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Justification and the New Covenant

Bill Dumbrell

Introduction

In his review article on the modern discussion of justification by faith in the *Churchman* of 1995, Gerald Bray quotes an article of mine¹ on his page 122, noting that ‘Dumbrell, following Wright takes it [justifying faith] in an objective sense, as the content of belief which undergirds the Covenant’.² The citation occurred in connection with my mention of my view on justification, which I share with Wright, that justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone in the right but is the declaration itself that someone is in the right, ie, in the covenant. For Paul, justification is not the means whereby someone is initiated into Christ but the declaration that someone is now a Christian and in the faith.

Bray suggests that the quote and context whose substance I have given reveals a basic problem in the modern debate on justification, namely the stance accorded to faith in my view and that of N T Wright whom I have followed. Bray then proceeds, ‘but as Paul presents the matter in Romans... faith is really trust in the promises of God’.³

Those who know me well and have heard me in discussion on this area will find Bray’s conclusions strange and, indeed, such a view of faith as associated with justification sounds completely at odds with what Wright has published. I wonder whether Bray has read my article in question carefully? Firstly, his conclusions do not follow from the context which summarizes my exposition of Genesis 15:6, which asserts only in regard to faith, that faith is the evidence of justification and New Covenant status, without my having defined at that stage what I mean by faith. Bray mistakenly concludes that because I argue for the objectivity of justification as declaration I am arguing for faith as objective in association with justification.

1 W Dumbrell ‘Justification in Paul – A Covenantal Perspective’ *Reformed Theological Review* Vol 51 1992 p 93

2 Gerald Bray ‘Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship’ *Churchman* Vol 109 1995 p 122

3 Bray

Faith and Justification

Admittedly I use the word 'faith' loosely in 'It [ie justification] is not the means by which someone has come to the faith' where I clearly mean 'become a Christian' as is completely clear from the item itself to which Bray refers. But in the preceding exposition of Genesis 15:6 on the previous page of the article, the sense in which I understand faith in connection with justification is, I think, plainly stated. I argue that Abraham's conduct commended that which supported the existing covenant relationship. 'What God expected from Abraham was faith in his prior promises' ie, a subjective attitude of trust, the overwhelming Old Testament view of faith.

When this was in fact expressed by Abraham, God declared him righteous or justified. Abraham's reaction was that which should have been expected from any believer standing within the covenant, the content of which had been delivered in Gen 12:1-3. The verb 'reckon' (*elogisthe* Gen 15:6 LXX) had a declarative and not an accounting sense and served to indicate that Abraham's conduct was that which supported the covenant relationship (then in existence). God declared that Abraham's act of faith (ie, what he did and said based on the trust which he had shown) was 'righteousness' and that it thus indicated trust in God which is the sole requisite for fellowship with God. Faith from that point on biblically becomes the attitude of the heart which characterizes the ones who live in relationship with God. The righteousness demanded from Abraham was in effect, faith in the fidelity of God.⁴

Then, immediately after the section quoted by Bray I continue,

In absolute terms, though intermediary language in regard to faith is used in the New Testament, faith is not the condition of receiving justification (which Bray has quoted as my opinion). Basically and reduced to its salvation-history dimension, faith rather is the evidence that the promises of new life in Christ have been received.⁵

I am aware of how often the New Testament uses intermediary terms in regard to faith, that we are saved *dia pisteos*, 'through faith'. But even in putting forth an instrumental view of faith the biblical presupposition is that all faith operates by divine stimulus. That is why, in the final analysis, a view of faith as it operates in salvation by grace must be evidential. Therefore, the substance of my article as well as my particular quotes from it make it quite clear that in regard to justification, faith is the subjective evidence for the believer of covenant acceptance, ie justification.

