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IS ISLAM THE “END” OF CHRISTIANITY? (PART TWO)

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In the first part of our study, we examined the Muslim belief that Islam has fulfilled and superseded Christianity, thus bringing it to an end as a viable religion. Their view is that Islam is to Christianity as Christianity is to Judaism. We noted that the claim of fulfillment is only legitimate if there is a continuity of essence, though not necessarily of form; otherwise, the result would be *negation* and *replacement*, not *fulfillment*. We observed that while New Testament authors never criticized the Old Testament, Islam denies the textual and doctrinal integrity of both the Old and New Testaments. Regarding previous revelation, therefore, Islam is *not* to Christianity as Christianity is to Judaism. As we'll see below, additional areas of *essential* discontinuity are sin, atonement, and salvation. After illustrating these discontinuities, we will discuss Christianity's relationship to the Mosaic Law.

Human Sinfulness. The claim that Islam confirms the teaching of previous prophets is weakened by its contradiction of biblical teaching regarding human sinfulness. For example, both the Old and New Testaments affirm that humans are sinful by nature (Ps. 53:1–3; Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:9–18; Eph. 2:3), even from birth (Ps. 51:5). This sinfulness stems from Adam (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12–19) and results in an inherent inability to live according to God's revealed will — His law (Rom. 8:6–8).

In contrast, Islam denies that we are born with a sinful nature. Muslim apologist Hammudah Abdalati writes: “The idea of Original Sin...has no room in the teachings of Islam. Man, according to the Qur'an (30:30) and to the Prophet [Muhammad], is born in a natural state of purity or *fitrah*, that is, Islam or submission to the will and law of God. Whatever becomes of man after birth is the result of external influence and intruding factors....Sin is acquired not inborn, emergent not built-in, avoidable not inevitable.”¹

Atonement for Sin. Islam also believes that one's good works tip the balance for salvation (Sura 7:8–9; 21:47). The Qur'an teaches that atonement for bad deeds is found in good deeds such as almsgiving (2:271), prayers (11:114), pilgrimage (2:158), and listening to and memorizing the Qur'an (7:204). Islam, furthermore, denies not only that Jesus is God incarnate but also that He died upon the cross, thus rejecting the reality of His resurrection (Sura 4:157–158; cf. 3:54).

The Bible, however, teaches that all have sinned (Ps. 14:3; Rom. 3:23) and thus face the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18; 2:8). Our only hope is in the sinless Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5), who atoned for our sins in His death upon the cross (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Heb. 2:17; 4:15; cf. Isa. 53:5) and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Islam denies these all-important affirmations of the Christian faith.

These doctrinal discontinuities devastate the claim that Islam fulfills Christianity. To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to denounce the Christian faith as a fraud from its beginning (1 Cor. 15:14–17). Islam negates Christianity; it does not fulfill Christianity.

Muslim Responses. Muslims respond in different ways to such assertions. Some argue that appeals to biblical teachings are invalid *since* the Bible is corrupted and unreliable. This, however, demonstrates the false analogy between Islam and Christianity, since, as noted in the first installment, Christians affirm the reliability of the biblical texts.²

Muslims also argue that since Christians do not observe circumcision, dietary restrictions, and the Sabbath, it is actually Christians who negate, rather than fulfill, Judaism. If true, all this would establish is that *neither* Christianity nor Islam is a viable religious tradition stemming from Judaism. Even so, this is

one of the most compelling Muslim arguments against Christianity. How can we show that Christianity actually fulfills, rather than negates, Judaism? We'll focus our attention on questions of circumcision, Christian morality, greater and lesser commands, and the new covenant.

Gentiles and Circumcision. In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul argued against those who insisted that Gentiles cannot be right with God (justified) apart from "the works of the law," with circumcision being the ultimate "work" (Gal. 2:14–15; 5:2–6; 6:12). Circumcision was the primary mark distinguishing Israelites from Gentiles;³ the Jews, in fact, were simply "the circumcision" and Gentiles the "uncircumcision" (2:7–9, 12).⁴ Judaizers (Jewish Christians who insisted on adhering to the laws of Moses), in effect, taught that uncircumcised Gentiles could not be right with God unless they became Jews!⁵

Paul, in response, argued in defense of the Gospel, which he identified as God's promise to Abraham: "All nations [Gentiles] will be blessed through you" (Gal. 3:8).⁶ The true Gospel is that people are justified by faith, just as was Abraham (3:6–9),⁷ not by "the works of the law" — that is, apart from being circumcised (2:14–16; 3:10–14).⁸ Since God promised to bless the Gentiles *as Gentiles*, any other "Gospel" is no Gospel at all (1:6–9).⁹

