

Is Christianity a Legal System on the Earth, or Is It a Spiritual Movement From Heaven?

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the question of whether Christianity is a legal system or a spiritual movement, with the apostle Paul arguing that it is a spiritual movement that brings emancipation from legal bondage and into the liberty of the sons of God.

Scripture: Romans 7:24, Galatians 5:1

Topics: "Legalism vs. Spiritual Freedom", "The Nature of the Gospel"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the critical question of whether Christianity is merely a legal system or a spiritual movement from heaven, emphasizing the significance of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians in clarifying this issue. He highlights the intense struggle within the early church regarding the nature of Christianity, particularly the conflict between legalism and the freedom found in Christ. Sparks points out that the essence of the Gospel is emancipation from legal bondage and the embrace of spiritual liberty as children of God. He stresses that this battle for understanding the true nature of Christianity is ongoing and vital for believers today. Ultimately, he encourages the congregation to seek a deeper understanding of their liberty in Christ and to reject any return to legalism.

Transcript

We are asking the Lord to help us in these mornings to consider some of the most vital matters of our Christian life. In our New Testament we have a number of documents. But amongst those documents, there is one which stands related to perhaps the most vital question that has ever risen in relation to Christianity. In the matter of space, it is not a very long document. Indeed, it is one of the shorter ones; but into its brief space the writer has crowded the very essence of Christianity. He took up his pen to write this document with an intense determination to settle this great question. So he concentrated into a short space the very essence of Christianity. I do not think the apostle ever wrote anything under a greater sense of importance and necessity. This letter just throbs with the sense of his passion about this particular matter. A great question had arisen. That question threatened to destroy the real nature of Christianity. The question was this: What is this thing which has invaded this world by the coming of Jesus Christ? For in the coming of Jesus Christ into this world, God had broken into history, and God had broken into history to make an immense change in everything. So the great question was: What is it that has come into this world with Jesus Christ? Is it just the continuation of an old system with some things added

to it? Is it a legal system shaped on the basis of the old Jewish system? In other words, is it just the continuation of Judaism with something added to it? Or is it an entirely new, living, spiritual movement from heaven? Is the old garment of Judaism just to have some new patches put into it? Or is it to be an altogether new garment? Is it the old wine-skins of Judaism to have new wine put into them? Or is it to be an altogether new wine-skin? This was the great question.

This great question represented a vast difference, and that difference became a great battlefield between the old and the new. This question just wrought Christianity into confusion. For a time, everybody but a few were in a sense of uncertainty about this. It led to very serious divisions amongst the Lord's people. It even insinuated itself among the first apostles themselves. Peter, the leader of the twelve, had a great battle over this question, and at one time he came into serious conflict with the Apostle Paul on this matter. James, who was one of the brothers of our Lord on this earth, had serious reservations about this matter. The first Christian martyr died on this very question; Stephen was martyred because of this very matter. Wherever Christianity went, this dispute followed it. We, in our time, are not able to realize how tense was this strain over the matter of the real nature of Christianity.

Although this particular document to which we refer did settle it very largely at that time, the nature of this controversy has persisted right through into our own day. Is Christianity a legal system, or is it a spiritual life? It was in relation to that question that the Risen and Ascended Lord broke through from heaven and laid His hand on the Apostle Paul. Jesus came right out of heaven, right through from the glory, and put His hand on this man Saul of Tarsus. It was not a small thing for the Lord Jesus, Who had sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, to get up off the Throne and come back here again. He must have seen that there was a very serious matter involved. So He did not send an angel or an archangel; He left His place in glory and came down to that man on the road to Damascus, and He laid His hand upon him. Afterwards, Paul described it as being apprehended by Christ Jesus. You know what that word "apprehended" means? Well, I hope you do not know what it means so far as the law is concerned. When the policeman is after a criminal and he finds the criminal, he puts a very strong hand on him. And that is the word that the apostle used. He said, 'I was apprehended. I was arrested by Jesus Christ.' And it was in relation to this specific question. The Lord arrested Paul as the instrument through which He was going to answer this question. So serious did the Lord regard this matter, that it is impossible to understand the Apostle Paul's ministry unless we recognize this particular connection. The whole of the Apostle Paul's ministry related to one issue: And that issue is the true, spiritual, heavenly nature of Christianity.

