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Q&A#104 How Do We Apply Pauline Teaching Given to Jews as Twenty First Century Gentiles?

February 14, 2019



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Today's question:

"How should Gentile Christians situate themselves when listening to the New Testament's many sections which were originally directed towards Jewish Christians, but seem now in many ways to apply to Gentiles who have been raised in the the faith?

For example, large sections of Romans are clearly directed at Jewish believers (e.g. Romans 2:17-29), with the basic thrust here and elsewhere being the dangers for those who use the law to justify themselves whilst condemning others.

However, with most churches across the world now being predominantly or wholly Gentile, there will be few, if any, converted Jews in the congregation to create this tension. These passages, then, are usually reapplied as a warning to mature Gentile believers not to look down on others.

The logic of this "re-application" is obvious, as mature Gentile believers, standing atop centuries of Christendom, do find the religious Jews addressed by Paul easier to relate to than the recently converted, formerly idolatrous Gentiles he addresses elsewhere - and yet to identify with them seems to do a violence to both the text, and the categories of Jew and Gentile which God has created. Even though the dividing wall has been torn down in Christ, both categories still exist and matter in some sense. As a Gentile Christian, though my felt experience may be as an "older brother", the reality and categories of salvation history inescapably categorise me as a "younger brother".

However, if one preached and taught these sections with exclusive reference to Jewish Christians in congregations where you will never actually have any Jewish Christians, I imagine the result would be a lot of sermons directed at people who aren't there!

How then should we Gentiles situate ourselves when applying these texts?"

I mention John Barclay's 'Paul & the Gift': <https://amzn.to/2EcE6oz>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, How do we apply Pauline Teaching Given to Jews as Twenty First Century Gentiles? Yet, to identify with them seems to do a violence to both the text and the categories of Jew and Gentile which God has created. Even though the dividing wall has been torn down in Christ, both categories still exist and matter in some sense.

As a Gentile Christian, though my felt experience may be as an older brother, the reality and categories of salvation history inescapably categorise me as a younger brother. However, if one preached and taught these sections with exclusive reference to Jewish Christians and congregations where you will never actually have any Jewish Christians, I imagine the result would be a lot of sermons directed at people who aren't there. How then should Gentiles situate ourselves when applying these texts? It's a very good question and one of the key questions I think that lies behind some of the resistance to something like the New Perspective on Paul, which re-reads a lot of the typical texts used for the doctrine of justification and our understanding of salvation and applies them in a way and understands them in a way that in their original context applies very particularly to Jewish Christians and to a conflict over the boundary marker of the law which makes it very difficult for people to understand how it might apply to the lives of Christians here in the 21st century or in the context of the 16th century debates around Roman Catholicism.

Now, it's worth considering the ways in which we can take something from original context and move it to a new context. There are ways that I think are very common among liberals which are to look within that context and to see the nut of the truth and remove the shell that's surrounding it or the husk and the kernel and just get that kernel of truth and then that kernel of truth is a universal decontextualised truth that can be held up and abstracted from any particular context. The particularity of the context is dispensable and that's often how these things have worked.

So God is seen throughout history acting in these different contexts and we see these kernels of truth surrounded by this husk of context and history and once we remove that husk, we've got the real truth and the real truth is some principles such as love, inclusion, equality, these sorts of things. Very abstract notions that are not very strongly rooted within context. Whereas within scripture, I think what we see is a traversal of contexts where contexts are connected to each other and you can move from context to context but through particular pathways.

And so you're not moving directly from an abstraction to a universal truth, but you're traversing contexts and as you traverse those contexts, you're able to move certain things along those lines of connection. So for instance, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul can talk about all our fathers passed through the cloud and the sea. They were baptised with Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

All these things happened as examples to us upon whom the end of the ages have come. What's he doing there? Is he taking some general truths that are abstracted from the Exodus narrative? No, that's not what he's doing. Rather, he's connecting the Corinthian Christians with that narrative and saying that there are ways to look at this narrative in the light of the fact that this is connected with your story and to bring truth across from that to your life in this present situation in time.

So when you're reading the Exodus narrative, this is not just addressing a people that belong in a very different time and place. It's not just about them. It's about us here and now.

But it's about us here and now in a way that does not evacuate what happened back then to them of its significance. Rather, the significance as it passes from us, from them to us, is through our connection with them. It's through the connections that he draws, first of all, that they are our fathers.

Whether you're Jew or Gentile, you are descended from these people spiritually. You have inherited the project that God is working out within the world. Also, there's the continuity of God's work that the spirit and Christ were present and active at that point in time.

The rock that followed them was Christ. They all participated in Christ in the bread and the water from the same drink, the same spiritual drink. They're all baptized into Moses.

So there's a continuity in the form of God's work, a form that is characterized by baptism and supper. And there is a continuity in the analogy, a typological connection between Moses and Christ. And that allows for the traversal of those contexts so that truths can be moved from one context to the other.

Now, I think the same can be seen in a number of other places in Scripture. Even when

we read the Old Testament, a lot of the texts do not have a very clear context. Some of the minor prophets, it's not entirely clear what their context is.

But yet there are truths that traverse contexts, that they're not abstracted from context, but they can move from context to context and they change in the process. That does not mean that they can be made and treated as a wax nose, that you can make them into whatever you want. Because there is a very particular shape to this traversal of contexts that manages and controls the transition.

So the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant is one that passes through resurrection. And so the old dies and the new is formed and that new creates certain connections. So, for instance, the church is analogous to the temple order, but it's analogous in ways that involve a transformation.

