

First Paper:
Exegetical Essay
on
Faith vs. Law
According to St. Paul

by
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towards
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“Faith” vs. “Law” is such a primary issue in Christianity that it defines its unique identity, distinguishing it from other belief systems. Being of such immense importance, It is not surprising that it also became a major fault line between churches; such as disagreements about what is meant by “Faith”. Is a verbal declaration of Faith in Christ enough to be justified in the eyes of God, no matter how lawless one is? Or is “Work” is required too? If yes, what kind of work?

Given the divergence of views on this issue, I decided to refer only to the primary source, the Bible rather than to secondary sources of uncertain inclination. This approach also serves as a test of self-sufficiency and consistency of St. Paul’s letters on this topic. Can we deduce the relevant facts about him personally, and about his audience, from his letters alone? The following will start as literal exegesis using quotes* from St. Paul’s letters to the Philippians, Galatians, Corinthians and Romans; with comments after each quote; leaving the summary and conclusion till the end. The sequence of quotes followed that of “Saint Paul” by Pope Benedict XVI (**). However, the comments presented below, are quite different from those of the Pope, which were for “general audience”, not for an exegetical study. A further difference in the conclusion, might be attributed to some difference in perspective from that of the Roman Catholic Church.

1- Faith vs. Law:

Phil. 3:5: “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee”

St. Paul was a Hebrew of respectable Hebrew credentials, of tradition, ancestry and accomplishment. As a Pharisee, he was well qualified in the “Law” of the Torah. That Law included not only instructions for good deeds, but also rites as circumcision and ritual purification which protected the Hebrew society from the incursion of its multi-cultural neighbors.

Phil. 3:6 “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

Being of such a zeal for the protection of his Hebrew culture and identity, he saw the new church as a threat to the Law. Therefore, his persecution of the Church was perfectly in accordance with the Law.

Gal. 1:14: "And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers"

That zeal in persecuting the Church for the protection of his ancestral traditions gained him respect among his fellow Jews. He became perfectly justified in the eyes of the Law.

Phil. 3:8: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ"

Suddenly, St. Paul reverses direction, after his experience on the road to Damascus. His faith in Christ becomes everything to him. All his previous interests and zeal became worthless in light of that experience.

Phil. 3:7

3:7: "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ."

What used to look like a gain to him, his zeal for his ancestral traditions and status among the Jews, turned out to be a waste once he gained the illumination in Christ.

Phil. 1:21: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

The new experience becomes everything to him. His love to Christ absorbs his being. He wishes he could accelerate his path to Christ, knowing it would bring him early death which he would gladly welcome...

In the above, St. Paul opened his soul to the Philippians, giving us an intimate picture of his soul.

2 Cor. 11: 28: "Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches"

As contrasting his letter to the Philippians, here St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that his care in this world is for the churches that he founded. They need his nurturing them. So, he can not rush in his way towards Christ. He is forced to take a more pragmatic approach so that he can live long enough for them.

But that message, in reminding them of how much he cares for them, hints to some unruly behavior in Corinth.

1 Cor. 4:3-4

4:3: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self."

4:4: "For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord."

He reminds the Corinthians that it is not up to them to judge him (presumably for his past zeal for the Law instead of Faith); no one can judge him on that, not even himself; only the Lord can. Probably an implication that there is a power struggle in that city. It sounds as if there was some challenge to his authority in Corinth; given their wealth and financial help to the Christians of the Holy Land. So he is reminding them that he is Christ material; he is above their judgment; but to soften it a little, he disqualified himself as well.

Phil. 3:12: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

In a softer tone, he tells the Philippians that since he is not perfect in Faith, he is destined to keep going on in his mission.

Here he sounds more humble than in the above letter to the Corinthians. There is no trace of the confrontational tone noted above.

Gal. 2:15-16

2:15: "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,"

2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

In a hard sell tone, St. Paul tells the Galatians that even those who believed in the Law, i.e. Jews like himself, have realized that only the Faith in Christ justifies. It is interesting that he mentions the supremacy of Jews "... not sinners of the Gentiles", presumably in relation to the Law.

Rm. 3:23-24

3:23: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;"

3:24: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:"

To the proud Romans, who might think that they are the centre of the universe, he reminds them of the need for humility ("... all have sinned") therefore all need to be justified; and that is through the grace of Christ...

Rm. 3:28: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

... and that is only by Faith in Christ, not by your deeds in the Law.

Don't think that you can have God in your pocket by doing your mechanical works prescribed by the Law.

Only God can give you that by His grace which is based on your humble Faith in Christ.

2- Elements of Faith

What is exactly meant by Faith in Christ?

Gal. 5:14: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

In preparing them for what Faith in Christ is, St. Paul gives credit to one word in the Law: Love. That will be the link between the OT and NT on salvation

Gal. 5:6: "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love."

Faith is not just a thought, an idea or a philosophical opinion. It is Faith that works by love.

Gal. 5:19-20

5:19: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,"

5:20: "Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,"

Faith works in contrast to the works of the flesh that lead to a long list of immoral acts.

Gal. 5:22-23

5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,"

5:23: "Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

Faith works by the fruit of the Holy Spirit who inspires love first, followed by many virtues leading to self-control which is necessary for love to express itself in a hermeneutical circle.