Now Paul by that mighty act from heaven had come to see this great difference. He had come to see that a great divide had been created between old Judaism and new Christianity, between the old earthly Israel and the new heavenly Israel. He had come to see that these were two distinctly different nations. He had come to see that this question divided the ages. What had existed in the past ages was now terminated. And something new had been introduced to be the nature of things for all the eternal ages. When the Apostle Paul himself came to see that, when that broke upon him from heaven, that is, the vast difference between the legal and the spiritual, he threw himself into THAT BATTLE to the last drop of his blood.

That battle began immediately when Paul was saved. When he had been met by the Lord, and entered the city of Damascus, after being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit, he testified to them that Jesus is the Christ. Recognizing what that meant where this man himself was concerned, recognizing that he had changed his ground, that he had left the ground of legalism, the ground of Judaism, that he had taken the ground of Christ: THEN THE BATTLE STARTED. And right through the thirty years of his life, everywhere he went he was found in that battle.

The last chapter of the Book of the Acts, which leaves Paul in prison waiting the sentence of death, finds him still in the battle. The Judaizers are with him in his prison. He seeks to reason with them, but then he has to turn from them and say, 'It's no good, I must turn to the Gentiles.' The battle was on from the beginning to the end of his life; and this battle was on one mighty issue: Is Christianity a legal system on this earth, or is it a spiritual movement from heaven?

Now, I began by saying that there is a document in the New Testament which sets forth the answer to that question, and I expect many of you have already come to the conclusion as to what that document is. If you are not sure about that, let me say at once, it is the Letter to the Galatians. It is now fairly or generally believed that this letter was the first letter that Paul wrote. In my early days, it was believed that the Letters to the Thessalonians were the first letters that Paul wrote. And I used to say that. But further investigation has led those who know very well that the Galatians Letter was probably the first letter. Now I am not going to argue out that matter this morning. You can believe it or you need not believe it. But, if that should be true, how significant it is that that should be the first great issue about which the apostle wrote. And if you read that letter, and feel the strength with which the apostle wrote it, you can discern how serious he felt this question to be. He saw that there was that which was threatening the whole nature of Christianity. And so he set himself to do this work. That is, to preserve the pure spiritual nature of what had come in with Jesus Christ.

Now before we proceed to consider what is in this letter, there are two basic things which must engage our attention. First of all, what the apostle himself meant by this letter, and that is contained in chapter one, and verse eight, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any Gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema" (ASV). The whole letter is gathered into that one sentence. "The Gospel which we preached." He says that what he is dealing with is the nature of the Gospel. He says we preach the Gospel to you. This letter then is a restatement of the Gospel. Now various names have been given to what is in the New Testament. It is called by many Christianity, and that is a very comprehensive term; or it is called the Christian faith, or the Christian religion. In the New Testament, it is known by none of those names. The New Testament never speaks of this as Christianity; it never speaks of it as the Christian faith; it never speaks of it as the Christian religion. It is known just by one name. Everything that is in the New Testament and which came in with Jesus Christ is just called The Gospel.

Now here is something that we need to carefully notice. You see, we draw a distinction between what we call the Gospel, and fuller teaching for believers. By the Gospel, many mean that which is for the unsaved, and what we give to the saved, well, it is something else. Suppose you are going to have some gospel meetings at the end of the week and they are not for believers, they are for the unsaved. That is an altogether artificial distinction. Everything in the New Testament for the unsaved and for the saved is called the Gospel. It is not a religion. It is not a philosophy of life. It is not a system of truths and practices. It is just the Gospel. And that word means: "Good News." It is given various connections, such as the Gospel of our salvation. But there is one overall and inclusive thing about this word, and that is, "The Gospel of God concerning His Son Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:1-3). So when we divide between the Gospel for the unsaved and something else for the saved, do you see what we are doing? We say, we have left the ground of God's Son, and we have come on to some extra grounds for Christians. The Gospel is comprehensive of everything in Christ. You will never get to the place where you will cease to discover something new concerning God's Son; and although we may be discovering more throughout all eternity, it would still be the Gospel.

