

Isaiah 64:1-7, Galatians 2:11-21

Introduction: Half a Christian?

In my ministry apprenticeship, a generous friend had paid for me to have a car. And being a wise, recently-graduated university student, I bought an absolute bomb. A blue Nissan Navara D21 ute always a misfire or two away from a trip to the mechanic.

One day I was driving along on a hot, dry Canberra Spring day listening to the Christian radio station - Canberra's 1-Way FM. And the host was interviewing this guy who was talking about gifts of the Spirit. And he was talking about this idea of 'baptism of the Spirit.' But I will never forget the thing that he said...

He said that for 'normal' Christians, we kind of, 'tick along' in life. A bit like a four-cylinder motor. But for Christians who've been 'baptised in the Holy Spirit', it's like they've got a V8 motor.

I might have only been driving a four-cylinder carbureted Nissan Navara, but it was *my* head gasket that just about blew then-and-there! I mean, *how offensive is that!?* Even if he believed it was true, what possessed him to go on a public radio station and say it!? To make out as though 'normal' Christians are somehow inferior - half a Christian, no less - than the kind that believe the way he does. It was *galling*. And I've never forgotten it. Never mind the fact that the theology of what he said falls down under cross-examination... what an offensive thing to say about other Christians! Christians I *knew*, who were clearly displaying the fruits of the Spirit. I mean sure, they may not have all of the dreams, or the speaking in

languages, or the healing gifts of the apostles, but... let's be honest, neither did he. I was furious. Because that's the kind of comment that can cut someone down, cut them off at the knees, and it's so un-like Jesus who, Isaiah prophesied about saying, *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.* Jesus is gentle with those who are 'weak,' he is not a spiritual vandal.

It was galling. I was outraged.

But I think that that day, I understood a bit of how Paul felt in this part of Galatians.

There are no 'second class Christians'

Because Paul had seen Peter, *Saint Peter*, make out as though Gentile Christians were half the Christians of the Jewish ones. You see it in verse 11:

When Peter (or Cephas in Aramaic) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles, the non-Jews. But when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party—the people who insisted on this idea that the real Christians are the ones that are fully Jewish. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews [went] along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

Do you see what happened? Judaism had these ceremonial food laws about how you eat and who you share your table with. And Peter had given up on them, because they *ultimately* do not matter. But then these guys come from Jerusalem and they're Jewish Christians; and suddenly Peter's behaving like he's a soldier who's been caught napping. He puts on airs about how Jewish he is, to the point where he stops eating dinner with the non-Jews.

Do you see what he's done? He's made out like the non-Jews are second-class Christians. Like they're only the four-cylinder Christians and the Jewish ones are the vee-eights. And as Saint Peter does it, of course all the rest of the Jewish believers follow his example. Even Paul's dear friend Barnabas trades the right hand of fellowship for the left boot of separation.

So how would you feel if you were a Gentile Christian? If you'd been told that the Jewish Messiah is the Saviour of the world and that he calls all who will come—whatever they are—to come and be reconciled to God? If you'd been that you would have full dignity, full participation in that deepest sense of belonging? And then all of a sudden the Jewish Christians turn around and treat you like you're a filthy animal, and like sitting next to you at the table will contaminate them? How would you feel?

You can tell how Paul felt. Paul was *outraged*. And he called Peter out. Verse 14 says:

*But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" ¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not (scare quotes) 'Gentile sinners;' ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is **not** justified by works of the law but through **faith** in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, **because by works of the law no one will be justified.***

Paul says, "Come on, Peter. You *know* that when it comes to salvation, your Judaism gains you nothing in terms of your standing with God. The only thing you can earn through the depth of your Judaism is *more condemnation*." Why? Because as you

come to the law of holiness, you grasp sight of the holiness of God and, *as in a mirror*, you see how far you fall short.

Think of our first reading, Isaiah 64:7. Isaiah is a Jewish prophet, speaking for God to the Jews, and as with the voice of the nation, he confesses:

There is no one who calls upon your name, [God]; who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

Just for a moment, enjoy the beauty and the horror of Hebrew poetry: *'You have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.'* It's as though sin itself seizes hold of the sinner and, like butter, causes them to melt. Isaiah says, *there is no one in Judah who calls upon your name, God.* Because the consequences of their sin have been visited upon them.

You see, fundamental to Judaism is the understanding that God is holy and I am not. And as soon as he gives me a standard - *"eat any fruit, from any tree, except that one"* - the second he reveals his holy standard, he reveals my unholiness of heart. The law does not save, it accuses. And it accuses in order that, seeing our guilt, we might cast ourselves upon his mercy, pleading for salvation. And, joy of joys, it is revealed in Christ Jesus.