4 Dumbrell 'Justification in Paul' p 92

5 Dumbrell 'Justification in Paul' p 93

According to Bray, the implications of all this are that the modern covenantal theory reduces faith to belief and sin to no more than separation or alienation.⁶ Theologically speaking, Bray continues, views such as my own are a form of Pelagianism mixed in a very curious way with hyper-Calvinism. What we have is something that could be called 'Old Testament Christianity' a faith in Christ which is tied closely to and expresses the norms of the Old Testament.⁷ Again, since I am lumped together with Wright in his conclusions, I have to say that I cannot understand how Bray can come to these conclusions from the reading of my article nor indeed from following the course of the justification debate.

I do not write now simply to 'justify' myself! Besides I know how easy it is in hurried moments to misquote. Rather Bray's article provides me with the further opportunity of restating some basic views and probably more importantly to add to them, as well as correcting some misunderstandings which may have arisen from Bray's assessment.

Some heat has been generated through this debate on justification and I have felt some of it. But those involved on both sides are arguing exegetically and what both sides are seeking to do is rightly to divide Scripture and thus to provide the most plausible and coherent view of Paul that the evidence suggests. Nobody in the present justification debate would want to detract from the central, biblical notion of salvation by grace through faith and that is not an issue in the debate and should not be made one. The debate concerns whether the controversy in Galatians (and Romans but Galatians especially) over justification (Gal 2:14-21) was over legalism ie, works done to earn salvation or maintain salvation, or whether as I contend, the basic issue was a salvation-history question relating to relationships between Jew and Gentile primarily in regard to covenant entrance or initial justification.

The issue is a hermeneutical one and must not be understood as anything else. It involves the total use of Scripture, a view cohering with the whole of Scripture, Old and New Testaments, and the interpretation of contexts. For me there are no hidden agendas, no disquiet generally with traditional reformed theology and certainly not for me on the final authority of Scripture. I say this, for Bray's conclusion which finds Wright and myself in some confusion on the question of faith and justification is appended under the heading, 'Were The Reformers Mistaken?'.⁸

Christians highly value, but do not believe in the inspiration of Reformation literature. We acknowledge its importance and the centrality

6 Bray p 124

7 Bray p 124

8 Bray p 123

of its thinkers. I wish personally that there was a much greater interest in the literature. We thank God for the contribution of the Reformers but their position like any other Christian position has continually to undergo evaluation. We cannot accept criticism of a position or settle discussion simply because prejudicially it is said to detract or differ from the reformed position. The reformed position on justification by faith was a series of complex human decisions bound up with biblical interpretation, and like all such decisions it is open to evaluation, challenge if need be, and if necessary variation or nuancing.⁹

My position on the place of faith in justification is clear. Faith is not the ground or the means of justification, for that is grace. Faith is thus our evidence of belonging to the covenant, the evidence created by regeneration, evidence which is our subjective assurance by its possession of the divine response of justification. It is true that the covenant as such with Abraham is formally concluded only at Genesis 15:18 but I refer again to my argument in *Covenant and Creation*¹⁰ that the formal conclusion of covenant is the recognition of existing relationships, and that to talk in terms of the Abrahamic covenant must be to take into account the entire context of Genesis 12-15.

Bray suggests that a notion of faith as being the basis of relationship with God may be acceptable, though he seems to feel as I do, that the subjective presence of faith is the evidence of our relationship. Here we both agree with Calvin that faith primarily (though it can of course be used confessionally) refers to a relationship with God in Christ which is implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The Justification Debate.

As most know, the debate on justification received impetus not only from the nagging criticism of Jewish scholars this century about the Protestant position on justification coupled with such influential opinion as that of George Foote Moore¹¹ on the Protestant side, but also from the very seminal article in 1963 of Krister Stendahl,¹² Dean of the Divinity School in my Harvard days. In that article he suggests that Luther's position on justification more really represented his own internal struggles and the shape of the reformed debate in the sixteenth century than the actual salvation-history position of the Pauline letters. It has never been suggested in the present debate, as far as I know, that Luther's position was unbiblical but merely that it was not appropriately contextual and thus that

9 Here the title of Bray's article seems a piece of special pleading!

10 *Covenant and Creation* (Exeter: Paternoster 1984) pp 47-72

11 James D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective of Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 p 7

12 K Stendahl 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' *Harvard Theological Review* vol 56 1963 pp 199-215

he was incorrect on the reasons for the controversy surrounding justification in Galatians particularly.

