

The New Beginning of the Global Mission

Lesson 8: Wednesday, December 14, 2005

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In our topic you note that we are speaking of a new beginning not the beginning. It is not as though God's plan for the globe was a NT invention. It was a continuation and heightening, and an unprecedented "lateral" shift of truth-in-culture, but it was not a total new beginning.

In fact, however, it had so many new features in it that a loud clamoring among scholars has been going on for centuries to the effect that the Apostle Paul invented a different religion from that of Jesus. Such scholars focus on the fact that the form of faith Paul promoted does seem in some ways like a distinctly different religion. Jews think so to this day. But not just Jews. such discussions take place among Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical Bible scholars, pastors, and theologians. One of the more famous books on this subject is that of J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*.

However, it may just be that all such thinkers are working with an artificial problem because they are simply not thinking missiologically. Like the Dispensational scholars who produced the classic *Scofield Reference Bible*, they can be praised for picking up the numerous differences between eras and taking them seriously. However, some of them have felt they were forced to make the NT into a radically different "new dispensation," one in which even the Gospels are not completely part of the so-called "church age," and the book of Acts is seen as a mere "corridor" of transition from one dispensation into another, and unreliable for the formation of doctrine. Doesn't that very conservative Dispensational perspective seem similar to the more blatant liberal insistence that Paul invented a new religion?

I do think that there is at least one important difference between the kind of changes that took place over time *within* the Biblical stream of the OT, on the one hand, and the kind of change we see in the NT shift from Jewish culture to Greek culture. Obviously,

right within the enormous span of time covered by our Bibles, we are able to read of several different epochs such as that involving 1) Abraham's form of faith - which did not involve either circumcision or the Ten Commandments - and then 2) the form of faith, whatever it was, while the "children of Abraham" were slaves in Egypt, 3) the form it took when Moses tried to lead the ragged refugees in the wilderness, 4) the new circumstances of the period of the Judges, 5) the later period of the Davidic Kingdom, still later 6) the period of Solomon's temple worship, 7) the radically new situation in the Babylonian and the Persian captivities when the synagogue was invented and Satan was recognized. Then, 8) the different dress in the new Palestine of Greek and Roman occupation, which we see in the NT, only 9) to be modified greatly after the NT with the invasion of Titus - the exhaustion of Roman patience - and the definitive destruction of the temple, 10) the ensuing development of "rabbinical Judaism," and 11) still later versions reaching down to our day in Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Judaism, and even Political Judaism in Israel.

All of these particular substantial changes, being within the same ethnic stream, can be called *diachronic* - they take place within the same people over time. Note that we are talking about changes throughout 4,000 years.

However, the basic Biblical faith has not changed over time. The heart-faith and obedience God favors - the "fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom" - has not changed. We still quote with approval such verses as

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.

And we still gain insights from the period of Abraham and his faith. In Galatians 3 Paul actually speaks of the Gospel that was preached before Christ to Abraham, meaning the information (good news or bad depend-

ing on your viewpoint) that God intended to reconcile all nations not just the lineage of Abraham.

It could be said that one of the main functions of a Biblical record spanning so much time is to make crystal clear that the same expectations of faith could weather all of these *diachronic* changes of culture and continue to do so in the future! Note that these changes were not necessarily sudden. No doubt in many cases there were “before” and “after” versions side by side, as with the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, or today between the contemporary and the traditional worship protocols. This kind of change is still a *diachronic* pattern.

But when the NT portrays a major, fairly sudden shift of faith from one ethnic community - the (Semitic) Jews, to the (Indo-European) Greeks and Latin Romans - we are dealing with a significantly different kind of shift. This kind of shift is a major phenomenon which the Bible teaches us in the NT especially. This second kind of change could be called *synchronic* instead of *diachronic*. But I would rather call it a *lateral* shift when it's from one cultural basin to another, not within the same cultural basin.

