

PAUL VS. THE LAW OR THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS?

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Some authors have suggested that Paul in his writings for the Gentile mission was opposing the tradition of the elders rather than the Mosaic Law itself. But the following factors look away from such a reading of Paul's concern.

For one thing, (1) Paul objected to circumcising Gentiles. Circumcision was a practice related to the Law itself, not just to the tradition of the elders. The apostle was evidently countering the meaning of that rite itself, which had associations with Jewish nationalism. Beyond that, circumcision identified people with law since it identified them with the Mosaic Law. Consequently, circumcision had a soteriological implication: in theory it committed people to maintaining relationship with God by committing them to the principle of personal perfection (Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 27:26), the point Paul makes in Galatians 3:8-14. Succeeding at personally doing everything required by law is exactly what none of us do or have been able to do in a practical sense; we have all sinned, and we continue to fall short of perfection—"the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Starting in spirit (that is, I think, with interpersonal processes with Christ) and trying to finish in flesh (law, perfection, nationality) attempts to mix contrary types of things in order to accomplish the righteousness that is prerequisite for being viewed as righteous, which in turn is prerequisite for fellowship with God. In effect, the Law was a yoke that neither first-century Jews nor their fathers were able to bear (Acts 15:10). It was the Law itself that was the yoke, not just the tradition of the elders, which built a hedge around it by making it stricter.

Furthermore, (2) Paul speaks of "works of law," that is, works in a legal sense, or actions in a legal setting. He does not speak of the traditions of the elders. "Works" does not mean simply doing something, doing something outward, doing something formal, doing some token effort, or doing the supererogation involved in the tradition of the elders. It means doing something that produces righteousness, that is, perfection, which could theoretically commend us to God. In human and divine-human affairs, there has to be more involved in establishing and maintaining an interpersonal relationship than just the doing by the person on one side of that relationship, because perfection is always the standard for all relationships human or divine, and perfection is not practically attainable by humans in the first place and not theoretically attainable by us in the second place, that is, once the perfection is broken. From the other side of the relationship must additionally come forgiveness upon repentance for the failures and disobediences of imperfect people. The repentance-forgiveness process addresses the ever-present difference between performance and perfection in relationships that involve human persons.

(3) The role and work of Christ is to be understood in contrast to the divine efforts that went before, not in contrast to the human efforts represented in the tradition of the elders. Certainly, Christ's work is not to be understood within the context of law—within the parameters of legal process, but within the context of interpersonal relationship. That point is clear from the fact that Paul interprets Christ's work in connection with the promise to Abraham, which came 430 years before law became a factor in divine economy—and then only as a temporary add-on (Galatians 3:15-20) for practical rather than theoretical purposes. Legal and non-legal are

different systems and different kinds of systems. The covenant through Christ is a return—or reaffirmation—of the original kind of process involved in “promise” to Abraham; it is “faith,” another Pauline code word for what we are calling “interpersonal.” The grace-faith system contrasts with the law-works system. There is then a more profound difference between the Judaizers and Paul than the difference between the Law and the tradition of the elders. The last two are of the same kind, with the tradition of the elders carrying legal principles to a greater extreme—in fact, “going to seed” on legal principles. There is a difference in kind, however, between Messianism and what went before.

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