Feckless Churches

Paul, like Jesus, believed that the end of the world and the beginning of God’s Kingdom on earth was imminent. Jesus said very explicitly and emphatically that this dramatic event would take place before his generation of followers had died. Paul, faced with the reality that Jesus was off on his timing, did the best he could to reassure his converts that everything was still on track, and the apocalypse (revelation) was just around the corner.

In fact, Paul was so sure that it would happen soon that he didn’t see any need to spend a lot of time on church organization and hierarchy issues. The congregations he established in various communities had no established structure, and there was no need for special buildings. That would have been a waste of time, in Paul’s thinking. Instead, the group of local believers met (usually in someone’s house) for education, edification, fellowship, encouragement, support, and worship, with no particular person(s) taking charge of the proceedings. Instead, the Holy Spirit was in charge, endowing each believer with whatever special gift(s) was God’s will for that person. For some that gift was knowledge, for others the ability to teach, for others it was prophesying, for others it was speaking in tongues (revelations given in angelic languages not understood by the people around them). At least, that was Paul’s paradigm, and his hope for each congregation.

It didn’t quite work out that way, however. The church in Corinth, for example, was really messed up. Various members considered themselves leaders on the basis of superior endowment of the Holy Spirit and its gifts. Each had his followers, and the church was divided into competing factions. Some self-styled church leaders were determined to demonstrate their superior speaking-in-tongue talents, competing to do so louder and more often than anyone else. Some members took others to court, suing them for Holy Spirit infringement or spiritual leading without a license. Or something. Some of the guys enjoyed spending time with prostitutes, and they also enjoyed bragging about it in church. One guy was making time with his stepmother. At the weekly communion meal (real food, not just a wafer and a sip of cheap wine), some guys got there early, stuffed themselves, got drunk, and left nothing to eat for those who arrived later. Those latecomers were probably the most needy of the community, including lower-class workers and slaves.

Paul didn’t write to the bishop because there was no bishop. There was no official leader, so Paul had to address his scolding to the community at large. Eventually, as it became painfully obvious that this was not a viable arrangement, churches did become more organized and structured. But Paul was dead by then. That gives us a clue about the authorship of three NT books traditionally ascribed to Paul: 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, known as the pastoral epistles because they offer advice to the pastors, Timothy and Titus. That advice shows the kind of advanced church structure that did not exist in Paul’s lifetime. Furthermore, the writing style and vocabulary are not compatible with Paul’s known writings. Paul did not write those books, and the vast majority of scholars agree on that.

There should also be widespread agreement that Paul’s chimerical concept of the Holy Spirit providing all the church leadership that would be necessary was disastrous and unworkable. It didn’t work in Paul’s day, and it hasn’t worked since. During the Middle Ages, the Church behaved more like the Italian mafia than God’s representatives. In the late Middle Ages, the Church made the life of the believer a living hell with its gestapo tactics.

There is no evidence at all that the Holy Spirit improved the conduct of believers. In fact, it seems to have brought out the worst in men, adding arrogance, a sense of entitlement, and legal immunity to their already impressive cache of
personality defects and abused privileges. The Church was not a place where people could get help in dealing with their troubles. The Church was their biggest trouble – exploiting, oppressing, terrorizing, tormenting, and killing them in large numbers for centuries. The Inquisition and the Crusades are not products of the Holy Spirit, unless the Holy Spirit is pure evil.

Later, the Europeans who went to the New World, in large part to spread Christianity, spread disease, terror, oppression, enslavement, and death among the Native Americans who preceded them. Later, it was Christians who made American slavery possible and prolonged the practice until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, after the Civil War, and after the death of Lincoln. Was that the Holy Spirit at work? Is it the Holy Spirit that motivates pedophile priests to molest Catholic children and corrupt bishops to protect and enable them? When have we ever in the history of Christianity seen any reliable evidence that the Holy Spirit is a force for good in a person's life, or that it exists at all? There are most certainly good people who are Christians, but there are also good people who want nothing to do with Christianity. So, there is no rational basis for concluding that the Holy Spirit is responsible for good behavior. All the historical evidence points to Christianity as an evil, fraudulent institution, based on lies, greed, and lust for power – not a force for good in the ancient or modern world.

Faith vs Works

Most Christians these days think they have a pretty good grip on their salvation, and any fundagelical worth his salt can let John 3:16 roll off his tongue reflexively.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

It seems that some folks, long ago, had the crazy idea that one attains salvation through good works. But that misguided notion has long since been debunked, and fundagelicals aren’t about to fall for that these days. After all, that was Old Testament stuff, based on Jewish law. That doesn’t apply any more, because Jesus went and got himself all dead. So now, faith is what gets you saved, not good works. Anybody who doesn’t get that just needs to read Paul. Paul will set the record straight for you. Good works are fine, and Christians are all for that, but that’s not the way to salvation, Paul tells us. You get saved through faith, then you go out and do good works because you are saved, not because you are trying to get saved.

