

No Longer I

Galatians 2:17-21

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
www.branchofhope.org
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But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, *is* Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. ¹⁹ For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain(Galatians 2:17-21).

But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, *is* Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not (Galatians 2:17)!

Is it Sinful to Trust in Christ Alone?

Is Christ a minister of sin? The answer is “Certainly not.” What would lead Paul to ask this question? In order to answer this we must remember Peter, who had been given the message of freedom from dietary restrictions (emblematic of a works oriented salvation), was being bullied into a sect in the church who viewed the efforts of men as some kind of contribution to their salvation. What Paul is basically asking Peter here is, “Did Jesus, who taught justification by faith in Him alone, teach us something sinful?” Is it sinful to trust in Christ alone for the salvation of my soul? The answer is obviously “no.”

Rome and (some) Evangelicals

Yet I have been told that I am in danger of burning in hell because I trust in Christ alone, preach Christ alone and (I would argue with Paul) refute doctrines which contradict such a teaching – primarily Roman Catholicism. Yet it is not only Roman Catholicism that exalts the ability of man to contribute to the cross of Christ; this dark, God-dishonoring teaching is well within the bosom of “evangelicalism” as well.

First, in Roman Catholicism the error has a long, historical tradition. At the Council of Trent we learned that man is not justified (acquitted or declared innocent) by faith alone, but we read,

Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy.¹

Christ's Righteousness or Ours?

Realizing that baptism is the new covenant version of circumcision makes one wonder what Rome does with Galatians. This, of course, is all quite different than the Protestant (and I would argue, biblical) understanding of justification being a result of the righteousness of Christ alone. The difference is something like this: Protestants believe that when God judges a Christian, He looks at the righteousness of Christ – we are covered or clothed in Christ. The Roman Catholic believes that when God judges the Christian, He isn't looking at the righteousness of Christ but He is looking at how righteous Christ has made the person. The assertion is,

Justification detaches man from sin which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin.²

Finally we see that justification is a cooperative effort between man and God. Again, the Council of Trent teaches,

When God touches man's heart through the illumination of the Holy Spirit; man himself is not inactive while receiving that inspiration, since he could reject it; and yet, without God's grace, he cannot by his own free will move himself toward justice in God's sight.³

In other words, God will grant just so much grace, then leaves men to their own abilities. Some men have what it takes, others don't. This necessarily amounts to a works righteousness since the determining factor in salvation is found not in God but in man.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA, 1997), p. 482.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA, 1997), p. 482.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA, 1997), p. 483.

Protestant Roman Catholics

Notice how similar this is to the popular “evangelical” position espoused by Dave Hunt and endorsed by Tim LaHaye, Chuck Smith, Chuck Missler, etc. In Hunt’s denial of total depravity he writes,

Yes, it can only be as the Holy Spirit convicts and convinces “of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment,” but Christ said he would bring that reproof conviction upon the whole world (John 16:7-11).⁴

So, similar to Roman Catholicism, the Holy Spirit will only bring the person so far and then leaves them to their own abilities. Some men have what it takes, others don’t. This necessarily amounts to a works righteousness since the determining factor in salvation is found not in God but in man.

Resting Your Soul

So where will you rest your soul? I prefer to preach and rest my soul in the Christ of Scriptures alone rather than the folly and depravity of Popes and councils or the impotence of human decision making. Dave Hunt, Chuck Smith, and Tim LaHaye, may, or may not be regenerate – I won’t dare venture there – but it is becoming quite apparent that the gospel they affirm, similar to the Romish gospel, is a false gospel.

For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor (Galatians 2:18).

Paul, speaking toward Peter is saying, “Peter, when you lived like a Gentile (exercising your freedom in Christ, recognizing you’re saved by grace), you tore down the ceremonial law. Now, since you live like a Jew (building back up the ceremonial law – salvation by works),⁵ you’re tearing down salvation by grace. The teaching of a gospel which elevates the forces which proceed from man is a transgression.

⁴ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?* (Loyal Publishing Company, 2002) pp. 97, 98.

⁵ This was a perversion of the ceremonial law, which was never designed to effectually save people even prior to Christ – it’s design was to lead to Christ.

No Longer I but Christ

**For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God
I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live,
but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave
Himself for me (Galatians 2:19, 20).**

We learn in these verses that death from the law and life from Christ are somehow related to justification by faith alone. In some respect the law of God kills me while at the same time I am granted life—**“through the law I died that I might live to God.”** Paul goes so far as to say that it is **“no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”** These are difficult words. What is Paul getting at?

Prior to getting married I lived for a few months with a family which consisted of a mom, a dad and five boys. One of the younger boys, a three-year-old, had a very vivid imagination. He would always play with imaginary friends and often viewed himself as some fantasy figure—usually Luke Skywalker. One day this boy spilled an entire box of cereal across the kitchen floor. When his mother found the mess she asked him who did it. He responded by immediately blaming Luke Skywalker. She asked him, “But aren’t you Luke Skywalker?” His answer, “Not any more I’m not.”

Is this what Paul is getting at when he says it is no longer him who lives but Christ? It seems like a bit of a cop out. Is Paul arguing that Christians need not take responsibility for their actions? I think not.

