

Paul & Weakness: The Background

We now reach the days of the new covenant. Even so, this chapter might still seem to be a digression from the theme of weakness. But it is not!

Paul was deeply anxious about the rise of the Judaising false brothers (Acts 11:2; 15:1; Tit. 1:10, for example) – the *pseudadelphoi* (2 Cor. 11:26), or, as he labelled them (or was it their own description of themselves?), the super-apostles (2 Cor. 11:5,13; 12:11). Paul knew that their teaching was destructive of the gospel. So concerned was he about their cunning infiltration of the company of believers (Gal. 2:4; see also Jude 4), that he wrote to several *ekklēsia* about them. He was tormented by the knowledge that believers were accepting the false gospel which such men – he dismissed them as peddlers, hucksters, cheapjacks¹ – were pedalling (2 Cor. 2:17). Which was: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:1). Salvation itself was at stake. This was the risk. Salvation.

We need to pause and make sure we really understand what all this involved.

As I have argued elsewhere,² ‘unless you are circumcised’ was shorthand for ‘unless you come under the Mosaic law’. This was the first point: these men demanded that keeping the law of Moses was essential. They might harp on about dietary laws and circumcision, but the truth is such preaching and teaching

¹ Strong words? No stronger than these: ‘For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds’ (2 Cor. 11-13).

² See my *False*.

could only end in one conclusion: the entire law. As the apostle explained:

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:3).

You can't pick and choose with the law; it's all or nothing. And that is as true today as it was two thousand years ago. I say this – and do so with vehemence – because of the Reformed ploy of chopping the law into three bits and dismissing about 95% of it, leaving what they like to call 'the moral law'. Clever it may be, but entirely unscriptural. And it comes under the apostle's rebuke.

What is more, there is a second point. 'You cannot be saved' cannot be confined to justification. It definitely includes that, of course, but it also includes progressive sanctification (Rom. 6:22; Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 12:10,14), leading to transformation into Christ's likeness (Rom. 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:12-16; Phil. 3:10; Col. 3:10; 1 John 2:6; 4:17). The fact is, as a reading through the post-Pentecost Scriptures makes abundantly clear, God's eternal purpose was always the conversion of an entire race of sinners, with their transformation into Christ's likeness.³ This is what 'salvation' means. The almost-ubiquitous notion that justification – vitally important, essential, though justification is – is the be-all-and-end-all of the spiritual life is false – and dangerous.⁴

³ See my *False*. I will not repeat the arguments here. And that comment applies throughout this chapter.

⁴ Take the book of Galatians. Contrary to what many believe, justification was not the nub of the issue which concerned Paul in writing to the Galatians; progressive sanctification, the believer's perfection into Christ's likeness, was. (See my 'Getting Galatians Right' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Thirteen; Sanctification in Galatians*). You don't have to take my word for it. Hear the apostle. Having laid down the doctrine of justification by faith (Gal. 2:15-21), Paul hammered home his main point: 'Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected [that is, are you trying to reach the fulfilment of God's purpose for your life – DG] by the flesh [that is, by trying to keep the law – DG]? (Gal. 3:3)'. And, overwhelmingly, most of the

Now all this is of the highest significance, but since I have dealt with it in my *False Brothers*, I will not digress and expand on the issue here. But this must not be taken to mean that it can be brushed aside. We must be vigilant and determined in holding on to this biblical principle of salvation as defined by Scripture, contending earnestly for it; as Jude explained:

Although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Indeed, never was there greater need to contend for the fully-orbed, biblical doctrine of salvation. I say this because evangelicals are being swept up in the principles and practices of inclusivism, easy-believism – with conversion being a notable casualty – while the Reformed are adept at glossing Scripture, putting words into the apostle’s mouth, imposing their theological template on Scripture, in order to maintain their adherence to a Reformed Confession,⁵ and thus keeping

rest of the letter is taken up with the reply: the believer began by the Spirit, continues by the Spirit and comes to eternal glory in the kingdom by the Spirit. Justification? Yes, of course, a believer’s regeneration leading to repentance and faith, with union to Christ leading to justification signals the start of his pilgrimage, but that pilgrimage – the believer’s growing in grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18) – continues until he reaches eternal glory. Thus, progressive sanctification leading to transformation is key (see my *Christ*). Without justification, no sinner can be saved – no question of it! But the same goes for progressive sanctification and transformation; without progressive sanctification and transformation into Christ’s likeness, no sinner will be saved. ‘Holiness without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14), is how the writer to the Hebrews put it (See my ‘Paul’s Breathtaking Assertion’ on my sermonaudio.com page). This does not refer to justification or positional sanctification (See my *Fivefold*); as the context makes as clear as noonday, it is all to do with the believer’s progressive sanctification. The *pseudadelphoi* were ruining this. And their success – and the damage they were causing – was driving Paul to desperation.