It’s all elementary, basic stuff for fundagelicals. Everybody knows that. The two things every American knows and understands are (1) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (2) Fifteen minutes could save you 15% or more on your car insurance by switching to GEICO.

But, as it turns out, it isn’t that simple after all. That’s not quite the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. When you actually do a little Bible reading, you find that there were a few people who had a different perspective entirely. One of them was Matthew, one of Jesus’ original disciples, and author of the gospel by that name. Surely he is worth listening to. Another is Jesus Christ himself. Surely there is no more reliable source than that. So, let’s take a peek at what they had to say about the means of salvation.

Matthew 25:31-46:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’
“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

That was Jesus talking, right after telling his audience the parable of the bags of gold. The point of that parable was that we are required to do. If we don’t get off our butt and make good use of whatever abilities the Good Lord has given us, we are in a heap of trouble. Good works. Jesus says nothing about faith in that parable. It’s all about works. Then Jesus delivers the words quoted above in Matthew 25:31-46. Again, there is nothing in there about faith. It is about good works.

There is nothing obscure or ambiguous about what Jesus is saying. The key to eternal life is good works, not faith alone. There is nothing to suggest that this lesson no longer applies after his death. After all, Jesus was a Jew. He observed Jewish customs and adhered to Jewish law. You know, the law handed down to Jews through Abraham and Moses. The same God who had set aside Jews as His chosen people and given them the law as their means of attaining righteousness was now speaking these words through his Son Jesus. The Christian God is immutable, is He not? If God never changes, why would anyone think he suddenly changed His mind about Jewish law and decided it didn’t matter any more after Jesus’ death? Jesus certainly isn’t saying that in the above passage in Matthew.

Nor does Jesus say that in this passage. Matthew 5:17-20:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Is Jesus saying that the Jewish law no longer applies? Is he saying what Paul is saying, that faith alone is the key to salvation and the law is no longer to be observed by Jews or Gentiles in the Christian religion? No, Jesus most certainly is not saying that at all. The most clever and creative exegetical prestidigitation cannot change that fact. Matthew and Jesus are saying one thing, and Paul is saying something entirely different. Their teachings are diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive, and totally incompatible. There is simply no way to honestly reconcile them and come up with a hybrid that either Jesus or Paul would ever accept.

Of course, Christian leaders have had to try to do that. You have a big fat juicy disagreement right there in the middle of the canonical Bible. The doctrine of an inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God simply does not permit that kind of blatant contradiction. So they are forced to somehow try to pretend that Jesus / Matthew and Paul are really on
the same page. But if words have any meaning at all, Jesus is saying that the key to salvation is good works, and that the road to salvation leads through continued fastidious compliance with Jewish law. Faith alone is not enough. If you are capable of mental gymnastics that allow you to pretend otherwise, then words have no meaning, and the Bible is no more an authority on anything than *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* or *Aesop’s Fables*.

You can continue to put your salvation in the hands of Paul if you want to roll the dice. But did Paul die for your sins? Did Paul know Jesus? Did they ever meet? Matthew, as one of the original disciples, did know Jesus very well (Christians claim). About as well as any man ever knew Jesus. Paul never met Jesus. In fact, Paul deliberately avoided having any contact with any of the disciples for at least three years. (See Galatians 1:15-20). Why? Because Paul insisted that his insight came directly from God himself, not from any of the disciples or apostles. Well, where did Paul think the disciples got their own insight? It certainly seems reasonable to place more credibility with the original disciples than with someone who once persecuted Christians.

So, we can see why Paul never got the memo about good works. Furthermore, Paul began his writings before any of the canonical gospels existed. So Paul may very well have never read the words of Jesus that Matthew presents to us. Everything Paul says comes from Paul’s own mind, not from Jesus or from the people who knew him personally. We’ve all heard that “Jesus saves”. I’ve never heard anyone claim that “Paul saves”. There’s a good reason for that.

So, good Christians, you’d better be prepared to have an epiphany, just as Paul himself did. You’d better wake up to the fact that faith alone is not sufficient for salvation, at least if your faith is in Jesus Christ, and not in Paul. You’d better start making some Jewish friends and learning about their way of doing things. Because the way things stand right now, you have Christians who have part of the formula (faith, but not observance of Jewish law), and you have Jews, who have half the formula (observance of the law, but no faith in the death and resurrection of Christ). Heaven is going to be a very lonely place. Looks like there will be God and Matthew and a whole lot of vacancy signs.