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Justification by Faith in Galatians

An Argument from the Letter and Intent of the Law

by
Ira J. Jolivet, Jr.

Shortly after Stuart Love asked me to write an article on justification by faith in Galatians I began to realize that I could probably count the number of sermons and Bible lessons I have heard on this subject since I have been a Christian on one hand. Upon further reflection I could not recall dealing with this specific subject even once in the fifteen or so years that I have been preaching and teaching Bible classes. While I certainly do not have access to adequate data to suggest that preachers and teachers in the Churches of Christ tend to neglect the matter of justification by faith, I can speculate on why I have unconsciously avoided dealing with this subject. Basically, in the past I think I considered justification by faith to be a great deal less relevant than many other topics for which I could see a concrete “practical application” for the Church.

More recently, however, my interest in the application of insights from ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric to selected New Testament documents has allowed me to see that the concept of justification by faith is indeed extremely relevant for the present-day Church. For I now view this concept as a rhetorical argument from the letter and intent (or, in Paul’s terminology in Romans 2:29; 7:6 and 2 Corinthians 3:6, the letter and Spirit) of the law which may have important implications for how we use scriptures in the Church today.

Justification by Faith in Galatians

The clearest statement of the concept of justification by faith in Galatians is to be found in 2:15-16 in which Paul writes:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

Historically, the function of this passage in the overall argument of Galatians has been disputed. Some scholars propose that the specific problem of the apparent acceptance by the Galatians of a “new gospel” in which circumcision and Torah observance were deemed necessary for salvation merely afforded Paul an opportunity to expound on the more important “doctrine” of justification by faith. Those scholars who view Galatians as an “occasional” letter which Paul wrote primarily to address the specific problem, however, assign a somewhat subsidiary argumentative function to the concept of justification by faith.

In general, I agree with the latter position, for I see Paul’s statements in which he contrasts

justification by faith with justification by works of the law as an indication that his primary argumentative strategy in Galatians conforms to that line of reasoning which the ancient Greco-Roman rhetoricians referred to as an argument from the letter and intent of the law.

An argument from the letter and intent of the law was one of several types of argumentative strategies which could be used in cases which involved a written document such as a constitution or a particular statute of some kind. In simple terms, in this type of argument the party which argues for the letter follows the exact words of the written document while the party which argues for the intent follows what he or she claims the writer of the document meant.

A fictitious but perhaps familiar anecdotal illustration will serve to demonstrate how an argument from the letter and intent might figure into a contemporary argumentative situation. Most people have no doubt heard some form of a story about a husband who while rushing his expectant wife to the delivery room is stopped by a police officer for exceeding the posted speed limit. The ending of the story is totally predictable. The officer, on being told that the wife is in labor, gets back into the patrol car and with lights flashing and sirens blaring escorts the couple at breakneck speed to the hospital where all ends well.

But suppose we change the story somewhat and say that instead of escorting the couple to the hospital the officer gives the man a ticket for speeding. Despite the delay the couple arrives at the hospital in time and the woman delivers the baby with no problems. Nevertheless, they decide to protest the ticket and appear in court on the appointed day. The officer who issued the ticket is present and testifies that the man broke the law by exceeding the posted speed limit and should therefore pay the fine. He further states that if the judge accepts this excuse, other people will also claim that they have valid reasons for breaking the law. The officer is arguing for the letter of the law. The husband, on the other hand, pleads that the lawmakers who decided what the speed limit should be did not do so arbitrarily, but for the purpose of saving lives. And, while he indeed broke the letter of the law, he adhered to the true intent of the lawmakers by speeding in order to save the lives of the mother and the unborn child. The husband is arguing for the intent over the letter of the law.

In Galatians Paul also argues for the intent over the letter of the law as he attempts to dissuade those whom he had taught the gospel from accepting circumcision and Torah observance. More specifi-

cally, Paul claims that God always intended to justify all people, including the Gentiles, on the basis of faith rather than by works of the law. The example of Abraham's justification by faith in Galatians 3:6-9 adds support to this claim. For here Paul states:

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

Elsewhere in chapters three and four Paul uses various other subsidiary arguments in support of his primary argumentative strategy of the intent over the letter of the law as stated in terms of justification by faith rather than by works of the law.

