

The Problem with the Law

In 1963 a young Biblical scholar by the name of Krister Stendahl published an article in a theological journal that was entitled “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” In it, Stendahl basically accused the Protestant tradition, of which he was himself very much a product, of having gotten Paul all wrong. Basically of having fundamentally misread the writings of the apostle by reading him almost entirely through the eyes of Martin Luther, resulting in a view of Paul that was actually a lot more Luther than it was the apostle himself. The article by one who was himself a Lutheran clearly hit a nerve, and set off a re-examination of Paul and his writings that eventually came to be called the New Perspective, and that reassessment, that new perspective, is still going strong today. Interestingly enough, this one article was pretty much the only thing of any substance that Stendahl ever published, but with it, he certainly had a profound effect upon the church and its understanding of the great apostle. It’s a very different Paul that we encounter in the pages of the New Testament today than it was fifty years ago.

One of the major aspects of Paul that the New Perspective claims we got wrong was Paul’s whole take on the law. While Paul would no doubt have agreed with the traditional Protestant formula that we are saved by faith and not by good works—though he never put it exactly like that himself—still Paul would likely have drawn a very different set of conclusions from that claim than we usually do. For one thing, Paul really didn’t have much problem with the law *per se*. His problem, at least at first, was almost entirely with certain laws, and in particular, with circumcision and various dietary rules.

What is more, his problem even with those laws wasn’t so much theological, as it was purely practical, a problem with the effect those laws tended to have in actual practice. You could say that for Paul, the problem with the law was one of unintended consequences, a recognition he came to over the course of his years of ministry, that these particular laws in actual practice tended to have consequences that were not what was originally intended, yet consequences that very often subverted the original purpose or intention of the law, shall we say, the spirit of the law.

For example, one of the problems he noted was the fact that someone could become so focused on the letter of the law, and fulfilling the letter of the law down to the very last detail, that they often didn’t even notice that they had never gotten around to fulfilling the spirit of the law at all. Someone might bend over backwards to keep from ever harming their neighbor physically, might never steal so much as a blade of grass that belonged to their neighbor, might never even think of bearing false witness against their neighbor; they might do all that, and yet never get around

to actually loving their neighbor, which is what the point of all those rules was in the first place, the spirit of the law.

Another problem with the law that Paul ran up against in actual practice were situations where there was no law, no rule either commanding certain actions or prohibiting them. But as Paul experienced in his work with congregations, just because there isn't a rule against something, doesn't mean that it is necessarily a good idea. But if one insists upon drawing guidance for one's actions from the law, and nothing but the law, and there's no law, then there's no guidance, nothing to keep you from doing harm, either to yourself or someone else, when something is not strictly speaking prohibited but just isn't a very good thing to do in a given situation. In such cases, the absence of a law doesn't absolve us of any responsibility to do the right thing. But what is the right thing, when there is no law? For Paul, what is clearly needed was some sense of a higher law, which could provide guidance over a broad range of situations, rather than attempting to formulate a specific law for every conceivable situation, something that in actual practice simply can't be done.

That higher law, of course, is what Paul sometimes calls faith, and other times calls love, just depending on the situation. You see, while Paul acknowledged the fact that rules are enormously helpful and at times clearly necessary to the well-being of any human society (from the family on up), he also knew that there always needed to be something more, some higher law, some sense of the big picture. For Paul, that was faith, an utter sense of trust in God, and thus living one's life in the light of that trust, on the basis of that trust. Sure, laws and rules and traditions governing our behavior can generally speaking prove very helpful, but it is faith that gives ultimate direction to our lives, thus faith that takes precedence over any given rule. Because without faith, the law—any law—can all too easily have those unintended consequences, and produce results other than those intended. That's why Paul insists we are justified by faith, and not by works of the law. For without faith, the law is of limited help, and at times may even be dangerous. The law on its own can't reliably get you where you're going.

All this is why Abraham and Sarah were so important to Paul, for they were both considered exemplars of righteousness, of right-with-God-ness, despite having lived long before the law was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. So theirs was a righteousness quite literally not based on works of the law, at least not works of the Law of Moses, and in fact Genesis makes the explicit claim that Abraham believed the Lord, that is, the Lord's promise that he and Sarah would have a child, and it was that belief, that faith, that trust in God that was "reckoned to him as righteousness." In fact, Paul quotes this verse from Genesis in his letter to the Romans in the portion of that letter we read this morning as our epistle. The point is that Abraham was considered righteous not because he did this, or because he didn't do that, but because he simply trusted in the Lord, and lived his life on the basis of that trust. That is to say, he lived by faith, or as we might put it, by the big picture.

Which is exactly what Jesus was looking for in his disciples, someone who was willing to live by faith. When he called people to follow him, he didn't say, "If you want to be my disciple, these are the rules: you have to do x, and y, and z." No, he said, if you want to follow me, you've got to take up your cross and follow me. *Follow me, not do this or don't do that.* Note he doesn't say where he's going, or what's going to happen to you along the way, though the mention of the cross makes it pretty clear they're not going to a picnic.

No, what Jesus was—and still is—asking for is a fundamental commitment to him, and a repudiation of any other concern, agenda, or priority that would distract us from that ultimate allegiance. Of course, that's exactly what those who would be his disciples found so difficult, because they all had their own agendas, their own concerns, their own issues, which is why they so often seemed to be on a different wavelength than Jesus, and just didn't seem to get it. It was at such times that Jesus accused them of having their minds set on human things, and not on divine things. Or to put it another way, on the letter of the law, rather than the spirit. Or being so caught up in the details, that they couldn't see the big picture.

Needless to say, we're all guilty of the same thing, which is not surprising because in many ways it is the human dilemma. As mortal creatures with a very finite lifespan, we have a natural tendency to get hung up on the details, which is more the human dimension, and fail to grasp the big picture, the really big picture, which is more the divine realm, the dimension, then, of faith. When that happens, when we lack that faith dimension in our lives, when we lose sight of the big picture, we tend to lose perspective on the events happening around us, and our own efforts—even our best efforts—lacking that guidance often fall victim then to that problem of unintended consequences, the same problem that Paul had with circumcision and the dietary rules, though in our own case, of course, those are obviously not the issues involved.

But this happens all the time in churches—in this and every other church—when people out of the very best of intentions, and motivated by an intense desire to do the right thing, nonetheless do untold damage to the church, to other church members, and even their own families, because they can't see the forest for the trees. Can't see the big picture for all the details. For most of us, that happens because we just can't see beyond ourselves and our own concerns. And we are absolutely certain we're right, and that anyone who disagrees with us is wrong. Which again is why Jesus says, "If you want to be my follower, then you've got to deny yourself and follow me." Because this isn't about us. It's about him. The big picture.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and to endless ages...*