

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP355

ROBBING PAUL TO PAY PETER AND JAMES

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This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 35, number 05 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

The apostle Peter once said of Paul's letters, "[they] contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort" (2 Pet. 3:16; all Scripture quotations from the NIV, except where noted). Although that was written in the first century, more than two thousand years later a trend has emerged that encapsulates Peter's warning just as readily. A new breed of "ignorant and unstable" people are now distorting Paul's letters in order to condemn him unjustly.

Seeking to disconnect Paul from the rest of the New Testament, and the early Christian church, a movement designated by the slogan, "Jesus' Words Only" (JWO) argues that Paul was a turncoat whose letters were inappropriately inserted into the New Testament canon. Strangely, proponents of this view may also argue that God ensured that other parts of the Bible, including the Old Testament, warned us in various coded ways that Paul would appear. The JWO movement's reasoning is, therefore, that God found it more convenient to drop obscure hints about Paul throughout the text of the rest of the Bible—hints that only they have had the perspicacity to uncover—than to name Paul explicitly as a villain, or else, simply ensure that Paul's works never made it into the canon in the first place.

A leading voice in the JWO movement is attorney Douglas del Tondo, whose book *Jesus' Words Only* (Infinity Publishing, 2006) has served as a flagship piece for many JWO proponents. More recently, controversial dot.com executive Craig Winn has posted an online book titled *Questioning Paul*,¹ which takes many of the same arguments made by del Tondo further, and adds Winn's own tendentious applications. Both authors make much of what they see as Paul's unwarranted abrogation of Old Testament law, and detect subtle warnings about Paul all through the rest of the Bible. When Genesis 49:27, for example, speaks of the tribe of Benjamin as a "ravenous wolf," both authors determine that this is intended as a warning to us about Paul, a Benjamite (Phil. 3:5), appearing as a "ravenous wolf" in the church.

The JWO movement, true to Peter's warning, is characterized by such obscure readings as this one. JWO authors also show a disdain for serious biblical scholarship, often to the extent of supposing that Christian scholars are covering up the truth. Del

Tondo takes special care to ignore most scholarly works, and relies heavily on popular Christian authors, or unknown Internet commentators, for his arguments. Winn uses no scholarly sources at all, and apparently considers himself to be more competent to translate Greek than biblical scholars, whom he derides as either deceptive or incompetent as he deems necessary.

While we cannot in this space deal with the full range of JWO arguments, we can defuse many of them by dealing with two of their most important misrepresentations. One is the alleged conflict between the message of Paul and that of James, as reflected in their respective epistles, and the other is their interpretation of the controversy between Paul and Peter recorded in Galatians 2.

Does Faith Work? The basis for finding discrepancy between James and Paul is encapsulated in these two verses:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Rom. 3:28)

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (James 2:24)

Taken in isolation, it would not be hard to conclude that these two verses are in utter contradiction. However, the larger context of both refutes any such claim.

For biblical peoples, “faith” was not merely intellectual assent, but was naturally and inevitably followed upon by works. This did not mean that works “saved,” but that they were the natural product of a real and living faith. James says this quite clearly: “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (2:17 KJV; cf. James 1:22–24). Paul makes no such statement directly, but his frequent exhortations to believers to live a life appropriate to a disciple of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 5:13) amount to the same message.

The most critical distinction, however, is found in grasping what James and Paul are placing in contrast to “faith” in their respective epistles. The argument for contradiction implicitly assumes that both are generically referring to all works.

However, Paul is specifically juxtaposing faith with the specific observation of the Jewish law and its practices, such as circumcision (Rom. 3:1), and is doing so with reference to a person *prior to*, or apart from, becoming a Christian. James, in contrast, says nothing about the specific ceremonial duties of joining the Jewish covenant, but is advocating the practical outworking of faith through generally moral behavior, not through anything uniquely associated with the Jewish law, and *after one becomes a Christian*. Thus, the alleged conflict between James and Paul is resolved by realizing that they are answering two entirely different questions.