Stimulus to the debate was given by the publication in 1977 of E P Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in which it was maintained that the Judaism of Jesus' period was a religion of grace and not a religion of works. Sanders' position has been contested but to my knowledge not refuted. It has been endorsed by most Jewish scholarship, particularly by Jacob Neusner¹³ who nuancing some of Sanders' positions about the Pharisees nonetheless agreed with its basic thrust. Redemption from Abraham onwards has always been an exhibition of divine grace extended to humankind. I note that Bray agrees that the evidence points to first century Judaism as a theology of grace.¹⁴

What else would we expect when the Old Testament emphasizes clearly the position of redemption by grace through faith like its New Testament counterpart? It surprises me that Bray should label the covenantal view for which I argue as an 'Old Testament Christianity' closely tied to the norms of the Old Covenant law.¹⁵ Paul seems to label Abraham's faith as an Old Testament Christianity! I cannot see how Bray can conclude that such a covenantal view is closely tied to the norms of Old Covenant law.¹⁶

Although at Sinai the law was given and added, the basic biblical covenant remained the Abrahamic covenant as Paul, who sees the biblical covenants as one (Gal 3:17), points out. The delivery of the Sinai covenant law made it clear (Exod 20:1) that law was always given within a context of grace and was always a reply to grace. God's redemption demanded the response of changed life, national or individual. The law was given so that Israel might know the nature of national life to be reflected within the covenant. Here again the Old Testament makes it clear that for the believer the law was always written in the heart.¹⁷ God's requirements were always known and active at the inner level. In a more limited sense I believe this to be true of humankind in general, since the Ten Commandments articulated to Israel as a code in Exodus 20 always constituted the divine demand to humanity in general as a response to the grace of creation. We may speculate that such a basic knowledge of God's will for human living would be reflected in the inexplicable but operative function of the human conscience. If adherents of the covenantal view must plead guilty to an emphasis upon personal obedience for covenant members and thus a

13 Neusner, a sharp critic of Sanders agreed that Sanders' pattern of covenantal nomism accurately depicts the Palestinian Judaism of the Advent period, (*Comparing Judaism's History of Religions* vol 18 (1978) p 178.

14 Bray p 125

15 Bray p 124

16 Bray p 124

17 Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* pp 179-81 with the references there cited.

response to divine obligation as continuing within the New Covenant structure, this, in my judgment is a healthy corrective to much evangelical thinking which so emphasizes a theology of grace that the place of conduct as the basis for personal subjective assurance of salvation is undervalued.

Yet somewhat paradoxically, with his suggestion of a nomistic attitude to the Old Testament law, Bray suggests that Wright's vision of the Torah involves frustration at Israel's continued inability to keep divine standards but not despair.¹⁸ His comment follows on from that on the Pelagianism which he sees in the covenantal view, which, he feels, depreciates the fact of sin and underemphasizes the biblical view of total depravity. But, in reply, we need to bear in mind that Israel was operating always within a covenant of redemption, ie, within a sphere of redemption as a nation, within which there was provision (which highly stressed the reality of sin) for the forgiveness of national (and personal) sin, and the maintenance of the covenant. Israel and Israelites were expected to come to terms with the continued fact of national and personal sinfulness in the Old Testament, no less than in the New. I cannot see that the covenantal view that Wright espouses and with which I agree would be responsible for any diminution in Israel's pursuit of holiness. Israel may well have had a depreciated view of sin, but biblically she was set apart from the general world whom she regarded as sinful. If the Adamic character of Israel is referred to by Wright, this is the necessary explanation which he would advance for the continued failure of Israel to meet her covenantal obligations, certainly not a mere reference to an inherited condition.

