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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

ON GAL. 2:17-19

Bible students know that the line of thought in these three verses of Galatians is difficult to determine. A little article on this subject including a listing of some of the views advanced by interpreters may be welcome. The words, taken by themselves, are simple enough. It is the relation of the various statements to one another and the question what Paul is pointing to in v. 18 that compel us to do some special searching. The KJV renders: "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid! For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the Law am dead to the Law, that I might live unto God."

The rendering of the RSV is smoother and in certain places more accurate: "But if in our endeavor to be justified in Christ we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. For I through the Law died to the Law, that I might live to God."

The paragraph preceding our section (vv. 11-16) had related the wobbling of Peter at Antioch and Paul's criticism of the attitude of his fellow Apostle, concluding with the ringing statement that justification is not by works of the Law, but solely through faith in Christ. Everything in that section is luminous. One question that presents itself is whether the words of Paul addressed to Peter end at the close of v. 16 or must be thought to continue to the conclusion of the chapter. As I see it, the former alternative has to be adopted. V. 17 begins a new section, dwelling on something suggested by the discussion with Peter, but not a part of it.

V. 17

In v. 17 we do not find serious difficulties; exegetes, though differing concerning details, are quite well agreed on the general meaning. Paul, according to the dialectical method which he is fond of, brings before us an objection which is raised against what he has just said: that we are justified not by works of the Law, but by faith. The objection is the old one, uttered already by the Pharisees when they said of Jesus: "This man receiveth sinners" (Luke 15:1 f.). It is the charge against the doctrine of free grace and justification by faith that has been voiced

throughout the centuries and that will not die: "If God forgives sins freely and we do not have to earn His pardon through the works we do, then we may sin as we please; justification is made an astonishingly easy matter; merely believe, and you are justified regardless of the life you lead." We had better remember that it is not the Roman Catholic Church alone that has hurled this accusation against what has rightly been called the Pauline doctrine of justification, but that our carnal reason is willing to join in the accusation, perhaps from motives of pride, or concern about public morality, or because it is actually seeking a soft pillow for its sinful urges, in which case the accusation is no longer an accusation but a shout of impious joy. Paul, of course, repudiates such an inference from his teaching. It rests on a total misunderstanding of what he has said of faith and justification. As I stated, on the interpretation of this verse the expositors are fairly well agreed; the few divergent opinions need not detain us (e. g., that of Bengel, who thinks Paul is not speaking of an attack on the doctrine of justification, but wishes to say that Peter's refusal to continue eating with Gentiles brands all who engage in such eating as gross sinners and thereby makes Christ, who had brought Jews and Gentiles together, a minister of sin).

V. 18

It is v. 18 that causes the chief difficulty. If we compare the KJV and the RSV, we note that the latter begins with "but." Literally it should have been "for" (*gar*). Evidently the RSV scholars here, instead of translating, wish to interpret. They must have thought that connecting the statements by means of an adversative rather than an explanatory or causal conjunction would help us in trying to understand Paul. The change they introduce will be found neither necessary nor helpful. The great question is, Of what is Paul speaking when he refers to something he tore down which he might build again?

The older exegetes — Calvin, Beza, and especially the Lutheran Balduin (professor in Wittenberg, d. 1627) — who in the nineteenth century were followed by Wieseler, Rueckert, and others, think that Paul is speaking of the service of sin. They see clearly the accusation which the opponents hurled at the doctrine of justification by grace through faith without the works of the Law, and they seek in v. 18 a decisive, annihilating reply to the charge that this doctrine makes Christ a promoter of sin. Calvin's comments are representative of this class and may well be quoted: "Paul has a twofold answer (i. e., to the charge referred to in v. 17), and here we have the first, an indirect one. He tells us that this charge is at variance with all his teaching because