Do you think the Gospel ends when you are born again? Do you think the Gospel ends when you leave this world and go to the Lord? If you see the great multitude, which no man can number around the throne, and you listen to their song, they are singing a gospel hymn, "Worthy is the Lamb." But they have come into a very very full understanding of God's Son. See, the Gospel is the Gospel of God concerning His Son for all time, and for all eternity. The Gospel is something infinitely bigger than salvation from sin; it is infinitely bigger than deliverance from judgment and death. The Gospel comprehends all that is in Christ. It was that for which the apostle was fighting. It was not just for the salvation of these people, but that they should understand what they are saved into. That is the battleground. He says, "The Gospel which we preached." And what does it amount to? A whole letter is crowded into that one sentence. The Gospel is emancipation from all legal bondage. It is emancipation into the liberty of the sons of God. That is the theme of this letter: Emancipation from all legal bondage. Emancipation into the liberty of the sons of God. And Paul says, "That is the Gospel which I preached."

In this letter, Paul calls legalism a yoke of bondage. He cries, "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage." When he used that word "yoke," he was using the same word as Jesus Himself had used in Matthew eleven, verses twenty-eight through thirty. Jesus looked out on the multitude, He said, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden. Take My yoke upon you, and learn Me. My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." He was speaking to the multitudes who were under the yoke of Jewish legalism. He said to be under that yoke is to be in labour and be heavy laden. He says, "My yoke is easy," by which He meant: I will liberate you from the yoke of Jewish bondage. I will set you free from all this toil under legalism.

The scribes and the Pharisees had thousands of interpretations to the Old Testament Scripture. They had taken the law of Moses, and they had put two thousand interpretations upon every law. Everything that God had said, they had interpreted it to mean a thousand different things. And so they had taken the Word of God and given to it an interpretation which became a great burden to bear. Not only had God said, "Thou shalt not," the scribes and the Pharisees had said, "Now that means, 'thou shalt not this; thou shalt not that; and thou shalt not a thousand things.'" Not only had Moses said, "Thou shalt," the scribes and Pharisees said, "Thou shalt a thousand things." Jesus said, "They bind heavy burdens and put them on men's shoulders." That is always the effect of legalism. Under a legal system, you just do not know what you may do. You are always asking: 'Now, really, may we do this? If we do this, shall some judgment come upon us? And if we don't do it in that way, shall we fall under the judgment of God?'

That is how it was then, and Paul himself had been under that burden. He tells us about it in the seventh chapter of the Letter to the Romans. And he ends that terrible story with "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this dead body?" That whole system is a system of death, but then he adds, "I thank God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I now meet all in Christ." Now that is the battle of this letter to the Galatians. So this is what Paul calls the Gospel. And as I have not the time to go to the second thing this morning, I am going to leave it there. I mean the second fundamental thing that lies beneath this letter. If the Lord wills, we will speak about that tomorrow. But let him who runs, READ; and let him who reads, RUN. Run out of all this sort of thing into the liberty wherewith Christ makes us free.

Now what I have done this morning is just to present the great question. This great question as to the true nature of Christianity, or of that which came in with Jesus Christ. But I must say this as I close, do not take what I have said as everything; that is only the beginning. We have really got to see what it is that we are in, in Christ. In general, we are in liberty. But we have got to see what that means. So do not go away and say: 'Well, he said this.' Just keep that quiet and say, 'There is something more that we have got to learn

about this.' I leave that with you for this morning, but it is a glorious Gospel - the Gospel of our liberty in Christ. And we refuse to be brought back into bondage by any man.

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