The election of the nation of Israel came within the patriarchal call. This is confirmed at Sinai, (Exod 19:5-6), where Israel is given a function later expressed by the Isaian phrase to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles', to exhibit to the world by her style of living and separation, the values of the kingdom of God in ways that would be bound to attract. National election still continued to be a fact which would provide assurance of a special relationship until the rejection of the nation by Jesus (Matt 21:43). But it is also clear that Paul's point in Romans 9:6, that not all Israel had ever been Israel, was ever a valid one in personal terms. Membership of the nation never guaranteed redemption for the individual then (or now). The sovereignty of God within the chosen nation had always been exercised as Paul himself makes clear in his arguments in Romans 9.

As far as Israel and the Israelites were concerned the law was written on the heart, resulting in a continual prompting in regard to sensitivity to national and personal sin. Further, salvation was clearly in the Old Testament a matter of the grace of God received, so that no distinction between the modes of redemption in the Old and New ever existed and the

¹⁸ Bray p 124

new insights developed by Sanders into the state of Judaism at the Advent simply confirm in my judgment, what would have been the expected case.

If in the gospels prominence is given to the Pharisees' insistence on the minutiae of obedience, this does not detract from the question of where, in their understanding, the impetus to keep the law would have come from. I say this conscious of the need not to underscore in the case of the Pharisees (and Judaizers later) the legalism that in actual fact a theology of grace could and undoubtedly did lead to. But in the final analysis I wonder if any Pharisee (or Judaizer) would have said that covenant acceptance and maintenance was dependent upon anything other than the grace of God. It was Luther's insistence upon seeing the law as the antithesis of the gospel and not the complement of the gospel which in my judgment has generated much of the modern Jewish unease and discussion, by in effect driving a wedge between the two Testaments which stamped them as law and grace.

So Sanders' analysis of the Jewish situation contemporary with the Advent ought to be the New Testament case. In terms of an Old Testament background, salvation would continue to be by grace and Judaism would expect this. It has always seemed to me to be an enigma why or how Judaism could have gone so wrong and developed the absolute works theology with which since the Reformation it has been traditionally lumbered.

Bray seems to question Wright's typological understanding of the role of law in Israel. 'When the Torah was given Israel collectively recapitulated the sin of Adam.'¹⁹ But the point which I believe Wright makes is that Israel in Canaan continued typologically the function of Adam in Eden. I believe this is a thoroughly biblical implication. Wright argues this way mainly because of intertestamentary evidence which cannot be lightly dismissed. I reach the same conclusion however from an analysis of the intention of Genesis 1 and 2 which I see composed with Israel particularly in view.²⁰

Righteousness:

Critical, as Bray recognizes,²¹ is the view held on the Greek *dikaioisune*, 'righteousness' and it seems to me that this is where the nub of the present controversy exists. He rightly dismisses Bultmann's view of the righteousness of God as something bestowed, a gift on those who have entered a right relationship with him. I take it that his sentence 'in essence, righteousness is an ethical quality imputed to human beings who stand in the right relationship to God through Christ' is a summarizing remark of

19 Bray p 117

20 W Dumbrell *Search For Order* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1994) pp 29-30

21 Bray pp 107-23

Bultmann's view.²² He does not agree with Kaesemann who also views righteousness as qualitative.

Seifrid, whom Bray quotes with acceptance seems to me to be correct in arguing for justification righteousness, in that special initial step as relational and forensic. If anything has come out of the Old Testament debate on this term it is that righteousness depicts a relationship to an agreement, particularly in the Old Testament to the covenant. God's righteousness is indicated by his continued fidelity to the relationship struck with Abraham and Israel expressed in salvation or judgment. God's righteousness was manifested in the physical historical acts which gave expression to the relationship. Israel expressed her righteousness by staying within the bounds of their relationship, by keeping within the rights of the relationship, or her unrighteousness by transgressing the covenant.

Here, I think Sam K Williams is correct in exegeting the righteousness of God in Romans 1:16 as relational,²³ and as God's continued fidelity to the covenant, though with Bray I disagree with Williams in his suggestion that the noun *dikaiosune*, 'righteousness', in the New Testament is to be construed qualitatively in gift terms.

