

Another Note on Galatians 4:24

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Áko díí hane' ch'íní'ánígíí bee ak'idi'dootííhíí át'é. Jó, díí asdzání naakiígíí éí bee aha'deet'áanii naakiígíí yaa halne'. Ła' éí Héígar, Dził Sáinaidéé' bee aha'deet'áanii yaa halne', éí naalte' danilíí doo biniyé áhoolchííł. (Galatians 4:24)¹

These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. (Galatians 4:24)²

Introduction

I have argued in other papers that Paul's focus in his letter to the Galatians is on circumcision, and this is true. It is. But notice that, whereas the Ten Commandments came from Mt. Sinai, circumcision did not. It began much earlier in the time of Abraham (see Acts 7:8). So is Paul's reference to Sinai out of context? Or have we perhaps misunderstood the context? Is it the case that he's really talking about other laws – laws other than circumcision – laws that in fact *were* given at Sinai. Was he was talking about the Ten Commandments after all? And, when he speaks of bondage, does he really mean we should not be in bondage to the Sabbath? Is it possible to know for sure? Fortunately there is a method we can use to resolve this problem.

Some Background

In this, as in every other problem of biblical interpretation, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture. The Holy Spirit has already answered our question by revealing what He has in other passages. We only need to search diligently and find the instruction He has already given us.

In John 7 Jesus is sparring with the Pharisees about miracles done on the Sabbath. To illustrate the point He is making he mentions circumcision.

Jesus said to them, "I did one miracle, and you are all astonished. ²² Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. ²³ Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? ²⁴ Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment." (John 7:21-24)

Abraham and circumcision

Notice vs. 22: "Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), . . ." In peoples' minds circumcision was a law, Moses gave the law, so circumcision was associated with Moses. But in fact Moses did not initiate circumcision. The first person to receive circumcision in the Bible was Abraham, who lived many centuries before Moses. Speaking to Abraham, God said,

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. (Genesis 17:10)

Moses and circumcision

Circumcision is mentioned in Genesis 17 (nine times), 21 (once), and 34 (five times). There is one reference in Exodus 4, where Moses neglected to circumcise his son and his wife did it for him to save the boy's life. There are two references in Exodus 12, and then we find nothing more about it until Leviticus 12.

In Leviticus 12:3 God tells Moses, "On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised." The section of text that contains this instruction begins with the words, "The LORD said to Moses, . . ." (Leviticus 12:1) and refers to newly born infants. Baby boys were to be circumcised on the same day of the week they were born, but one week later.³ Anyway, my question is, If God said this to Moses, when did He say it? On what occasion? And where was Moses at the time?

In Exodus 40 the Israelites finished setting up the tabernacle. They were still camped at Mt. Sinai when they did this. They came from Egypt to Sinai, heard the Ten Commandments there, built their tabernacle there, received the laws found in the book of Leviticus there, and celebrated their next Passover a year after leaving Egypt – all of this at Mt. Sinai.

The LORD spoke to Moses in the Desert of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they came out of Egypt. He said, ² "Have the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time. . . ." (Numbers 9:1-2).

When the Israelites left Egypt they sprinkled blood on the doorposts of their houses to spare the lives of those inside when the angel of death went through the land, punishing those who had oppressed them. (When he saw the blood on the doorposts the angel of death "passed over" that house.) Their first Passover was celebrated in Egypt just before they left. Now they were celebrating their second Passover. A whole year had gone by since leaving Egypt and they were still at Sinai. The law about circumcision appears to have been given during this period.

³ Jews counted inclusively in Old Testament times, so if a child was born on Tuesday, eight days later was the next Tuesday.

A Possible Explanation

The reason for going through all this history is to show that, although Moses did not initiate the practice of circumcision, he did write a law about it which is preserved for us in Leviticus 12:3 (quoted above). And based on available evidence, the place where he received that law was Sinai. He was not on the mountain when he received it. He was in the tent of meeting (see Leviticus 12:1). But the tent of meeting was at Sinai when Moses received his law about circumcision.

Discussion

Now we return to our original question. When Paul speaks of "Sinai" in Galatians 4:24, does that mean he was talking about the Ten Commandments? Not at all! Many laws were given to Moses during the time the Israelites camped at Sinai. So was it correct and legitimate for Paul to associate circumcision with Sinai? Certainly. Such an association was entirely appropriate.