With either kind of shift there is no denying that there may be many disturbing differences, just as Judaism in Joshua's day was quite different from the Judaism of Jesus' day. We have to admit that taking such *diachronic* differences seriously is to the credit of the so-called Dispensational school of interpretation.

But such shifts are mainly the result of the significant fact that times change and culture changes. In Paul's case, however, it was not merely a *diachronic* shift over time but also a *lateral* shift from one cultural basin to another. When the Jerusalem council met in the book of Acts and decided that there were indeed certain things about the Jewish form of the faith that ought not to change in the switch to Hellenistic (Greek) culture, they were not dealing with new or old *diachronic* change but *lateral* change. The “new rules”

did not necessarily apply to Jewish believers in Christ but to those Greek and Latin believers, called “devout persons” who were not following all of the Jewish customs.

Realistically, then, whether we are studying a *diachronic* or a *lateral* shift, we need to expect significant differences of wrapping paper for the Biblical faith. We also need to be aware that even though such changes are inevitable the changes may not be all to the good. Some of the new versions of the Christian faith in Africa, as in the Tai Ping movement in China, or the novel Christian Science and Mormon traditions in the United States are new combinations of culture and faith that incorporate significant error. To a lesser extent this incorporation of error has taken place in Roman Catholic, Muslim and, yes, Protestant religious traditions. That is what *syncretism* is.

Note, furthermore, that in all cases, whether *diachronic* or *lateral*, there are multitudes of people who become caught up in a religion or behavior that may contain very little if any true heart faith, but that in the new composite there may as well be truly devout souls whose genuine response to God contains significant, true faith.

Furthermore, after the Biblical faith survived the shift from a Semitic to an Indo-European culture, the new combination of faith and culture also began to move through *diachronic* shifts. Constantine's era was substantially different from Paul's era, and is where the word *Christianity* comes into the picture, since that was Constantine's political designation. After his 45 years as emperor, the label was soon to become the accepted term for the official religion of the empire. [And thus those employing that label outside of the empire were immediately persecuted. This fact eventually led to the term *Muslim* in the areas of Semitic substratum.]

Later, in the Reformation, we see the *lateral* shift from the Roman, Mediterranean culture to the Germanic. In this new shift all of the complexities and misunderstandings are present which the Book of Acts so help-

fully predicts but were lamentably unexpected and disturbing when they came. We see each side questioning the validity of the other. We see both sides involving multitudes with nominal faith as well as many devout souls.

The Reformation was a massive lateral shift and interestingly took place at the time when the older Mediterranean form of faith was already undergoing significant diachronic shifts, due to the unleashing of the Bible in the Gutenberg era. People in Luther's day, all over England, France, Spain, Italy, and Germany were studying the Bible as never before. That process no doubt contributed to the thought that there could also be a totally independent German form of the faith.

The most important thing NOT to believe is that the polarization we see in the NT (impending between Jewish and Greek carrier vehicles of the faith) portrayed one false, older religion with a new, pure, ideal religion. Or, that there is an inherent difference between the kind of heart faith intended in both the OT and the NT.

It simply is not true that the Jews, on the one hand, represented a religious tradition in which there never had been any basic component of grace and faith, while the Greeks represented a completely new and genuine grasp of both grace and faith.

True, both Paul and the author of Hebrews make many statements comparing a true walk of faith to a sterile legalism. However, that kind of a comparison can be made within every single emergence of a new combination of faith and culture. All forms of Jewish and Christian culture embody both nominal and spiritual followers.

The new, stupendous reality in the NT was not the sudden invention of grace and faith, and a passing from a defunct religion of works to a religion of spiritual reality, but the appearance of God Himself in the person of Jesus, who lifted the reality of God from the pages of scripture and literally acted out the will of God. In the face of Jesus we see the

glory of God the Father. This was an absolutely and totally unique gift to both Jews and Gentiles. Note that the name of Jesus is blasphemously employed today by some of the very same people who are supposedly part of the new religious tradition, while it is cautiously on the lips of some of the people who are supposedly part of the old religious tradition.