Bray seems to object to Wright's terminology on justification but it appears to me that Wright is really using concepts in a way which is in keeping with Bray's own argument. According to Bray, Paul means that God's inherent and unchanging righteousness is manifested by the way in which he justifies sinners, 'by acting to produce the right relationship with him, God is showing clearly just what his righteousness means'.²⁴ I certainly agree and I feel sure Wright would also. However, Bray ignores the question of what the right relationship is. Bray presumably would say one induced by faith. But faith in what? Presumably again God's promises, but then God's promises in the Old Testament are unequivocally attached to covenants, the word itself which is taken by many to mean fundamentally 'promise'. The basic promises of redemption are connected with the Abrahamic covenant. The Sinaitic covenant commissions Israel as the evangelistic arm of the Abrahamic promises, the Davidic covenant adds the Messianic features to the covenant while the New Covenant confirms what has previously been given but adds the new note of the absence of the need to forgive sins in the new creation.²⁵

22 Bray p 107

23 Sam K Williams 'The Righteousness of God in Romans' *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol 90 1980 pp 241-90

24 Bray p 116

25 Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* pp 182-5. In arguing this way I believe I broke new ground on Jer 31:31-4. I do not think my suggestions have been interacted with since I wrote! But on the other hand they have not been refuted.

Wright's thesis of righteousness as indicative of membership of the covenant community, either in terms of entrance or continuance is then discussed. Here Bray's quotation of Thomas Schreiner does not advance his cause. Bray quotes Schreiner who argues that *dikaosune* does not refer always to covenant maintenance and quotes the context of Romans 9:24-30 to point out that righteousness there means covenant entrance not covenant maintenance.²⁶ But that of course is a distinction without a difference. What needs to be dismissed if Schreiner's argument has any worth is the connection between covenant and righteousness relationally. But in my judgment righteousness cannot be measured apart from connection with covenant, entrance or maintenance. If the righteousness of God is his covenant faithfulness then our righteousness would seem to be also our covenant faithfulness and the conduct of course which stems from that and declares our righteousness. If righteousness is not a property but a relationship then the argument as to whether righteousness denotes entrance or maintenance is a needless one.

If the righteousness of God is God's attitude bent on maintaining the covenant with which his promise content is bound up and our righteousness is, as Bray seems to concede, also relational,²⁷ clearly in the New Testament as in the Old Testament righteousness is basically our commitment to the New Covenant and its obligations, and our determination to keep them as expressed ie, our righteousness is our positive relationship to God's promises. Our commitment to the relationship will then show itself in Christian action which is not our righteousness but its demonstration. Without such a demonstration we cannot have any assurance that we continue as members of the covenant. Our membership may well continue, but we can have no personal assurance that it will. Righteous acts will thus express qualities which have come about in us by the infusion of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and in continuing sanctification. Biblically these are the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long suffering etc.

Bray²⁸ suggests that status versus entrance is the difference between the two present schools of thought on justification. But I would argue that justification does not simply refer to entrance into the covenant but also to continued membership of the covenant as Paul himself makes clear.²⁹ After all, Paul's view of justification and the term itself, justification by

26 Bray p 116

27 Bray p 116. A relational view of *dikaosune* can accommodate all the Pauline references with the possible exception of three references in Ephesians but even there, in my judgment, a relational view is more likely.

28 Bray p 117

29 Charles H Cosgrove 'Justification in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Reflection' *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol 106 1987 pp 653-4 notes the contexts (Rom 2:13, 8:33, 1 Cor 4:4-5, Gal 5:4-5) where Paul refers to a future and final justification.

faith, presupposes a final justification (as Jewry believed) in fact.

