that the Old Testament offered a different way of salvation from the New. Wrong. Big-time wrong.

It is also wrong to expect the Word of God to be yielding and still under the systematician’s scalpel. It is here to carve and re-piece *us*. The Word of God is a living and active sword, not a cadaver awaiting dissection.

Bavinck has beautifully said that the “declaration of faith on the part of the church is not a scientific doctrine, nor a form of unity that is being repeated, but is rather a confession of a deeply felt reality, and of a conviction of reality that has come up out of experience in life. The prophets and apostles, and the saints generally who appear before us in the Old and New Testament and later in the church of Christ, did not sit and philosophize about God in abstracted concepts, but rather confessed what God meant to them

and what they owed to Him in all the circumstances of life. God was for them not at all a cold concept, which they then proceeded rationally to analyze, but He was a living, personal force, a reality infinitely more real than the world around them. Indeed, He was to them *the* one, eternal, worshipful Being. They reckoned with Him in their lives, they lived in His tent, walked as if always before His face, served Him in His courts, and worshipped Him in His sanctuary” (*Our Reasonable Faith*, p. 25).

We have descended from this grand height to the point where the right to be called Reformed is equated by some with a commitment “to philosophize about God in abstracted concepts.” Witness this recent post to a Reformed list: “Thanks to Dr. [Michael] Horton, et al, at *Modern Reformation* magazine, I learned of an attribute of God that I had never heard of before: His impassibility (*Modern Reformation*, Sept./Oct., 1999). That is—as I understand it and I am grateful for any corrections—that God is not affected by anything that transpires outside of God. In particular, God is not negatively affected by such things. God does not suffer; God experiences nothing like grief, no negative affects.”

When I tracked down the article cited I read this: “If God is affected by events outside of himself, he is dependent on these factors for his pleasure or pain. He is, therefore, a victim of evil, along with the rest of us...Because he is in himself beyond suffering, he cannot be affected or hindered by anything that happens in the world.” You see, this is what happens when the Bible is not permitted to form your presuppositions. What the god described above has to do with the God of the Bible, I do not know. If they had contented themselves with denying that God can be hindered, well and good. No one can stay His hand or say to Him, “What dost Thou?” But everywhere in Scripture our God presents Himself as *One affected*, i.e., moved, by His creation. He was *pleased* with His original work (Gen 1-2), *grieved* that He had made man (Gen 6), *angry* at Pharaoh, etc., etc. Isaiah says, “In all their affliction *he too was afflicted*: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and *vexed* his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them.” Does this sound like a God who is not affected by anything that transpires outside of Himself?

The notion of God’s “impassibility” is pagan and not Biblical. It arose from the Greek philosophical equation of suffering/ emotion with imperfection. It did not *begin* with Scripture, but with autonomously predetermined categories. The Christian thinkers who advanced this Hellenic nonsense thought they were doing God a favor. He has no need of such help. The God of the Bible is so “emotional” at points that it is almost embarrassing to us who revere Him. Again: read Hosea! Yes, at times it seems as if He has lowered the threshold of His own dignity, so great is His passion, His love, His jealousy, His anger, His desire. But who are we to dispute with the King? Let us blush if we must, but let us be sure to say “Amen.” Let God be true, and every man a liar. God’s revelation is anthropomorphic, to be sure, but that doesn’t make it untrue, nor does it make it a mere code, the true interpretation of which lies in another realm. This is gnosticism, pure and simple. Is it not time for us to allow God to speak for Himself? Does He really need Aristotle to defend Him?

The same arrogant method as employed in stripping God of His self-disclosed character is too often used in doctrinal formulation. I do not mean that systematics is evil, only that it can be too eager, too ambitious. To be fruitful, systematics must be ever humble before the Word. This is the irresistible attraction of Calvinism at its best—myriads are won to our creed because it starts by confessing God as *God*. Nevertheless, we Reformed do tend to expect doctrinal truth to be neater and tidier than it is actually found in Scripture. Even Ezekiel, when asked if the dry bones might live, could only answer: “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” The best theologians cultivate Ezekiel’s spirit. We need not dread rough edges! Not every tile has a straight edge, yet even scalloped tiles can be used to make a symmetrical and beautiful wall. Our demand that every aspect of every truth fit in a neat compartment will find a Bible that resists the claim. That is a problem for the Greek mind, but not the Jewish, covenantal mind. The covenantal mind is practiced at repeating Paul: “I do not know—God knows.”

## WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? (HINT: IT ISN'T JUSTIFICATION)

But what we can know requires context. The Bible cannot be properly interpreted if context is ignored. And, as Gordon Fee notes, “the first step toward valid interpretation of Scripture is...historical investigation,” that is, ascertaining the “original setting(s) of the biblical texts.” This means that when we read Paul’s letters we must ask why he wrote what he wrote. God inspired him to write *into certain situations*. Paul’s letters generally contain *arguments* which require contexts for true understanding. They are not strings of aphorisms.

When we 1) fail to consider the polemical contexts of Paul’s letters, 2) add our demand for system, and 3) read Paul’s letters backwards through Luther’s sad experience, one result is an emphasis on “justification” that simply does not exist in the Bible. One writer, with whom we have no shortage of disagreements, has nevertheless very properly written, “Justification is a Pauline concept in Romans and Galatians, but it plays a smaller role” in his epistles than in many systems. “Luther’s rediscovery of justification was important for himself and for sixteenth-century reforms, but it is not as central for...an astute interpretation of Paul’s theology.”

This agrees with the important observations of W.D. Davies (in *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*) that “in those contexts where the idea of Justification by Faith is central, we find that this is so only because of certain polemical necessities. It is only in those Epistles, namely, Galatians and Romans, where Paul is consciously presenting the claims of his Gospel over against those of Judaism that Justification by Faith is emphasized” (p. 220).

As noted by another, “For Paul, justification tells us how God accepts Gentiles.” Exactly. “Justification for him [Paul] had less to do with a guilty conscience than with the new age inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus.”

This is vital, for it represents an effort to see the Romans and Galatians treatment of justification in its actual, historical context. Justification by faith is *true*, but it was not *new*. It was not, for Paul, a doctrine to beat people with, or to display in a museum. Why did Paul emphasize it when and where he did? There was nothing abstract about it for him. He treats of it in epistles concerned with setting forth the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in light of Christ’s work. For 2,000 years “the story” of God’s activity was peculiarly Jewish. Christ’s accomplishments in history, however, meant that “those who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of the Messiah.” God now *fully* accepts Gentiles in the same way He accepts Jews—by grace through faith.

Paul is explicit about what is “new” in the New Administration: “that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). Galatians was not written to tell us about a new way of salvation: salvation has *always been by grace through faith*. It was written to guard the new way of *inclusion*, of being reckoned among the people of God. Full membership is indicated by Christian baptism, which is universal, not by Jewish circumcision, which is provincial.

It is not grace that is new in the New Testament. It is not faith that is new in the New Testament. It is not justification that is new in the New Testament. What is new is that Gentiles are fully incorporated into Israel by faith alone, i.e., apart from circumcision, apart from an earthly priesthood or Temple, and certainly apart from any rabbinic conception of merit. When we say that Gentiles are incorporated into Israel by faith “alone,” the word “alone” is not used to set faith against covenantal obedience. It is rather used to distinguish the true means of covenantal inclusion from three erroneous ones:

- 1) That one must become a Jew to have access to God in Christ.

- 2) That one must approach God through the Levitical priesthood, offerings, and Temple.
- 3) That one is made right with God by one's own merit.

Davies: "How little... Paul intended that Faith should be opposed to obedience (is) clear when we recall his work as ethical *didaskalos* (instructor, master, teacher). A doctrine such as Justification by Faith... cannot have been the dominant factor in the thought of one who could never have separated religion and life."

This is why we affirm justification by faith but insist (as good Calvinists do) that true faith *never* appears alone. Tearing faith away from its Scriptural setting, and resetting it in opposition to covenant obedience, is more than an abstraction: it is rebellion against God.