Thus, as zealous as we wish to be in getting people to (as we say) "accept" Jesus Christ as their Savior, in the last analysis we must recognize that no process through which we lead people, emotional or intellectual, can be an infallible test of the true heart-faith which the Bible constantly emphasizes.

Our lack of infallible criteria is frankly as inconvenient as it is embarrassing. But that lack is apparently as God intended, since we read in the Parable of the Tares. However, the common tendency is for those in one composite of faith and culture to exclude those of all other composites, all other forms, and often earnestly to do so, because for us as humans there does not seem to be any other way to separate the sheep from the goats, even though in the Bible that kind of separation is clearly in God's hands.

When any of us adopts one of these re-clothings of the faith we must relentlessly resist the temptation to overly exalt our own culturally wrapped Gospel and be unable to see the validity of any other form. I will never forget in my seminary days how offended mainland Chinese believers were by the practice in the USA of passing an offering plate in front of each person. They do it differently (at the front door). I was surprised by my own surprise at their surprise!

We all know how many different forms of the faith are swirling around in the United States, and some of the adherents of each one probably think all others are invalid.

There was a time when some Pentecostals insisted that speaking in tongues was an indelible evidence of salvation. Earlier for some pre-pentecostal Evangelicals there was a similar insistence on the necessity for salva-

tion of what has been called “a second work of grace,” quoting the verse “holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb 12:14),” equating one of their evangelistic protocols with the meaning of the word *holiness* in this verse.

Probably the most wide-spread breakdown of understanding is the lateral kind of shift, whether in Paul’s day, Luther’s day, or in India today with those who see things as does the Missouri-Synod Lutheran theologian/missionary, Herbert Hoefler. This movement of millions of believers in India, who retain much of their Hindu culture, is scorned and denounced - expectedly - by both some Western Christians in America and in India by many who are followers of Christ in a Westernized form of faith. Similar breakdowns of understanding can be seen in attitudes toward some of the African movements that are not tracking with Western Christianity. There are now in Africa more than 50 million in this category.

We should not be surprised when after 400 years Protestants and Catholics are still confused over the difficulty of distinguishing between the faith that works and the works of faith. Will we ever accept the simple Biblical statement that “faith without works is dead”? There has always been common ground between true believers in both Catholic and Protestant camps. The unmodifiable sticking point then and now is the divergence of the two *cultures*, Mediterranean and German. In Romans 1:5 Paul spoke of bringing about “the obedience of faith” among all Gentiles. It is as though the Protestants accused the Catholics of believing in obedience without faith while the Catholics felt the Protestants were promoting faith without obedience. These are the kinds of theological fine points which lateral shifts often involve.

On the one hand, for Luther there was the unavoidable chasm between the best German spirituality and the worst of the city of Rome’s carnal, commercialization of religion plus its cultural stress on celibacy. On the other hand, for the highly spiritual Catholic NT scholar Johan Staupitz, whose fervent

preaching on the Pauline epistles jerked Luther out of spiritual depression, there would have been an unavoidable chasm between the best of Roman spirituality and the worst of German nominalism plus the “carnal” desire of German priests to marry.

What was not the case in Luther’s day was the often mentioned issue of supposed restrictions on the vernacular translation of the Bible. Luther’s superb translation was the 14th full Bible to be translated into German from the Latin, and the previous versions were all done during the previous era of Roman Catholicism in Germany.

Then, as now, it is the obvious Biblical emphasis on faith not culture which is the great enemy of those who wish to canonize a particular type of Christianity.

As we reflect in this lesson on the enormous significance of the New Beginning portrayed in Paul’s ministry, a lateral shift from Jew to Greek, we must ruefully acknowledge at the same time that the many diachronic shifts in our precious Bible cause lots of problems for merely religious people whether they shift or not!