Bray, as indicated, argues that what Paul means by God's righteousness is that God's inherent and unchanging righteousness is manifested by the way in which he justifies sinners. We do not disagree with this, but we need to consider its implications. How does God justify sinners, if as Bray argues God's righteousness is to be considered imputed? The answer is that God gives the verdict of not guilty in their favour and includes them in his covenant of grace. In any case, justification is not in itself covenant entrance but is the attestation of covenant entrance. Covenant entrance occurs by regeneration. Justification, as reformed theology has always believed, is the declaration of our (not just our initial but our continuing) status and I would add, as covenant members.

Bray points out that God is not automatically bound by his covenant promises;³⁰ he is treading on slippery ground here. We cannot accept belief in a deity who would be capricious and overturn promises and expectations. We do accept that the Deity who has pledged himself by an oath has the perfect liberty to resile from his promises for non-performance. But we have the biblical indication that in spite of continued non-performance and indeed the impossibility of human performance, God has maintained his covenant even to the point where the blood of Jesus becomes the blood of the New Covenant! Paul calls this the righteousness of God (Rom 3:25). God's righteousness is not subject to a covenant norm but quite the reverse; it has created the covenant norms. God who moves this way in relationships with men and women is rightly the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I find it strange that there is a reluctance in New Testament studies to give the covenant notion its full New Testament due. The notion is basic to the whole Bible, not just the Old Testament and the distribution of the word, 'covenant', within the New Testament documents compares very favourably to the Old Testament, where as we know it is a largely assumed and seldom articulated concept. The New Testament position is clearly that we have entered, with the death of Christ, the period of the New Covenant. All its apparatus is in place by that death though our full apprehension of the benefits of Jeremiah 31:31-34 remains an expectation. The notion of covenant inclusion also emphasizes an important biblical aspect, that of the corporate dimension of salvation. We are saved to be members of a community and the biblical emphasis in salvation argues for the construction of a people of God.

Bray is perfectly correct in arguing that the redeemed have no claim to God's righteousness apart from the relationship with Christ given to us by

30 Bray pp 115-116

the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament position and the Pauline one is that it is the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification to give us the grace to keep the law. Law as a covenant obligation is not dismissed by Paul but is endorsed as an integral part of the New Covenant. Individual commandments are retained by him as a basis for Christian response. Apart from the Sabbath commandment which is retained in principle, the other commandments certainly figure right across the board in the Pauline letters.

It is also of interest that Bray argues that justification precedes regeneration and he cites some very limited reformed support.³¹ Such a view indicates the continued difficulty with the terminology in maintaining consistency. In view of the biblical terminology used Bray's stance seems difficult to hold in individual terms, though no doubt it is true in terms of the conceptual divine decree. In individual terms regeneration means essentially a new birth, the infusion of new life. Justification is the normal biblical recognition of that activity having occurred in our own individual case, and this is the way the terminology is used in Paul.

In individual terms, righteousness biblically is always used to recognize the existence of a relationship, never in terms of the creation of a relationship. If our justification/righteousness is deemed to have taken place, this is a recognition of the work of God in us which has preceded. Justification, on the basis to which Bray has assented, in Paul, is really the anticipation of the verdict of the last judgment in actual present experience. Thus essentially it is the recognition that a not guilty verdict on the sinner has been passed.

In all this what is needed is, in my judgment, a careful analysis of the biblical terminology used, particularly in the Galatian controversy and in Romans. There is a call for some precision in regard to the use of terms which in the present debate are somewhat wildly thrown about. Bray refers with approval to the common reformed view that we are justified by Christ's saving work on the Cross.³² Of course the work of the Cross is the objective basis of justification, but we are required to use words here in a way which is consistent with their biblical usage. It would be better to suggest that justification results from the work of the Cross applied in regeneration by the Holy Spirit. The reformed position on the use of the verb 'justify' is that the sinner is 'deemed righteous' on the basis of the work of Christ. 'Impute', is thus terminology traditionally used while 'impart' was unacceptable, so that on this ground 'gift or dynamic theories of righteousness', are loose uses of the terminology. But if a relational view of righteousness is adopted as I argue, neither of the concepts,

31 Bray p 123

32 Bray p 124 referring to the Reformers but clearly endorsing the view.

imputation or impartation suit.

