

Pastor's Corner – 11-4-2017

Non-Vital Points

In the 1880's there was a massive theological storm brewing in the Seventh-day Adventist church. The eye of this storm was the role of the law in the life of a Christian and just how big a part grace should play in our theology. The old guard emphasized a more law oriented focus. The reformers believed that Christ's righteousness should be the central focus of our teaching. As with any war, this theological conflict was fought on many fronts.

One particular front was the law spoken of in the book of Galatians. Gal. 3:23-25, "Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law as put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

This passage appears to take a decidedly negative view of the law. Paul says that the law held us as prisoners, that it functioned as a jailer until faith (in Christ) showed up, that its only purpose was to lead us to Christ, and now that Christ has come it no longer had oversight in the life of a Christian. Read in this way, one could make the case that the law isn't very relevant to a Christian who has come to faith. One could reasonably conclude that Paul is saying, now that we have Christ, we have no need of the law.

That concern was preeminent the minds of the old guard, led by George Butler (the General Conference President) and Uriah Smith (GC Veep and Editor of the *Review*). Their fear was that this passage, taken to its conclusion, would undermine the 10 commandments and destroy the Adventist arguments about the need to keep the Sabbath. Once that theological erosion had taken place, they imagined that the entire Adventist structure would collapse.

Law, and law keeping was preeminent in their minds and they couldn't comprehend a passage that seemed to shove law keeping to the back seat. So the old guard didn't think "10 commandments" when they read these verses, they thought, "ceremonial law." Nobody had a problem imagining that the ceremonial law was irrelevant to Christians. After all, the ceremonial law, with its circumcision, sacrifices, and services all pointed to Christ and were fulfilled by him. Tossing them aside was no big deal. When speaking of the law in Galatians the old guard believed that the ceremonial law was in view.

The reformers (AT Jones and EJ Waggoner) took the opposite view. They believed that the law in Galatians was referring

to the moral law, including the 10 commandments. They taught that the purpose of that law was to lead us to Christ and that it was there to point out sin. Rather than focusing so much on the law, they wanted to focus on the righteousness of Christ.

And so both sides fought against one another. Smith wrote articles for the *Review*. Jones and Waggoner wrote articles for *Signs of the Times*. Back and forth they debated, criticizing and belittling the other side. At times the attacks went beyond theology and got personal. It was at that point that Ellen White began to step in.

It's interesting to me that she gave any kind of authoritative statement to clarify the meaning of the law in Galatians. On that point she kept telling people to study it out for themselves. She didn't want her writings to be used to settle questions of Biblical interpretation. Instead of joining the theological fray, she tried to direct everyone's attention to more productive avenues.

During this time period Ellen White cautioned both sides to refrain from arguing over points which weren't vital to the cause. In White's view, the law in Galatians simply wasn't all that important. In a letter addressed to Jones and Waggoner we get a glimpse of what Ellen White thought was truly vital. She says, "There is danger of our ministers dwelling too much on doctrines, preaching altogether too many discourses on argumentative subjects when their own soul needs practical godliness... The wonders of redemption are dwelt upon altogether too lightly. There is danger of keeping the discourses and the articles in the paper like Cain's offering, Christless."

For Ellen White the vital points that needed to be stressed centered on Christ, redemption, and practical godliness. This last one was in short supply during the 1880's as both sides abandoned humility and compassion and prepared for war.

The church will always have questions and conflicts. We will always have different opinions on what should be done and how it should be done. We'll disagree on how certain passages of scripture should be interpreted. Our goal when these disagreements happen should be to maintain our focus on Christ and manifest a Christlike character at all times.

The most vital point of all is that of character development. God wants a people on this earth who represent him to the world. He wants a people who exemplify his nature and his character. If our theology and our discourses don't move us in that direction they cease being of vital importance and instead become a stumbling block. As a church and as individuals, let's strive to develop the

character of Christ in our life and may the world know that we are Christians by our love.

Have a Happy Sabbath,
Pastor Tyler

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