A right reading of the Old Testament law of God *cannot and will not* result in self-righteousness. And if you ever meet someone who's self-righteous and who tells you they've read the Old Testament, they didn't understand a word of it. And if they *did*, they didn't spend a moment in honest self-reflection. You see a Jewish Christian shouldn't be looking at Gentile Christians thinking, *they're so unworthy!* They should be looking at them saying, *they're so blessed! For in the moment they recognised their sin, they met the*

Saviour. Me? I spent a lifetime mired in the depths of my sin... living in it... unable to escape it... hoping, wondering, pleading for a Saviour and, praise the Name, he has been revealed. But these blessed souls knew not the depth of their sin without also understanding the depth of God's love and his Grace. They had no cause to wonder if salvation might ever come, for they knew it in Christ. What a privilege!

There are no second-class Christians. There are only saved sinners. You get it?

I'll say it again slowly. **There are no second-class Christians. There are only saved sinners.**

The law is the rock that breaks us, in order that we might be built up. It shows us our sin, so that we would run to God for salvation.

That's the biblical way. In Hosea 6:1, the prophet says,

"Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up."

Do you see what the prophets are saying? God breaks, in order that he might mend. He breaks our self-reliance and our self-righteousness, because it cannot and will not save. That *breaking* is the *right* work of the Law. What the Old Testament law is *for*, according to Paul, is to break our self-righteousness, to show us our sin, so that we will turn to the God of mercy. Verse 19 of Galatians 2, Paul says: *through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.* Or as Hosea might say, *"He has torn us, that he may heal us."*

Hallelujah!

Verse 19: the deep magic

But there's more to say about verse 19. Paul says that *through the law I died to the law*. And it's true that our recognition that the law shows us our sin and our fallenness alienates us from the law as if it was something that could save us. It cannot save us; that's not what it's for. And so we abandon hope in the law as our saviour. We abandon our self-righteousness and turn to God, who is our saviour. The Lord Jesus Christ is the saviour of sinners.

But there's more to it. Paul says that *through the law I died to the law*. So there's some sense in which the law itself became the vehicle of my freedom from the law. But how!?!

How does the law, which 'imprisons everything under sin' (as Paul will say in 3:22)... how does the law become a vehicle for my freedom from the law?

Anyone want to guess?

How does the law become the vehicle of my freedom from the law???

If you guessed the Sunday School answer, you're right! It's *Jesus!*

The law of God's holiness demands the death of that which is not holy. He says, *my soul will not abide with man forever*. Our wickedness will *not* forever contaminate the cathedral of creation. And so the law says, the soul that sins, that soul shall die.

The soul that sins shall die. **But Christ died.** Not for his own sin. Because he had none. He died our death, fulfilling the demands of the law. The Bible has this idea of solidarity, of belonging one to the other. And it tells us that when we trust in Jesus, we are joined to him. Our faith unites us with him. So that his death is our death, and his life is our life. That's why Paul can say that *through the Law*

I died to the Law. Because Jesus died our lawful death... and we receive his risen life.

Sometimes we talk about the great exchange, or the great swap. As though what happened at the Cross was that I gained Christ's righteousness and he took on my sin. But that runs the risk of getting things very wrong. It wasn't a 'swap', where I gained Christ's righteousness as though he lost it and he took on my sin as though I lost it. It's not like I am over here with Christ's righteousness and he is over here with my sin. It is a full identification of one with the other. So that as he dies, I die. The sentence of death that hangs over the sinner is fulfilled in Christ, and as it is fulfilled in Christ it is fulfilled in me.

It's like a marriage. We're not separate legal entities. We're treated the same, because we are united. In fact our union with Christ is not 'like' a marriage; the Bible says that a marriage is *like* our union with Christ. We belong to him and he belongs to us. Marriage is an *illustration* of that *deeper* truth. Christ died our death and, in that moment, we died to the demands of the law. And his resurrection is our own!

That's the deep... I want to say 'the deep magic,' like in Narnia, but it's so much more than that... That's the deep wonder behind verses 19 & 20, Paul says:

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So we can say that we as Christians are dead to the accusatory power of the law.

Against every accusation of the enemy; against any sense of being second-best or second class, Christ roars that we are **righteous in him**, by grace, through faith. *Hallelujah!*

So what does this mean for you?

Well it means that Christianity has no place for looking down on other Christians. We are *all* forgiven sinners. It is as simple as that. The faith of the simple person, who doesn't go very far beyond the thought that 'Jesus died for me', that faith is every bit as good as the scholar who has delved deeply into Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic and who spends a lifetime probing the deep things of the faith. Because it isn't about the individual and their qualification. It's about the Saviour of sinners. **Christ** is the one who justifies us by faith. There is no space for self-righteousness or arrogance in authentic Christian faith. And when you see it, when you see us behaving arrogantly or self-righteously, know that that behaviour belongs not to Christianity, but to the old man... the man of sin. The one who foolishly looks upon themselves and sees things not the way they truly are. For we are *all* forgiven sinners.

And if you're reading this today and you don't know that you're a forgiven sinner, know that in admitting your sin and coming to Christ by faith, you will be forgiven fully. Because he is the Saviour of sinners. He died the sinner's death so that through his death we might die to the power of death.

And if you're reading this today and you call yourself a Christian, know that you cannot call yourself a Christian and look down at other Christians. There is no place for self-righteousness. If you are a Christian, then you are a forgiven sinner.

And praise God for that.

Hallelujah!