We participate in the life of the spirit in a new way. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit in a way that takes the place in some senses of the old temple order. There are other ways that we can see these connections and explore the way that we can move from one to another.

Now, when we're thinking about resurrection, resurrection isn't just the sweeping away of an old order. It's the dying of an old order and it's raising again in a new form. And so a lot of Paul's letters are about they talk about principles of the law, but those laws, principles of the law have been transformed.

There are other principles to bear in mind that we are connected with the story of the Old Testament as the sons and daughters of Abraham. It's a key point that Paul's bringing out in his letters, particularly in Romans and Galatians, that we are the sons and the daughters of Abraham. And as such, we inherit this deposit of this narrative, this faith, and we walk in the footsteps of our father, Abraham.

So there are analogies and ways in which we can take truths that apply to him. And as we move them along with us, we can carry them with us on the pilgrimage of the people of God. And on that pilgrimage, these things are transformed as they're related to different contexts, but they are fundamentally consistent.

They're fundamentally related to what they were before. They're not transformed into something completely differently, completely different. They're not a kernel that's removed from its husk that we just dispense with the history.

Rather, we move through the history. And as we move through the history, we'll see these principles being expressed in consistent, but yet ways that are transformed. What does this mean when we're reading the accounts of justification, for instance, in Romans and elsewhere? Accounts that focus upon the works of the law, works of the law that are very specifically referring, I believe, to works that are related to the Jewish Torah and to

Israel as a body of people defined by this law.

It means that, first of all, we recognize we're not the first recipients of this letter, that this is not primarily addressed to our situation. It's not primarily addressed to a situation where people are seeking works righteousness, seeking to justify themselves, seeking to set themselves right with God, taking pride in their own performance. In the way that these issues or this elaborate doctrine of merit that we find in the context of the medieval church that Luther was responding to.

This is not the context of Romans or Galatians. But yet what Luther and the other reformers were doing and what other people have done since then is to explore Paul's doctrine of grace, the deep underlying principles that drive and inform his approach to that specific occasional issue. And it's not just a small occasional issue.

This is a deep issue for that transition, for the transition where the Gentiles are engrafted into the olive tree of Israel. Again, that's part of the continuity that enables us to move from principles of the Old Testament and principles in the New Testament into the life of the church. And what you do then, I think, is once you've got these principles in place, you can explore Paul's doctrine of grace and say, actually, this this doctrine of grace applies very readily to the sorts of issues that we see in the context of the medieval church.

Luther is recontextualizing Paul's doctrine of justification and works, doing so and his doctrine of faith in a way that does not do violent, essential violence to that doctrine, but that helps us to see its force and its application within our current situation in time. And I believe that this is exactly what we should be doing with the text, recognizing that it has this original context, that we are not the first recipients of this word and being very careful to dig into that original context to understand it, see what's taking place there. And then to traverse context as we move with that principle through the transitions that enable us to relate it to our particular situation.

And that requires a reading of the original context and the original text. It requires an understanding of the transition, the way in which we can traverse the distance between those contexts, and then a deep understanding of the dynamics of our context and the issues that are at play. One of the books I found quite helpful on this is at the end of John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift*, where he talks about the debates between new perspective on Paul's scholars and more traditional Lutheran reformed readings of Paul, and shows that the Lutheran readings were taking and radically reapplying Paul's doctrine of grace in a way that understood part of its inner moment, the mainspring of Paul's theology, in a way that often the new perspective writers have not.

They've understood the explicit context of Paul's theology, and they've dealt with that quite well, for the most part. But what they fail to do is recognize the power of the recontextualization and the necessity of that to occur. So I think it's important then to

recognize the original context, that these are not first and foremost addressed to the sort of issues that we find as Gentile Christians.

But yet it is not inappropriate to make some sort of transition from that original context to ours. In the specific examples that the questioner gives, examples of the older brother, younger brother dynamic, and boasting against the, first of all, there's the boast in the law. And then there's also, on the other hand, there's the boast against those branches that have been cut off.

There are different ways of seeing these competing boasts. But when we're thinking about what it means to be Gentiles, who have established churches, who have Christian society and all these sorts of things, and we've been Christianized for many years and many generations, and we've been brought up in the faith, etc. There is most definitely a way in which Paul's doctrine of grace, as it is applied to Jews, applies just as readily to us.

That someone who's taking that and making that transition is doing something that should be done with that text, that that text has an application to us. What they're recognizing is that grace is not found upon the preconditions that we have met. There's a priority to grace, that it meets us as enemies, that it meets us as people who are completely undeserving.

And that there is nothing that we do to precede God's grace to make us deserving of it. And that is a radical notion. There's also a radical notion in recognizing that everything is founded upon grace, that it's not us that bear the root, but the root bears us.

And so all the blessings that we have are not cause for boasting, but cause for gratitude and for fear as well. Lest if we become complacent and presumptuous, we neglect the root and turn away from it and trust in ourselves. Now, these are very strong Pauline themes, Pauline themes that are addressed first and foremost to the Jewish situation.

And that situation is a pivotal moment in history. But yet they have equal application to the life of the church today because this is the way God's grace works. This is what it means to be a people that are the recipients of grace.

And in many ways, we can even go further with that doctrine of grace. And as we apply it to Gentiles, if Jews do not have a right to boast and consider all the blessings that they had through the law and the covenants and these sorts of things. What about us who have been grafted in and we take on a boast as we become established over time? How much less right do we have if they fell away? How much more can we learn from their example about our own position and the danger of presuming upon God's grace and thinking that it is something that we have an entitlement to? As usual, there's a lot more that could be said about this.

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