he had preached faith in Christ in such a way that the destruction and abolition of sin were joined with it. For just as John teaches that Christ did not come to build the kingdom of sin, but to destroy it (1 John 3:8), so Paul here testifies that he in preaching the Gospel had established righteousness in order that sin might be destroyed. Hence it was by no means a self-consistent (*consentaneum*) view to hold that by the same factor sin was crushed and established. By pointing to this absurdity the Apostle repulses the false criticism." It must be admitted that this interpretation at first sight seems very appealing because it apparently does justice to the context. But upon closer inspection it does not commend itself. Too much has to be supplied to make v. 18 contain this meaning. The explanation assumes that the Apostle argues as follows: "Christ cannot be a servant and an abettor of sin. When I became a follower of Christ, my aim was to get rid of sin, its crime, its dominion, its tyranny. That was exactly what I thought Christ promised me. If the accusations of the opponents are correct, then Christ gives me permission to engage in sinning; and if I act on this permission and cast myself into a life of wrongdoing, then I build up again what I at my conversion tore down; I would again make myself a slave of sin, and such a course would brand me as a vile transgressor — a thought too terrible to contemplate." It is apparent I think that there are too many subsidiary considerations that have to be inserted to make v. 18 yield this sense. It is on this account that modern exegetes have quite unanimously come to the conclusion that what Paul is speaking of is the validity of the Law or obedience to it as a means of salvation. When the Apostle became a Christian, he turned his back on the idea that we could do anything through works of the Law to procure God's pardon; he absolutely demolished and abandoned the thought of self-righteousness. If he should again turn to the keeping of the Law to obtain God's pardon, he would be building up what he had destroyed.

Two questions now arise. The first one is, Why would such a course prove Paul a gross sinner, a *parabatees* of the Law? Various answers have been given. Meyer, in his commentary on Galatians (the later editors Sieffert and Schlier do not agree with him), holds the answer is contained in v. 19. The Law itself, as this verse shows, teaches us that we cannot be justified by obedience to the Law. Hence if we desire to receive forgiveness through the Law, we act contrary to the Law itself and therefore become transgressors of it. This interpretation does not seem tenable, because the misunderstanding of the function of the Law which is involved would hardly be called something brand-

ing one as a transgressor. In my opinion Sieffert, Zahn, Oepke, and others who share their interpretation, offer a more satisfactory explanation. They point out that at his conversion Paul tore down the building in which he had lived up to that time, that of salvation through works of the Law. If he now, as the Judaizers demanded, should return to the old ways and rebuild the house of Pharisaic righteousness, he would admit that in abandoning the Law, as he had done, he had been guilty of gross misconduct toward the Law, and that he deserved to be called a transgressor. The use of the term *συνίστημι* must not be overlooked. It means "to present, to prove, to set forth." Paul does not say that the rebuilding would *make* him a transgressor, but that it would prove that he deserved that title. The view of Schlier deserves mention. He submits the following construction of the contents of v. 18: If I again make the Law and its works the basis of justification, then the terrible verdict of the Law stands that I am a transgressor, a condemned violator of the Law. The thought is altogether Scriptural, but it seems to me to be more remote than that of Sieffert *et alii*.

The other question that calls for an answer is: How does this interpretation of v. 18 furnish a reply to the charge of v. 17 that the doctrine of justification by faith makes Christ an abettor of sin? Burton in his commentary (in the *International Critical Commentary* series) has a helpful hint when he says that in v. 18 we have an *argumentum e contrario*. If we adopt that conception of the verse, we may give the thought as follows: "Does this doctrine of justification make Christ a minister of sin? Not at all. On the contrary, it is I myself who is proved a vile transgressor if I return to the teachings that salvation comes through the keeping of the Law: it is I who stand convicted as a person who became guilty of shameful treatment of the Law when I, instead of relying on it for righteousness, at my conversion turned to Christ for forgiveness, life, and eternal happiness."

V. 19

The fact that Paul in this verse expressly speaks of the Law confirms me in the view that in the preceding verse it was the Law and its validity or function which he had in mind and not the service of sin or a life of wrongdoing. To put it briefly, the Apostle says in this verse, as it were: "I shall not again adopt the principle of justification through works of the Law. I am through with the Law as a justifying factor. The Law itself has brought about this attitude of mine. It showed me that I am a vile sinner and that I cannot keep its holy, august commandments. And that was precisely what God intended the

Law to do. 'By the Law is the knowledge of sin,' Rom. 3:20. The final purpose was that I might live an altogether new life, a life dedicated to the service of God. And that has been accomplished. It is then altogether wrong to think that Christ through the doctrine of justification has become a minister of sin. See what this message of free grace has produced in me — new impulses, new desires, a joyous willingness to serve the Father in heaven."

It will be seen that vv. 18 and 19 are quite properly connected by *gar*, "for," with what precedes. V. 18 presents an *argumentum e contrario* in reply to the charge that the Gospel permits sin. And v. 19 brings evidence that not a life of sin has resulted in Paul (and we might add in all his fellow believers) through having turned to Christ for justification, but a grateful dedication to the service of Him who gave His Son for our redemption.

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