

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles we use to properly interpret the Bible. Last time we discussed the major covenants of the Bible. Dr. Spencer, are we finished with the topic of covenants?

Dr. Spencer: Yes and no.

Marc Roby: Now wait a minute, that's a lawyer's answer, and you're not even a lawyer.

Dr. Spencer: OK, you're right. We are done with what I want to say about covenants themselves, but I want to use an example dealing with biblical covenants to get us into our next topic.

Marc Roby: Alright, what example is that?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at a passage in Galatians 4. The apostle Paul wrote this letter to churches in the Roman province of Galatia, which was roughly equivalent to the central and northeastern areas of modern-day Turkey. It is one of the more well-known of Paul's letters because it played a prominent role in the reformation. Paul argues in the letter that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, and not by our works, which is why the letter has sometimes been closely associated with Martin Luther. Although, I must hasten to add, that the letter still talks about the need for Christians to live differently. God's grace will produce changed lives so, for example, Paul says in Galatians 5:24 that "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires."¹

Marc Roby: That's pretty strong language, to say that we have crucified our sinful nature.

Dr. Spencer: It is strong language. Paul makes it clear that the fact we are saved by grace alone is not an excuse to go on living sinful lives. Nevertheless, the passage I want to look at today is in Chapter 4 of this letter. Paul is rebuking the Jewish Galatians who were telling people that they still needed to keep the Old Testament ceremonial law to be saved and, in Verses 21-26 we read, "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother."

Marc Roby: That passage requires some knowledge of Old Testament history to make sense. So, let me remind our listeners that God had promised Abraham, in Genesis 15:5, that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But then, when Abraham and his wife Sarah

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were getting old and had not yet had any children of their own, Sarah convinced Abraham, according to the custom of that time, to have a child with her maidservant, Hagar, whom Paul calls a slave.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And that arrangement did not please God. Abraham and Sarah were not operating on the basis of faith, instead they were trying to help God out in keeping his promise, as if he was somehow not able to keep it. He rebuked them and again told Abraham that he would have a son with Sarah, even though Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90.

Marc Roby: And, of course, that made them both laugh, and the child Sarah bore was named Isaac, which means "he laughs".

Dr. Spencer: I'm confident that most of us would also laugh at the idea of people that age having a child, but as God says to Abraham about this in Genesis 18:14, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" In any event, Abraham and Sarah did have the child, as you noted, and they then sent Hagar and her son Ishmael away. The Israelites are all descendants of Isaac, the son God promised to Abraham and Sarah, and so are called children of the promise in Galatians 4:28 and elsewhere.

Marc Roby: And then, later, the Sinaitic covenant is made with the Israelites, the children of the promise, after God brings them out of slavery to the Egyptians.

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. And you must know all of that Old Testament history to be able to understand this passage in Galatians 4. Paul writes to those who want to keep the ceremonial law and, after reminding them briefly of this episode with Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, he says, "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves". So, he is telling these Jews that when they are under the law, in the sense of looking to the law for their salvation, they are slaves. And, in fact, the analogy that he uses would have been extremely unflattering to a Jew because he compares them to the children of Hagar, who are the Arabs!

Paul then writes, "But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." This is speaking about the fact that those who have trusted in Jesus Christ are no longer under the law, but under grace. They are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Marc Roby: That is all very interesting, and again shows the importance of knowing the Old Testament to be able to understand the New Testament. But, you mentioned that you wanted to use this discussion of covenants to introduce something else, what is that?

Dr. Spencer: It is the idea of allegory. I have on several occasions noted that we want to avoid allegorizing Scripture because doing so can lead you wildly astray. It is often used to read into the text something that is completely foreign to the text. But, we can't avoid allegory altogether because Paul uses the word in this passage. Verse 24 of this Chapter, which we read a couple of minutes ago, says in our translation that "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women

represent two covenants.” The Greek word translated as “figuratively” in our version is ἀλληγορέω, which means to speak allegorically² and is the source of our English word allegory.

Marc Roby: Of course Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when he said that.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he was. And that is a very important point. We can’t go around willy-nilly allegorizing any portion of Scripture we want. That is an exceedingly dangerous and, in fact, downright dishonest thing to do when we come to conclusions that are contrary to the Word of God. The only way we can say that something in Scripture is meant to be taken as an allegory, is if Scripture itself gives us warrant to do so. In the book *Interpreting the Bible* by Mickelsen, which we have referred to before, he says the following: “Allegory, a very legitimate way of teaching truth, should not be confused with allegorizing, which takes a narrative that was not meant to teach truth by identification. [sic] By a point by point comparison, allegorizing makes the narrative convey ideas different from those intended by the original author.”³

Marc Roby: That’s a good way of describing the problem. But, in this case, it also begs the question of which author we are talking about. I mean, Paul is quoting from an Old Testament historical passage written by Moses, who most certainly did not think he was writing an allegory.

Dr. Spencer: You’re absolutely right about that. But, we must never forget that the Bible’s real author is God the Holy Spirit. Moses was telling us about real history, the events are not at in any way fictitious as is usually the case with allegories. But, since God is the absolutely sovereign ruler over history, the events can simultaneously be an allegory. That is different from works written by purely human authors. You have no right to take something I wrote and interpret it allegorically unless I indicated that was my intent in writing it. And you would most definitely have no basis for claiming a factual description of a historical event was an allegory for something else unless God himself indicated that to be true.

Marc Roby: Very well. But before we move on I think this passage raises another question. Paul refers to the covenant from Mt. Sinai, which is where Moses was given the Ten Commandments, often called the moral law. But you said that Paul was arguing against having to keep the ceremonial law to be saved. Why did you say that?