Developing a Mind-Set

In these verses Paul is setting before us a somewhat deep theological truth that should radically affect our mind-set in terms of our standing before God. How do you think of yourself when you consider God Almighty? What is the basis of your peace with your Maker? This is the issue before us.

Dead to the Law

First, what does it mean that Paul **“through the law died to the law”**? Does it mean that Paul doesn’t care at all now about obeying the law of God? He is now just going to do what he feels like the Spirit wants him to do? As one commentator put it,

For any who have ever felt burdened in his or her Christian life, or felt weighed down by “oughts” and “shoulds,” these next chapters contain the charter deed to personal freedom and to joy.⁶

Is Paul’s freedom from the law a charter deed to personal freedom from “oughts” and “shoulds”? If this is the case, the church has no power or right to declare any behavior absolutely wrong or right. We can’t tell our congregants they shouldn’t steal or lie or that they ought to feed the poor. Not only is this contrary to both the Old and New Testaments it is self-refuting. Because as soon as I tell people they shouldn’t steal, this commentator would tell me I ought not do that.

Revealing Sin

Of course, Paul is not taking about that at all. In a parallel passage in Romans it is explained a bit more thoroughly.

For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew *me*.¹² Wherefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.¹³ Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful (Romans 7:11-13).

The law kills by revealing sin for what it is. When Paul looked at the law it didn’t physically kill him. It, by the grace of God, revealed to him that he was dead before God – through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20) and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The good law made sin appear to be sin, working death in Paul. So through the knowledge of the law Paul died to the law in terms of it being a means of salvation. It was this concept that caused Calvin to write,

It was not necessary that Christ should destroy the righteousness of the law, for the law itself slays its disciples?⁷

⁶Richards, L. 1987. *The teacher’s commentary*. Includes index. (Ga 3:1). Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

⁷Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin’s Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries (Ga 2:19). Ages Software: Albany, OR

Living to God

This then leads to the second half of the verse, “**that I might live to God.**” Is this to be understood as some sort of Christian super living? No doubt, a proper understanding of justification by faith makes serving God more of a joy and less of a burden. We might go so far as to say that when justification by faith is absent, the gospel is absent; therefore obeying God is pure slavery with no hope of sonship or inheritance at all.

But I don’t think this is Paul’s point. In the same way Paul was killed through the law he lives to God. It is not a matter of effort or striving but rather standing. Paul now, through Christ, is alive to God. This is enforced in the next verse,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

Paul certainly hadn’t been crucified, nor was he dead. But by virtue of the imputed righteousness of Christ, Paul understood that his union with Christ afforded him all the privileges of that union. As he writes elsewhere, he died with Christ, was buried with Christ, raised with Christ, etc. (Romans 6). This has very little to do with me living the super Christian life or, conversely, copping out of my responsibilities of obedience. This means that when I consider my standing before God, it is no longer my life that I consider at all, but it is the life of Christ that is the object of my faith and hope.

This is not to be viewed as some sort of out-of-body astro-planing eastern mysticism. It is rather something we know to be true as we live our normal mundane lives. As Matthew Henry states,

He lives in the flesh, and yet lives by faith; to outward appearance he lives as other people do, his natural life is supported as others are; yet he has a higher and nobler principle that supports and actuates him, that of faith in Christ, and especially as eyeing the wonders of his love in giving himself for him.⁸

⁸Henry, M. 1996, c1991. *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Ga 2:11). Hendrickson: Peabody

Let us also not lose the intimacy of the last words of the verse. All of this is granted me because He loved and gave Himself for me. All Christians should enjoy this precious gift at the most personal and intimate level.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).

Views of the Christian faith which tack the efforts of men to the cross of Christ bring Christ, His death and resurrection, to vanity (meaninglessness). Why would Christ have to do for me that which I can accomplish on my own? Have we not seen the hubris of man reach this level when the new age icons scream from the shores that they are god? This is where it ends, but it begins with the simple, and seemingly harmless, assertion that faith is my donation to justification. Hear the profound words of Calvin, who had felt the flood of this man-centered doctrine.

If we could produce a righteousness of our own, then Christ has suffered in vain; for the intention of his sufferings was to procure it for us, and what need was there that a work which we could accomplish for ourselves should be obtained from another? If the death of Christ be our redemption, then we were captives; if it be satisfaction, we were debtors; if it be atonement, we were guilty; if it be cleansing, we were unclean. On the contrary, he who ascribes to works his sanctification, pardon, atonement, righteousness, or deliverance, makes void the death of Christ.⁹

Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplications! In Your faithfulness answer me, *and* in Your righteousness.² Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous...¹¹ Revive me, O LORD, for Your name's sake! For Your righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble.¹² In Your mercy cut off my enemies, and destroy all those who afflict my soul; for I *am* Your servant (Psalm 143:1, 2, 11, 12).

⁹Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 2:21). Ages Software: Albany,OR

Questions for Study

1. Why would Paul ask if Christ were a minister of sin (page 1)?
2. What error do we see in Rome and some evangelicals regarding justification (pages 1-3)?
3. What was Peter rebuilding (page 3)?
4. What does it mean (or not mean) to be dead to the law (pages 4, 5)?
5. What Paul said he “might live to God,” what did he mean (page 6)?
6. What would cause Christ’s death to be vain (page 7)?