No Law can match that.

By that, St. Paul gives a concrete example of how the Law is no match to Faith; the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Rm. 5:5-6:

5:5: "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

5:6: "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."

St. Paul elaborates on Love: Love of the Father, offered to us freely when we needed it the most by the sacrifice of Christ, was delivered into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Gal. 6:2: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

To pay back the Love of God, we have to offer it to each other. That is the new law, the law of love of Christ.

As a powerful rhetorical device, St. Paul uses the same word “law” for a maximum contrast between the old and the new. The legitimacy of the old Law has been stripped away by the new “law of Christ”, with capital letter for “Christ” only, not for “law”.

1 Cor. 13:1, 4-5

13:1: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”

St. Paul dramatizes this point in his first letter to the Corinthians when he says that even if one speaks like an angel, without charity that would only sound hollow. It is interesting that here he used the “charity” version of love as he has an eye on encouraging wealthy Corinthians to make donations to the poorer Christian in the Holy Land. It is reasonable to assume that such a transfer of wealth was a factor that helped St. Paul convince Hebrew Christians to accept baptizing the Gentiles.

13:4: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,”

13:5: “Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;”

Having drummed it up forcefully, in 13:1, he softens his tone while elaborating on what love is, while still using the “charity” expression. In a poem-like flow, he sings the nobility of love as being humble, kind, selfless, etc.

2 Cor. 5:15: “And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

Selfless love is payment of the debt that we all owe to the selfless love of Christ who died for us and was raised.

2 Cor. 5:17: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

If selfless love looks alien to us, let us remember that being in Christ, we are renewed into a new form for which selfless love is not alien any more.

Phil. 2:12-14, 16

2:12: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

2:13: “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

2:14: “Do all things without murmurings and disputings:”

2:16: "Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain."

Once again, St. Paul addresses Philippians in a loving tone ("my beloved") and fatherly authority ("as ye have always obeyed") reminding them that Faith in Christ needs to be maintained by constant works (of love). As if he is worried that they may slack for thinking that justification by Faith is a license to abandon hard work, he uses the words "fear and trembling". He is worried that the roots of Faith are not deep yet to survive in his absence ("not as in my presence only") and about their ability to offer selfless love (or is it "charity"? "without murmurings and disputing").

This shows his concern about the challenge of keeping the delicate balance between justification by Faith and Works.

1 Cor. 6:19: "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost"

The above-mentioned concern continues with his letter to the Corinthians. This time, it is about misinterpretation of justification by Faith as a license for committing adultery and fornication. The challenge continues as replacing Law by Faith seems to have opened the flood gates for interpretations accepting immoralities. Being unable to use the Law, he appeals to what is noble in them; to their embodiment in the Holy Spirit that must have elevated them to higher moral ground.

His tone here is stern which is typical of most of his communication with the Corinthians. Perhaps because of their pride in their riches.

Rm. 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

He repeats the same message of chastity to the Romans. Again for the same reasons. His tone here is more humble ("beseech you") given the status of Rome.

2 Cor. 5:10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."

The same chastity message repeated in his second letter to the Corinthians. And again it is stern and almost rebuking.

Rm. 2:16: "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel."
Rm. 8:39: "Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Reminding the Romans of the authority of God; that there will be judgment. How can there be judgment without the Law? Can Faith be judged? Yes, says St. Paul, because God knows what is in the hearts of people and therefore knows how strong their Faith in Christ is.

Lest the proud Romans think that their worldly power can cover up for lack of Faith, he reminds them that none of the worldly appearances mean anything to God. They can only be justified by the love of Christ.

3- Summary and conclusion

St. Paul, a Jew who has deep knowledge of the Law, realizes that it is mainly about traditions that has more to do with defending Hebrew traditions and identity, rather than anything to do with God. Justification is by Faith in Christ not by the Law. (*Rm. 3:28: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."*). This should not be interpreted as "justified by the Faith alone" as Luther understood it (**, pg. 80).

For faith in Christ and in His sacrifice on our behalf to be true, it has to be expressed by love and charity to fellow human beings. (*1 Cor. 13:1: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."*). "Charity" here should not be understood as a stand-alone "charitable donation" or even "love your neighbor" in today's language. It is not just charity and love plus Faith, but love and charity as payment of debt to Christ; an expression of our Faith. This debt is received on His behalf by those who are in His image: Humanity. (*Rm. 5:5-6: "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."*; *"For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."*). The concept of payment of debt was not explicitly expressed in Pope Benedict XVI book (** pg. 82).

Those who understand that justification is by Faith alone, risk opening the flood gates to immorality by isolating Faith from Works.

And those who understand that Works of the Faith mean "charitable donations to the less fortunate" imply superiority over the recipients as well as risking transforming Faith into a financial enterprise.

The Works of the Faith are not favors bestowed on others, but humble payment of debt to Christ for His sacrifice on our behalf. That is the "law of Christ".

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*Quoted from KING JAMES VERSION NEW TESTAMENT
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** "Saint Paul" by Pope Benedict XVI, for General Audiences, July 2, 2008 to February 4, 2009. Ignatius Press, San Francisco