So why does Paul refer to Sinai instead of Abraham when speaking of circumcision? Paul needed to say things about circumcision that were negative and he did not want to link the topic to Abraham, although in fact Abraham was the first person in the Bible to be circumcised. So instead of Abraham, Paul linked his topic to Sinai – the ultimate symbol of all things pertaining to law. He would not have had to do this, but neither is there a problem with doing it. Moses wrote about circumcision in Leviticus 12:3 and Leviticus is part of the law of Moses. It's not part of the Ten Commandments, but it does come down to us from Sinai, along with many other laws.

If Galatians 4:24 were the only verse we had from Paul on the topic of law we might think he was simply antinomian (against law) in his outlook. But in fact this is not the only verse we have. Paul expresses himself on many occasions and not all of his remarks about law are negative. It is true that he doesn't want anyone using the law as a substitute for faith. No one could come away from reading Paul thinking that. But there are other passages to weigh against the ones we usually emphasize.

Examples

Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:31)

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! (Romans 6:15)

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." (Romans 7:7)

So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. (Romans 7:12)

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. (Romans 7:14)

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. (Romans 7:16)

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; (Romans 7:22)

in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:4)

the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. (Romans 8:7)

Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:10)

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. (Galatians 3:21)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. (1 Timothy 1:8)

Notice two verses in particular. According to Paul, in Romans 8:4, Christ came "that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us." This would have been the perfect opportunity to say that Christ came to meet the righteous requirements of the law and that we can leave all such matters to Him. He obeys; we're forgiven. Done. But he didn't say it that way. We also need to meet the righteous requirements of the law, just as Jesus did – by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 13:10 Paul we are to love our neighbor because "love is the fulfillment of the law." So fulfilling the law is still an issue for Christians. If Paul wants us to love our neighbor, it follows that he also wants us to fulfill the law. The two goals do not oppose one another. They are equivalent and as such they work together.

Thus, in both Romans 8:4 and 13:10 the law, although it was fulfilled in Christ, should also be fulfilled in us. Paul says this in so many words: "that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us" (Romans 13:10). This does not mean Christ's efforts on our behalf have failed; it means they have succeeded. If forgiving mankind were a mere pronouncement, Jesus could have made that pronouncement from heaven. He would not have had to come here. But if forgiving us from our sins involves separating us from our sins (see Matthew 1:21), then we also are under obligation to live holy lives, just as Jesus did.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14)

Conclusion

From the above discussion I draw that it is not wrong for the law to be fulfilled in our lives (Romans 13:10), as it was fulfilled in Christ's life. It does not detract from grace or from any work of Christ – on the cross or otherwise – if we live in a way that is characterized by obedience to His commandments.⁴ We need not fear that by doing this we will fall from grace. Remaining under grace does not mean repeating the word frequently; it means walking as Jesus walked.

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? (Romans 2:4)

Repentance means turning away from sin. In all of this we need to hear what Paul is actually saying. To do this we must peel back twenty centuries of interpretation – some of it right, some of it wrong – if it prevents us from seeing that obedience is not a form of disobedience. One thing Paul is *not* saying is that we must fall from obedience in order to avoid falling from grace. Grace (i.e., God's "kindness, tolerance and patience") leads us to repentance and to living changed lives, as in the passage just quoted.

Paul mentions Sinai as a symbol of all things associated with law even though his primary focus is on circumcision, which did not originate at Sinai. It was legitimate to do this because Moses received a law about circumcision there, and recorded it in one of the books of the law. By writing this law down Moses made the topic of circumcision his own, and this in turn makes Paul's reference to Sinai in Galatians 4:24 both entirely legitimate and entirely clear.

We should start with the assumption that Paul has a unified theology – that he has one idea in mind. What he teaches in one place is consistent with what he teaches in another. So if it sounds like he is opposed to the Ten Commandments because they come down to us in written form from Sinai, we need to ask if such first impressions are accurate. The only way to determine whether they are or are not is to confirm them by comparing different passages written by the same author.

When we do this it is clear that Paul is always driving toward faith. Or actually what he is always driving toward is Christ. This is the one great object in everything he says. But after making his point forcefully, he often includes other statements to help people avoid reading more into his words than they imply.

Actually this is why I argue that we should obey all ten of the commandments, i.e., because they show us Christ (see Galatians 3:24). In the law we can see the character of Jesus in codified form. He is the One in whom we can safely rest (#4), the One who gives life rather than taking it (#6), the One who is faithful to every trust (#7), the One who personifies truth (#9), and so on. If these commandments didn't show us Jesus, studying them would be an empty exercise. But they do show us Jesus. That's why we must never think of setting them aside.

⁴ If anyone is thinking, yes, but not to His Father's commandment, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). We can't divide things up this way. What the Father requires, the Son also requires.