⁵ The Westminster documents are heavy on law. See my *Christ*.

sinners under the law for conviction, and believers under the whip – to use Calvin’s word⁶ – of the Mosaic law for progressive sanctification, thus producing conformity in place of conversion.⁷

Paul knew that the false brothers were wreaking havoc in many places – Galatia, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, for instance; but, above all, at Corinth. He himself had suffered under them, as he told the believers there. Included in the list of the many afflictions which he had endured was:

...[in] danger from false brothers (2 Cor. 11:26).

Do not overlook Paul’s talk of ‘danger’. This was no laughing matter.

As he explained to the Galatians, he had first met the *pseudadelphoi* in Antioch, and the experience had left its permanent mark seared on his mind and heart:

False brothers [were] secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (Gal. 2:4-5).

As I say, it was the teaching of the *pseudadelphoi* at Corinth that was a particular headache – not to say, heartache – for the apostle. In order to put a stop to the damage that the Judaisers with their so-called gospel were inflicting on the *ekklēsia*, and to instruct and warn the believers who had succumbed to the false teaching – in order to bring them back to Christ – Paul was moved to write his second letter to Corinth,⁸ in particular, devoting extended sections of that letter to deal with the question (2 Cor. 2:14 – 4:18; 10:1 – 13:10). The references are approximate and invidious: the truth is, the entire letter shows that Paul was mortified by what was going on at Corinth, and,

⁶ See my *Christ*.

⁷ See my *Assurance*.

⁸ As I have observed, while I am not ignoring the question, I am not entering the minefield of how many letters wrote to Corinth.

like we all do when some problem grips us, he kept coming back to the subject. He simply couldn't leave it alone; again and again, whatever he was talking about, he returned to the issue. And a good job too! Would that every believer recognised error, and was as disturbed by it and as staunch for truth!

But, as I say, it was in those specified passages in his passionate appeal to the Corinthians where Paul set out the doctrinal principles of the new covenant, and argued vehemently for the consequences of Christ's fulfilment and ending of the old covenant, and how, this being the age of the Spirit, the believer is at liberty and heading for glory.

Note that: to deal with the false teachers Paul set out doctrine – the doctrine of the new covenant. Now there's a principle we need to get hold of today! Rather, it is a principle which needs to grip us.⁹ Sentiment is no substitute for truth!

But Paul did not leave it there. It was not merely – I mean nothing pejorative by the word – not merely a question of doctrine; the apostle's emotions were stirred, and stirred beyond containment, by the antics of the false teachers *and, above all, by the consequences of their teaching*. After all, the *pseudadelphoi* – the super-apostles, as they were known (2 Cor. 11:5,13; 12:11) – were plying their trade and wreaking their mischief, and this, on top of the other serious, heartrending, problems within the *ekklēsia* at Corinth, including incest.¹⁰ And it was not only what was going on at Corinth that was depriving Paul of peace of mind, and keeping him under stress. As he explained:

There is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:28-29).

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⁹ We hold an opinion; a conviction holds us.

¹⁰ See the first letter.

As I said at the start of this chapter, all this may seem a digression. Not a bit of it! Did you spot the key word: ‘weak’? As I will show, weakness – his own weakness – was at the heart of the way Paul confronted the believers and the *pseudadelphoi* at Corinth.

David Alan Black tabulated the proof of the importance of Paul’s use of the word ‘weakness’:

The Greek root-word for ‘weakness’ is used 83 times in the New Testament, 44 times in Paul, 29 times in the two Corinthian letters, mostly (24 times) in 2 Corinthians 10–13.¹¹

I stress yet again that Paul was mortified by the defection from Christ brought about by the teaching of the ‘super’ preachers. So much so, when writing his second letter, Paul did something which he found utterly repugnant (2 Cor. 11:1,16-33; 12:1-6,11-13,19).¹² In his passion, he felt obliged to compare himself and his ministry with that of the super-apostles and their bragging, dictatorial ways.¹³ He was driven to it – goaded beyond measure – and all for the glory of God in the good of his people and the salvation of sinners. Don’t forget, biblical salvation was at stake.

As I have explained, having dealt elsewhere with the doctrinal arguments the apostle used to destroy the teaching of the super-apostles,¹⁴ I will not develop those arguments here; it is the way in which he described his own ministry compared to that of the *pseudadelphoi* or super-apostles – the hucksters, peddlers, cheats, deceivers – which concerns me in this present work.

And that takes us to the next chapter.

¹¹ See David Alan Black: *Paul, Apostle of Weakness, Astheneia and Its Cognates in the Pauline Literature*, Pickwick, Eugene, 2012, for – as his title implies – a thorough examination of the word and Paul’s use of it.

¹² Overtones can be read elsewhere in the letter.

¹³ The letter is full of references.

¹⁴ See my *False*.