The problem we are discussing arises from this three-step misstep: 1) the reduction of Scripture to a collection of propositions, 2) the extraction of texts from contexts, 3) reorganizing, resetting texts into systems which replace Scripture, rather than serve it. Let us see how this triple boo-boo operates in two cases.

### **IT'S 3:28. DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR VERSES ARE?**

Galatians 3:28—*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*—and Romans 3:28—*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law*—are verses which have oft been extorted from their contexts, stripped of their author's intent, dressed in the style of their captors, and reduced to servitude in contrived systems. If anyone should speak of restoring the verses to their original settings, the taskmasters scurry to their battlements and snipe. That's understandable, I suppose. After all, it's hard to find good servants; their lords are loathe to let them go.

But God's Word doesn't take well to chains (2 Tim 2:9). We are thus confident that, sooner or later, these 3:28's will be manumitted. In fact, while Romans 3:28 has a history of being hauled into service by the seigniors of systematics, the struggle for Galatians 3:28 is pretty modern, and has not quite been concluded. Perhaps the freshness of the tussle for the Galatians verse will help us look at the Romans passage with *refreshed* appreciation. In that hope we'll discuss the Galatians passage now, and Romans next month.

Imagine for a moment that you are a feminist who wishes to claim Biblical support for your views. I know, I know: that's a tall order. Honest Christians and frank feminists have both recognized the fundamental incompatibility of the two worldviews. Ted Letis once surveyed in an essay several prominent intellectual feminists who had tried to persuade their sisters and brother-ettes that feminism and the Bible don't mix. Elizabeth Cady Stanton produced *The Women's Bible* because, she asserted, Judaism and orthodox Christianity had to be eliminated if feminist ideals were to triumph. It was not her intention to make the Bible less sexist. In her view that was impossible. Rather, she set out to undermine canonical Biblical authority altogether, focusing on what she regarded as absurdities and contradictions. More recently, Naomi Goldenberg lamented that "Many of today's feminists are not yet willing to reject Jewish and Christian tradition at such a basic level. Instead they turn to exegesis to preserve Jewish and Christian religious systems." She warned that this is a self-deceptive enterprise. "Jesus Christ cannot symbolize the liberation of women. A culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as the equals of its men." And philosophical feminist Mary Daley, using more violent language, called for the castration of God. "I have already suggested that if God is male then male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the collective imagination." She would do away with Holy Scripture and the God revealed therein, period.

Still, imagine yourself an “evangelical feminist.” Just how would you seek “to preserve (the) Christian system” while promoting your revolutionary agenda? You would craft approaches and select verses to harmonize with the non-negotiable premise you brought to the Bible. You would equate power over others with evil. You would argue that uxorial submission was not expected at creation but was a temporary result of the fall. You would equate the traditional wifely role with slavery. You would argue that Jesus intended to usher in *the* Jubilee in which all “power-over” situations are to be eliminated through power redistribution, voluntary or coerced (ahem). You would detect a general *drift* in the Bible toward ever-increasing emancipation of all people in subservient roles (including, ultimately, children). Above all, you would hang your hat (and your scarf and your coat and yourself) on Galatians 3:28. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Yes, you would. Try to find an “evangelical feminist” who hasn’t made this her life verse. Richard and Joyce Boldrey fantasize that “Galatians 3:28 does not say ‘God loves each of you, but stay in your places’; it says that there are no longer places, no longer categories, no longer differences in rights and privileges, codes and values.” Rebecca Merrill Groothuis maintains that “Biblical equality is... a consequence of salvation through Christ, as indicated in Galatians 3:26-28.” Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty have been cited as saying that in view of Galatians 3:28, “all social distinctions between men and women should [be] erased in the church.” Websites abound which feature this as an anchor verse (e.g., *Christians for Biblical Equality*, *Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus*, *WomanPriest.org*, etc.).

## PER-VERSE

While no Christian feminist relies solely on Galatians 3:28, the value of the verse in their system is enormous for it offers a convenient summary of what they wish Paul to say and want the Bible to teach. How many think that the mere citation of the verse is the end of argument! But the feminist use of this verse is *perverse*. The proper understanding becomes plain when the light of context is admitted.