Paul and the New Covenant.

The most important issue in the present debate, it seems to me, is an understanding required of the nature and the significance of the New Covenant. Here we need to be aware of the dimensions of the controversy in Galatians which was essentially covenantal. That problem in Galatians between Paul and the Judaizers as undoubtedly covenantal is made plain by the centrality of the place of the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians 3. Here the difficulty between Paul and his opponents seems to be the misunderstanding of the nature of the present case by Paul's Jewish-Christian opponents. Their supposition seems to be that the Mosaic covenant is continuing and has been unaffected, indeed had been strengthened in its claims, by the incarnation and death of Jesus. Yet Paul is clear that the work of Christ and his death have brought the Mosaic covenant to an end. This was a major point of disagreement between the Galatian opponents and no doubt would be bound to give rise to direct confrontation. Paul's argument on this is clear in Galatians 3. Likewise the resolution of the problems in the exegesis of Romans 9:30-10:4 seems bound up with the same confusion on the Jewish side.

The demand on Galatian Christians by the Judaizers is thus to conform to the annulled Mosaic covenant. No doubt they would have also required punctillious observance of covenant requirements but this is not, in my judgment, the point at issue. I have no doubt that a confusion about the changed salvation-history situation and the operation of the New Covenant remained among Jewish Christians until the destruction of the Temple and the end of all covenant institutions for Judaism including sacrifice in AD 70. The demand for the works of the law (or 'works' in the relevant Galatians 3 and Romans 4 contexts) by the Judaizers stems from their misunderstanding of the new Christian case. The argument by Paul in Galatians is thus not over legalism and a works approach to acceptance with God, but is over the incompatibility in the new age of the Mosaic covenant. The time for the complete implementation by Judaism of the Abrahamic covenant had now come and this meant Gentile entry without circumcision. Justification now for Paul means membership of the Abrahamic covenant with its added New Covenant features, not the Mosaic covenant. Jewish covenant practices might still continue as cultural items for Jewish Christians but can no longer be demanded from non-Jews and this is an attitude which controls Paul's policy in mission. The sacrificial system had of course been superseded by the one final atonement of Jesus, and the Temple had been profaned by the rending of its veil on Jesus' death (Mark 15:38).

In short, with the death of Christ a new era in salvation history had been

ushered in and the particular problem in Galatia stemmed from a spiritual and national inability of the Jewish Christians to respond to the new situation. The time between the death of Christ and the destruction of the Temple must have been a difficult one for Jewish Christian believers. It was a time when the full implications of the death of the Messiah were being worked through. God gave St Paul the insight to see the significance of the atonement for covenant promises within salvation history and we have his understanding of the new era recorded for us in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 principally.

In the present debate over justification the significance of the covenant change occurring with the death of Christ has not played a large role. Arguments have tended to be static and dogmatic. But in my judgment true biblical interpretation requires a careful appreciation of the full implications of the progression of salvation history. Luther, for all his insights, approached the text from the standpoint of his times, as we all must, but with a flat, one dimensional, dogmatic view. Critical for our understanding of the Pauline Epistles is the New Covenant phase of salvation history which they present. Likewise, critical for our understanding of the gospels is the recognition of their faithful recording of Jesus' ministry to his own, Israel. The Bible must be read from a salvation-historical perspective before dogmatic theology with its credal agendas takes over.

There has been a disinclination in reformed theology to develop a covenant understanding of the New Testament yet the invitation is there in the title to the second division of the Bible. Perhaps we have felt that covenant is an essentially Jewish notion inappropriate to be applied to the new age. Perhaps we have also reasoned that the infrequent mention of covenant in the New Testament is a measure of the significance of its theological contribution to our understanding of the new era. But in both Testaments, covenant, without frequent mention, is a presupposition for understanding the course of salvation history. Covenant is the biblical promise dimension of kingdom, and in my judgment the combination of both items controls the progressive assemblage of a biblical theology of both Testaments.

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