Why would circumcision now be set aside? Paul explained that the Mosaic covenant was temporary, instituted until Jesus, the seed promised to Abraham, had come (Gal. 3:15–19, 24). It was added because of transgressions (3:19), like someone put in charge to keep youths out of trouble (3:23–25).¹⁰ Now that the Messiah has come, however, God's people transcend national boundaries; they are no longer defined by race but by grace. There is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ (3:26–29).¹¹ The religious and social distinctions between Jews and Gentiles have ended. To require Gentile circumcision, therefore, would be to bring them under the old covenant (4:21–31), obligating them to observe all facets of the law (5:2–3), including separation from uncircumcised believers — the very hypocrisy Peter had committed in Antioch (2:11–14)! The teaching of the Judaizers thus amounted to a denial that God had made good on His promise to Abraham through Jesus Christ. Such a teaching denies the Gospel (1:6–9). Such a teaching denies the work of Christ (2:21).

The Law of Christ. In light of our observations thus far, we can understand Paul when he wrote, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor. 7:19); and, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Paul said he was "not under the law," though he was "not free from God's law," yet he was "under Christ's law" (1 Cor. 9:20–21; cf. Gal. 6:2). We recognize that when Paul wrote these things he was being conscientious as he reached out to Jews (those "under the law") and Gentiles (those "not under the law"). Old covenant laws that segregated Jews from Gentiles are no longer binding, yet some commands remain. The law of God is thus refracted through Christ, becoming "the law of Christ"; so, when Paul wrote regarding Christian ethics, he showed that Christians are not to be immoral and idolatrous (1 Cor. 5–6; Eph. 4:17–21), but are to "uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31) and fulfill "the righteous requirements of the law" (Rom. 8:4; cf. 13:8–10).

Greater and Lesser Commands. The very distinction Paul made between greater commands (e.g., a contrite heart, justice, mercy, faithfulness, love of God and neighbor) and lesser commands (e.g., sacrifices, festivals, circumcision) of the law was foreshadowed in the Old Testament (see 1 Sam. 15:22–23; Ps. 40:6–8; 51:16–17; Jer. 7:21–23; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8). Even Jesus made this distinction (Matt. 22:36–40; 23:23; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28).

The New Covenant. We should also recall God's promises regarding the coming Messiah and the new covenant (Jer. 31:31; cf. Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:7ff.). The Messiah atoned for our sins (Isa. 53:5; Zech. 12:10), bringing an end to bloody sacrifices (Heb. 9:11–10:18). Under the new covenant God grants us His Spirit (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26), giving us new lives (Rom. 8:1–14; Gal. 5:22–25). Our hearts are circumcised (Deut. 30:6; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11),¹² and God's law is written on our hearts (Isa. 51:7; Jer. 31:33) that we might love God and others as we should (Rom. 2:14–15, 29).¹³

Our discussion of circumcision, Christian morality, greater and lesser commands, and the new covenant refutes the Muslim assertion that Christianity negates, rather than fulfills, Judaism.¹⁴ The claim that Islam is to Christianity as Christianity is to Judaism cannot hold. Islam is discontinuous with both biblical revelation and biblical doctrine, while Christianity affirms both Old Testament revelation and its teachings regarding human sinfulness, atonement, and salvation. In Jesus Christ God's promise to Abraham is now enjoyed by all true believers, regardless of ethnicity, gender, class, or age. Now that's good news!

– Kevin James Bywater

NOTES

1. Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1975), 32–33.
2. See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986). (Editor's note: For an in-depth treatment of this Muslim claim, see the feature article by James White on p. 32 of this issue.)
3. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 210 n. 6.
4. See Acts 11:2–3; Rom. 15:8; Eph. 2:11; Titus 1:10. The NIV sometimes translates "uncircumcision" simply as "Gentiles" and "circumcision" simply as "Jews" (e.g., Gal. 2:7–9).
5. Compare this with the issues surrounding Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10–11 and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.
6. See Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Gal. 3:14, 16.
7. See Gen. 15:6.
8. See Rom. 4:9–12.
9. See Jeffrey R. Wisdom, *Blessing for the Nations and the Curse of the Law: Paul's Citation of Genesis and Deuteronomy in Gal 3.8–10*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2* (German monograph series) (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).
10. See the discussion in Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Commentary to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 252–81.
11. See Rom. 11:17–24; Eph. 2:11–22.
12. See Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Acts 7:51.
13. See Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).
14. See Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995).