The problem at Galatia was simple: Someone was insisting that full covenantal inclusion for Gentiles could only be had by submitting to circumcision. In short, they were saying that you could only be a Christian if you were Jewish. They were trying to *compel* Gentiles to become Jewish. *This is the crisis Paul is addressing in the letter*. The crisis forms the context of the letter and provides the key to proper interpretation. That this was Paul’s concern is clear from several statements:

In 2:3 he addresses the problem by inference, noting that “not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled [by the Jerusalem church] to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.” Toward the end of his letter he expresses his contempt for those who wanted to confine the Gospel to the Jews. “Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.”

Here it becomes clearer that the issue of keeping the Law is a subset of becoming Jewish. Paul refutes his opponents by various polemical and rhetorical means, including adopting their position “for argument’s sake” and showing its absurdity. The arguments about justification arise because of the crisis: Gentiles are being told they must become Jewish to become Christian. Paul makes it pretty clear that this ain’t so: “Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 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.”

The distinction which must always be kept in mind is between the Law as God gave it and the Law as it had come to be used by the Jews. Robert Lewis Dabney properly scorned the idea that the Law *as given by God* was futile. When Peter says in Acts 15 that “the ritual was a yoke which neither the Jews nor their fathers were able to bear,” Dabney responds that “well disposed Jews” certainly *did* bear the Law as given by God, and God Himself says they did (Luke 1:6, e.g.). Dabney then asks, “Did God signalize His favour to His chosen people by imposing an intolerable ritual?” That is an important question. Law-Gospel dichotomists ask us to believe that God showed His love for Israel by placing them under an unbearable burden which He then commanded them to love! The thought comes close to blasphemy; it is certainly an insult to our God. “No: Peter has in view the ritual used in that self-righteous sense, in which the Judaizing Christians regarded it while desiring to impose it on Gentiles” (*Systematic Theology*, p.458).

Dabney’s dictum is critically important: “We must always remember that the Apostles are using, to a certain extent, an *argumentum ad hominem*: they are speaking of the Mosaic institutions under the [mistaken] Jewish view of them. They are treating of that side or aspect, which alone the perverse Jew retained of them. Here is the key.” Bingo.

In other words, Paul is arguing against Jewish abstractionism, the separation of Law and grace: the “perverse Jew”—as opposed to the faithful Jewish Christian—sought from the Law only that which could be credited to his account in the bank of righteousness. G. Dix calls Paul’s argument in Galatians “a brilliant and vigorous attack on the whole Pharisaic conception of *Zekuth* (lit.=‘satisfaction’), i.e., the notion that it is only by ‘satisfying’ the demands of the Law upon him that a man can attain to...righteousness” (*Jew and Greek*, p. 45). It is only against a *wrong* view of the Law the Apostles argued.

This wrong view of the Law has, not surprisingly, prevailed in Jewish history after Christ. The Encyclopaedia Judaica defines *Righteousness* as “the fulfillment of all legal and moral obligations.” It is regarded as “a learned trait resulting from sustained performance of obligations.” Today, serious discussion is had among orthodox Jews concerning the following: May one tie his shoelaces on the Sabbath, or squeeze a sponge, or open the refrigerator, or turn on his hearing aid, or play with nuts on the ground? (It depends, no, it depends, it depends, no.) This attitude was confronted by Jesus over and again. The famous hand-washing encounter of Mark 7:1-23 lives on in spirit among my people. They debate whether hands are efficaciously washed—i.e., according to ceremonial requirements—if they were not perfectly dry when the washing commenced. These and *thousands* of other regulations are rooted in the notion of acquired merit.

Though Sabbath and ceremonial issues continued to be refined by the Jews hundreds of years after Christ, the New Testament makes it plain that codification had already enjoyed a long history when Jesus ministered on earth. The Sermon on the Mount is tough to explain without that very background (“You have heard that it was said...”). One tradition with obvious roots reaching back to Second Temple Judaism is that portion of the Daily Prayer which thanks God for certain privileges. In the Jewish liturgy, a series of *b'ruchas* (blessings) is recited every morning. Three blessings are of special interest to those hoping to understand Galatians 3:28. Here’s what the *siddur* says:

1. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a gentile.
2. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a slave.
3. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman.