Dr. Spencer: I said that because that is clear from the letter itself. If you read the entire letter to the Galatians, Paul argues against the practice of requiring Gentiles who wanted to become Christians to be circumcised and to obey Jewish dietary restrictions and holy days. These are all part of the ceremonial law and were abrogated, along with the sacrificial system, by Jesus Christ as we are told in the book of Hebrews.

The moral law on the other hand, as summarized by the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, has never been abrogated. In fact, Jesus Christ explained its true meaning and showed us that the Ten

² *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Walter Bauer, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 39

³ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pg. 231

commandments are much more comprehensive than most people think. For example, he explained, in Matthew 5:27-28, that the command to not commit adultery not only prohibits the actual physical act of adultery but even the lustful thoughts that can lead to the act.

Marc Roby: Alright, that's clear. But what we said earlier bears repeating at this point though, our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, not by works. Not even by the works of obeying the moral law.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. As Christians, we obey the moral law out of love and thanksgiving and a true desire to please our Lord, not because we earn our salvation by doing so.

Marc Roby: Do you want to say anything more about allegories?

Dr. Spencer: No. But the example we just gave illustrates another point as well.

Marc Roby: What's that?

Dr. Spencer: It's that we should use the didactic portions of the Bible to interpret the narrative portions. To say something is didactic means that it is specifically designed to teach something. There are many parts of the Bible that present us with true history, beautiful poetry and wonderful imagery to help us worship God and to help us grasp his awesome power and sovereign rule over the universe, but it is dangerous to derive biblical doctrine from such passages because doing so requires significant interpretation of the *meaning* of the narrative.

Marc Roby: Can you give an example?

Dr. Spencer: The clearest example is probably the old debacle involving Galileo. He got in trouble for teaching that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the other way around. But where did people get the idea that the Bible teaches a geocentric view of the universe? They got that idea from narrative and poetic passages speaking about the sun rising and setting and traversing across the sky. But such passages are giving us accurate descriptions of different events in phenomenological language, which we have discussed before. There is no section of the Bible which is didactic in nature and which tells us that the sun revolves around the earth.

Marc Roby: The New Testament epistles would obviously be a major source of didactic material.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. The epistles were specifically written to explain proper faith and conduct, so they contain a great deal of didactic material. R.C. Sproul's book *Knowing Scripture* has a complete section on that topic.⁴

Marc Roby: Speaking of doctrine leads me to an interesting question. The main doctrines of the Christian faith are explained in a number of different creeds and confessions, and most churches, including ours, subscribe to one or more of them. What role do these creeds and confessions play in helping us understand the Bible?

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 2nd Ed, InterVarsity Press, 2009, see Rule #3, pg. 76

Dr. Spencer: They play a huge role. Just as it would be foolish to start studying physics on your own without bothering to find out what people before you have learned, so it would be foolish to study the Bible without the help of the many godly people who have gone before us, especially those who were trained in the biblical languages and eminent for their piety and wisdom.

I think many professing Christians today have never read through any of the classic creeds or confessions, and that is to their own shame and poverty. But, there is also a ditch on the other side of the road. There are a few churches who put so much emphasis on particular creeds or confessions that they become a substitute authority. And, of course, the Roman Catholic church places the traditions of the church in a position that is officially equal to Scripture, but in practice ends up overruling Scripture. We must retain the balance of the reformation on this point. The Bible alone is the ultimate authority for a Christian. It alone has the inherent authority to bind my conscience.

Marc Roby: And so we should always be checking what a creed or confession says against what the Bible teaches.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And it isn't just creeds and confessions either. This opens up the idea of the role of systematic theology in the exegesis of any particular passage.

Marc Roby: How would you describe that role?

Dr. Spencer: I would say that systematic theology has a very important role to play in understanding any particular passage of Scripture. We have noted a number of times the first rule of hermeneutics.

Marc Roby: That Scripture should interpret Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: Right. And in applying that rule, we must have an understanding of what the whole of Scripture teaches us on a given topic. That is exactly the role of systematic theology. There is a very close symbiotic relationship here. Our exegesis of different passages in the Bible leads to our coming up with what we think is an accurate description of the Bible's teaching on a given topic, in other words our exegesis directly drives our systematic theology.

But, at the same time, our systematic theology helps us with exegesis. We just need to be very careful to not let our systematic theology become the authority. If we find ourselves trying desperately to force a passage to say something that it doesn't in order to avoid contradicting our systematic theology, we need to stop and re-consider our systematic theology in the light of that passage. The Jehovah's Witnesses are the prime example of that today. Their systematic theology denies the deity of Christ and that causes them to grossly distort a number of passages to try and fit that view.

Marc Roby: I think this discussion has made it clear that every Christian has an obligation to study systematic theology, at least at some level.

Dr. Spencer: I would completely agree with that statement. The Bible is so important in the life of a Christian. It is, as we have argued a number of times, our ultimate authority for what we believe and how we live. And that means that we have an obligation to study it carefully. And, as

I hope our brief treatment of hermeneutics has made clear so far, carefully studying the Bible requires more than simply reading it.

Marc Roby: I might interject that it also cannot require anything *less* than reading the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not. We must read the Bible regularly, systematically and in its entirety. And we must do so over and over, continuously throughout our lives. But we also then need to study systematic theology to have an overall framework to help us understand what we read. And we need to read commentaries and other things as well.

I also think it is very important to note that this should not be drudgery! Far from it. If I have been born again, I should have a real desire to understand the Word of God. It is the instruction manual for the Christian life. It is what God deemed necessary for me to have and it is the only objective revelation I have to guide me in knowing God better and pleasing him more. If I have no interest in really studying the Word of God, then I really need to ask myself if I've been born again.

Marc Roby: Well, we are out of time for today. I'd like to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would love to hear from you.