The logical counter-argument to Paul's line of reasoning would be that following the intent over the letter of the law would promote moral license and perhaps give rise to ethical anarchy. As any well-trained orator would do, Paul anticipates and preemptively refutes this counter-argument in Galatians 5:13-15 in which he states:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

The love ethic, therefore, replaces the moral regulations of the letter of the Torah and forms the basis of self-restraint for the Galatian Christians. Paul further argues that the Spirit (which he reminds the Galatians in 3:2-5 they had received through faith) also functions to prohibit license in ethical matters when in Galatians 5:16-18 he writes:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not

subject to the law.

In summary, then, Galatians is an occasional letter in which Paul attempts to dissuade the recipients from accepting the views of those who taught that even the Gentile converts to Christianity had to submit to circumcision and Torah observance in order to be saved. Paul's primary strategy of dissuasion is an argument from the letter and intent of the law in which he argues that the true intent of God has always been justification by faith rather than by works of the law.

A Practical Application of Justification by Faith

Fortunately, the Church today is not faced with the specific threat which Paul addressed in Galatians. No one to my knowledge is teaching that members of the Church should submit to circumcision and Torah observance. "Different gospels" have continued to arise in various forms throughout the years, however, making Paul's general admonition to remain true to the original gospel pertinent to the Church in every age. Furthermore, some people in the Church will always tend to fall into the trap of "works righteousness" and so we must continue to preach and teach that one is justified on the basis of faith as a gift of grace from God.

But viewing Paul's concept of justification by faith in Galatians as an argument from the letter and intent of the law may help to resolve another major problem which threatens the spiritual well-being of the Church today. For it seems that some of us have the tendency at times to use the New Testament as the "new letter of the law," which would seem to run counter to Paul's implicit strategy of argumentation in Galatians.

A brief look at how my personal views on the sensitive and significant issue of divorce and remarriage in the Church have evolved will perhaps illustrate my point. In my earlier years as a preacher and teacher I dealt with this matter by simply judging each individual instance of potential or past divorce on the basis of Matthew 5:31-32 and other related scriptures. In other words, like many others, I used the New Testament as the letter of the law. In so doing I am sure that, in some cases at least, I unintentionally compounded the guilt and pain of

people who were already carrying a very heavy burden.

Understanding the concept of the letter and intent of the law in Paul's writings, however, has caused me to view the New Testament in a different light. In fact, I even see Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 as an argument for the intent over the letter of the law. For here Jesus cites the letter of the law when he states: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" The law which Jesus quotes here is Deuteronomy 24:1 which in the context of the entire passage on divorce reads as follows:

We must learn to trust in the Spirit which gives us the strength to live ethically and righteously before God.

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

Here clearly, according to the letter of the law, the woman had no rights whatsoever. Only the man could initiate the divorce, and depending on how one interpreted "something objectionable," he could do so on basically any grounds. On receiving the bill of divorce the woman had to depart from "his," not "their," house. And ultimately it was only the woman, not the man, who was considered to be defiled.

But Jesus shows the real intent of the law when in Matthew 5:32 he says that "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." God never intended to give men a law which they could use to

divorce their wives for any reason. In fact, unchastity was the only valid reason for divorce. Furthermore, whereas in the letter of the law the woman bore the defilement, in the intent of God it is the man who initiates the divorce for frivolous reasons who bears the responsibility for causing her to commit adultery.

In conclusion, I think we should exercise extreme caution when we intentionally or unintentionally turn New Testament teachings such as Jesus' comments on the true intent of God with respect to the issue of divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 into a new letter of the law. We should be guided as much by the

argumentative strategy of the letter and intent of the law which underlies Paul's concept of justification by faith as we are by the explicit theological content of that concept. And we must learn to trust in the Spirit which gives us the strength to live ethically and righteously before God.

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