Hmmm. The very same order used by Paul in 3:28. Isn’t *that* interesting! Yes, but not half as interesting as the *reasoning* behind these *b'ruchas*. Keep in mind that the threat in Galatia was posed by those who held the view that “the Law and its fulfillment offer the *sole* divinely-given means and opportunity for righteousness before God” (Dix).



This is the key point in understanding Paul's argument. *If* righteousness is, as Jewish thought held (and still holds) a "result... (of) sustained performance of obligations," then the one with the most obligations can attain the most righteousness. On this supposition it is easy to see why the Jew gives thanks for being a Jew. It is to the Jews that the Law was given. At the time of Paul, with the Temple standing and the priesthood operative, this was an especially important point. If Gentiles were not obligated to keep the whole Mosaic code, erroneous Jewish reasoning could argue that there would consequently always be a two-tiered membership in the church. Thus Paul emphasizes that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Thus far, Galatians 3:28's meaning is obvious.

Obvious, too, is the fact that a slave has less opportunities than a free man to fulfill the Law's commands, and thus, according to some Jews, attain unto righteousness.

The third condition (that of being a man, not a woman) suggests no obvious advantage—until the Jewish thinking behind it is introduced. Then it makes perfect sense. Remember that Paul is telling the Galatians that the Jews are wrong: you don't become more Christian by coming under more commands. But according to Jewish practice, men have more obligations than women. Women are not required to fulfill all the commandments! For example, it is only the *males* who were obligated to attend the three great festivals in Jerusalem (Dt 16:16; women and children were permitted but not *required* to attend: cf. 1 Sam 1; Lk 2).

Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs writes, "The wording of the benediction recited each day in which a man praises God for not having made him a woman (Men. 43b) should not be over interpreted since from the context it is clear that *the thanks are for greater opportunities a man has for carrying out the precepts*, women being exempt from those positive precepts which for their performance depend on a given time of the day or year (Kid. 1:7)" (Jewish Values, p. 151. Keter Books, Jerusalem). In *The Jewish Book of Why*, A. J. Kolatch notes, "Over the centuries, this prayer has been viewed by most Jews as an expression of thanks on the part of man for the good fortune of having been born male *and thus being privileged to perform so many more commandments (mitzvot) than a woman...* Women are considered on a par with slaves and minors because, unlike men, *none of the three classes is obligated to fulfill all of the 613 commandments (mitzvot)* [the Jews count 613 commands in the Five Books of Moses—sms]... Women are obligated to observe all the negative commandments in the torah (*mitzvot lo taaseh*). These are commandments that begin with the words, 'Thou shalt not...' However, women are exempt from some of the positive commandments in the torah (*mitzvot asay*). The Talmud ruled that women are not obligated to observe 'positive commandments dependent upon time,' commandments that must be observed at a specific time of year" (I've added emphases in this paragraph).

Compare this last observation with Galatians 4:10, 11—"You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you"—and the naturalness of the correct interpretation of Galatians 3:28 will grip your heart. Is God saying in 3:28 that "all social distinctions between men and women should [be] erased in the church"? Not at all. Is He saying that "there are no longer places, no longer categories, no longer differences in rights and privileges, codes and values"? The thought is repugnant and contradicted by a thousand Scriptures. He is saying that the Jewish way of reckoning rightness before God—viz., that "the Law and its fulfillment offer the *sole* divinely-given means and opportunity for righteousness before God"—is patently false. You do not need to become Jewish to be a Christian. The commands which separated Jews from Gentiles are obviated in Christ. We have fellowship at the same Table, access into the same Presence in heaven, *by faith*, not by race. And the false notions of climbing a ladder of merit are washed away by the very sight of His blood.

Now let's take what we learned in Galatians and go to Romans 3:28—in the next issue of *Messiah's Update*. (Our comments on Romans 3:28 have already been distributed to our supporters via snail mail.)

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Yours and His,

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