

‘For circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing! But a new creation is everything’ ¹. Paul is writing with the pen in his own hand, using bold and large letters. There are certain things he wants to emphasize. There is no gospel without the cross of Christ. And there is no gospel that does not lead to new birth. Faith in Christ’s cross – and nothing else – brings new life to those to have such faith.¹

¹ 6:15

The question is: what is it that really counts in the spiritual world? The Judaizers want to bring in an impressive, ‘showy’ religion. They want to play down the cross of Christ and bring in a very Jewish kind of ‘Christianity’ which will be admired by everyone and will be acceptable in the Roman empire. What they want more than anything is to persuade the Galatian men to get circumcised. This is the thing that will declare that a man is a Jewish Christian. Paul’s answer is: circumcision is in itself entirely useless to achieve anything in the kingdom of God.

Or we could put it like this. Rituals and ceremonies achieve nothing in the kingdom of God. There are a few little ceremonies in the Christian church, but not many. I can think of a few. Water-baptism was used when a person first came to faith in Jesus. The Lord’s Supper was a time when Christians had a fellowship-meal together and in the course of it broke bread and drank wine to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. The laying-on-of hands was used when praying for someone. Anointing oil was used when a sick person asked the elders to pray for him. The ‘right-hand of fellowship’ ¹ was used to express recognition and fellowship. The ‘holy kiss’ was a way in which New Testament Christian expressed their love for each other. So far as I know this is a complete list of the ‘ceremonies’ that we find in the New Testament. It does not amount to much and it shows that actually the apostolic churches were not very ritualistic in the way they did things. But even this short list is only a list of things that were picturesque and symbolical. None of them had any power in themselves. All of them are just ways of expressing faith. It is faith that achieves great things in the kingdom of God. Circumcision achieves nothing! Water-baptism was an expression of faith. Its significance is in the faith, not in the water! The Lord’s Supper is of no value if we try to turn it into a piece of magic! The laying-on-of hands can be used when praying, but it is the praying that is important not the hands. A ‘holy kiss’ expresses love, but when the one doing the kissing was Judas it was an act of betrayal. Circumcision achieves nothing!

¹ Galatians 2:9

Irreligion is as useless as religion. Someone might want to say, ‘Quite right. Religion is useless. We must throw out these religious routines altogether.’ But Paul says, ‘...and uncircumcision is nothing’. No blessing comes by religion. No blessing comes by avoiding religion!

What then is the answer? Paul tells us. ‘But a new creation is everything.’ When we put our faith in the cross of Christ, it crucifies us – we become new people. It crucifies the world to us – we shall never look at the world in the same way. And it brings about an entire new creation in our lives. Everything is transformed. Our minds are different. Our hearts and feelings and emotions are different. The things we want in life. The attitudes we have towards God, towards the sinner, towards ourselves, towards fellow Christians – it is all totally transformed. It is the beginning of a new world – literally. A new heavens and new earth is on its way – and we are the beginning of it. Religion is useless. Anti-religion or secularism is equally useless. But being newly created by our faith in the cross of Christ is the one thing that truly makes an eternal difference in our lives.

There is Christian fellowship only between those who have faith in the cross of Christ and who have experienced new birth. No other kind of ‘Christianity’ is genuine. ‘For all of those who will follow this principle –peace be upon them, that is, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God’ ¹. Paul gives his final word of peace to only one kind of person: those who will accept that the only gospel that

¹ 6:15

exists is the gospel of the cross and of new birth through the cross. 'Peace be upon them,' says Paul, 'upon all of them and only upon them.' No other person is recognized as being able to have peace with God. 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.' There is no other way.

He adds another phrase 'and upon the Israel of God'. Is this another group of people? Is he referring to Jewish people in distinction from those who believe in the cross, and who know of new birth? After all that he has said Paul surely cannot mean that! Having said, 'There is no Jew or Greek', he cannot now be blessing Jews as a separate entity from those who believe in the cross. We must follow those who translate the Greek kai as meaning 'that is'. Believers are the Israel of God. Paul has said as much in Galatians 3:29. The current Israel consists of Jewish believers plus gentiles who have been grafted into that small body. The church is 'remnant Israel' plus believing gentiles added into it. The church is 'the Israel of God'.



Paul asks that this controversy may be settled once and forever. 'From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus' ¹. He has been persecuted so much for his preaching of the cross, and carries the scars in his body. He has not avoided persecution as the Judaizers wish to do. Surely it is reasonable for him to ask something from his own converts who had received so much blessing by Paul's preaching of the cross. 'From henceforth let no person trouble me,' he says. 'Let the gospel be accepted by you all and let those who deny it be rejected. Let me hear of no further debate over this matter! He is rather abrupt in his ending. This is no time for pleasantries. He ends with a brief prayer and nothing more: 'Brothers and sisters, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen' ². Galatians has called us away from salvation by Mosaic institutions, even back from salvation by morality or 'churchianity'. It has called us to a simple and exclusive faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We are justified before God by faith alone. Such 'justification' brings down the Holy Spirit upon us. Our 'law' is Christ Himself. He is our law by giving us His Holy Spirit. We reach new heights of loving graciousness by following the Spirit in His kingdom of love. We run from the flesh. We keep in step with the Spirit. It is such people – not simply circumcised people – who are the Israel of God. Upon them will be peace. They will receive the answer to Paul's prayer and will experience the grace of God in their lives.

¹ 6:17

² 6:18

Note

1. There is a work of the Spirit that leads to faith and there is a gift of the Spirit that is the result of faith.
 - (i) For some people regeneration is the first of these. 'Regeneration is the work of what Augustine called "prevenient" grace, the grace that precedes our outgoings of heart toward God' – says J.I. Packer in Concise Theology.
 - (ii) But there is also a 'life' that is received by coming to Christ. At other points in the Scriptures and in the writings of Christian teachers, 'new birth' comes through our faith. It is not (in this terminology) the same as the first 'quickening' of the Spirit. The subject is tricky because of the limits of human language. I refer here to new birth in the second sense.

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