

my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give . . .

The early Christian community came out of a tradition that structurally and morally related to God's being as much a legislator as a creator, a source of behavioral maxims that bore consequences of either good or bad depending on one's behavior. The realm of God (as in the *Book of Job*) was often imagined as a celestial courtroom presided over by God and among its personnel was a prosecutor named Satan (or the Adversary) whose job was to suspect us of sin and accuse us if necessary – which of course it always was!

Yet the good news proclaimed by Jesus (for which he was executed) was: God is not a judge but a Source of absolute Grace, graciousness, ready to forgive, quick to enlighten our lives behaviorally (in the sense of unburden them) as well as illuminate the world and beings around us as fundamentally worthy of care and cordiality – love, affirmation, and thereby – liberation. But human nature being what it is, old habits preferred a schoolmaster or district attorney or “tradition” or “what we are used to” more than that wide open region of a graceful God which Jesus preached, wherein one might also break into a graceful way of being – the dance of life.

And so in today's first reading we find some Jerusalem Christians demanding that the earlier Jewish initiation rite of circumcision be retained by the Church, which led to “no little dissension and debate” in which this man named Paul was prominently involved. Indeed there were other old legalities under discussion regarding diet (kosher abstinence) and valid marriage. In other words there lingered that human nostalgia for being told what to do rather than letting grace and sensitivity, the ethic of the Jesus parables, guide one toward authentic maturity.

Which, as we might say, “drove Paul right up the wall!” Because if you read this Paul's later New Testament letters to other Christians who wanted to set up all sorts of legal practices to insure their salvation – not to have to *think* but simply to observe, to *do*, to pay the fines, to keep their records clean - you can imagine Paul slamming his fist on the table and saying – as he did to new Christians in Asia Minor - *O stupid Galatians! Who bewitched you . . . I want to learn only this from you: did you receive the Spirit from observing laws or from trusting the parables of Jesus. Are you so stupid? . . . Does the one who supplies the Spirit to you and does mighty deeds (of mercy, care, concern) among you do so from works prescribed by the law or from trust in the good news of this grace in which you stand?*

He says similar things elsewhere in his letters – and also argues that while the Law of Moses had long been in force, it was four centuries *earlier* that God challenged ancient Abraham to end his nomadic, meandering existence and step with abandon, with trust, faith, into the wide open region of miracles (like old Sarah's otherwise impossible birth of Isaac) that got the ball rolling toward human redemption. A new region where: *There is neither Jew nor Greek (no need of passports), neither slave nor citizen, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus – where there is no Temple . . . for the radiance of God gives it light, and its lamp is that metaphor of gentleness and self-sacrifice – of Christic being – that Lamb which we identify as divine.*

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