A Confrontation Over Purity. In contrast, the confrontation Paul describes between himself and Peter (Gal. 2:11–16) involves a more complex set of circumstances, which are not made apparent from the text of Galatians itself. Critical arguments in this regard often rely on a chronological factor that most readers will find obscure: whether the

confrontation described in Galatians 2 happened before or after the Apostolic Council described in Acts 15. For critics, a far better case can be made if Galatians 2 occurred after the Council. The evidence, however, suggests that the confrontation occurred before the Council, and that the Council was intended to resolve the very issues raised by Paul and Peter's disagreement.²

However, apart from the chronological issues, critics simply read too much into the Galatians 2 confrontation. Many suppose it represented some sort of functional and doctrinal split between what they call Pauline Christianity (with its alleged emphasis on grace, and origins among Gentiles) and Petrine Christianity (which is supposed to be more concerned with works, and the Jewish origins of the faith). JWO writers like del Tondo and Winn even go so far as to say that the modern church is descended from Paul's corrupt version of Jesus' message.

The background of Paul's objection to Peter's behavior, however, lies not in doctrine or salvation *per se*, but in what scholars call *ritual purity*—an understanding of persons and things as sacred, or pure, or being in their proper place and order. Many of the regulations in the Old Testament law, such as not wearing two types of fabric (Deut. 22:11), were designed to instill a sense of ritual purity. A mixed-fabric garment does not represent purity as well as a garment made of one fabric.

At the time of Christian origins, Jewish persons considered Gentiles to be ritually impure, and would not share certain social situations with them, such as eating at the same table. However, with Jesus' advent, Gentiles had the opportunity to become ritually pure, apart from joining the Jewish covenant. Logic would have dictated, then, that there was no longer any reason for a Jewish-Christian man like Peter to not share a table with Christian Gentiles. Paul, however, notes that Peter formerly ate with Gentiles, but "withdrew and separated himself" from the Gentile Christian converts when "certain men came from James" (Gal. 2:12).

Peter's actions implied that Christ's work in the Gentiles' lives had been ineffective, and that they were not ritually pure. This in turn meant that Peter was treating them as nonbelievers, and effectively denying the power of Christ to cleanse people of sin and impurity. It is thus not surprising that Paul directly confronted Peter and asked him, "If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?" (2:14, KJV). Paul knew well enough that Peter had, in the past, freely associated with Gentiles (Acts 10), believing them to now be ritually purified in Christ. But now, his actions sent a message that the Gentile converts were not ritually pure.

It is in this light that Paul's further admonitions must be read:

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Gal. 2:15–16)

It is this passage above all that leads critics, and JWO authors, to conclude that here we have a split between factions that saw faith versus works at the heart of salvation. In reality, Paul is indicating that the previous rules for being ritually pure are passed away; the rules have been rewritten by Christ, who renders fallen men pure by his gracious atoning sacrifice, in which we must invest our loyalty, or faith.

In all of this, it is doubtful that Peter realized the implications of what he was doing by refusing to eat with Gentile Christians. It was also a matter of some difficulty, in their honor-based culture, for Paul to challenge someone as high-ranking in the church as Peter, even though he, too, was an apostle. Nevertheless, Paul's bold step was required in order to squash any latent notions that the body of Christ had different ranks of membership, as though Christ cleansed some less than others, or not at all. In a very real sense, anti-Paulinists are reversing the commonplace saying, and "robbing Paul to pay Peter"!

American founder Thomas Jefferson was famous for the "Jefferson Bible" — his own Bible version, which he reputedly arranged by physically using a razor to dissect and edit the New Testament. Authors such as del Tondo and Winn may not use physical knives on the text, but their surgery on Paul is no less radical, and no better informed. — *James Patrick Holding*

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NOTES

- 1 <http://www.questioningpaul.com>.
- 2 For an analysis of the chronological issues, see Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 442ff.