

Has it Really Come to This?

Comments on a Banner Article

Part 2

This is the second of two pieces in response to an article in the current issue of *The Banner of Truth*, the article itself being an extract from J.Gresham Machen's *The Christian View of Man*, which the Banner published in 1965. In my first piece, I dealt with Machen's words in a general sense. I now want to home in on one particular point. Here is the relevant extract from Machen's article:

How, then, shall [men] be right with God? Oh, you say, there is the gospel; there is the sweet and comforting teaching of Jesus Christ. Yes, but do men come to Jesus Christ? Do they come to him for the salvation of their souls? No, they patronise him as a fine religious teacher, and then they pass him by. How, then, shall they be brought to him? The Bible gives the answer. 'Wherefore', it says, 'the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Gal. 3:24). That was true of the Hebrews in Old Testament and post-Old Testament times, about whom Paul is speaking in that passage; it is also true of everyone who really and truly comes to Jesus Christ as the Saviour from sin. The consciousness of sin alone leads men to turn to the Saviour from sin, and the consciousness of sin comes only when men are brought face to face with the law of God... Do not fear, you Christians. The Spirit of God has not lost his power. In his own good time, he will send his messengers even to a wicked and adulterous and careless generation. He will cause Mount Sinai to overhang and shoot forth flames; he will convict men of sin; he will break down men's pride; he will melt their stony hearts. Then he will lead them to the Saviour of their souls.¹

¹ J.Gresham Machen: 'The Majesty of the Law of God', *The Banner of Truth*, Nov. 2017, pp1-6.

Machen is here preaching unadulterated preparationism. And he is basing his case for it on one verse from Galatians 3. One verse! Well... there is no end to the sort of nonsense that can be dragged out of, or foisted on, one verse of Scripture. What is more, and most important of all, Machen's case is founded on one of the worst, most glaring, mis-translations of any verse in the entire Bible.

Before I get to that, let me explain the terms. The advocates of Reformed preparationism² say that sinners must be 'prepared' for Christ, 'made fit' for Christ, fit to receive him, or use some such jargon, and that this is accomplished by preaching the law to them. Sinners will trust Christ only after they have been prepared by the law; that is, after the law has sufficiently convicted them of their sin. This is the only way they can be saved.

This is quite wrong, and has been the source of endless misery for countless sinners and saints.³ But it is precisely what Machen is teaching here, in this *Banner* article:

How, then, shall [sinners] be brought to [Christ]? The Bible gives the answer. 'Wherefore', it says, 'the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Gal. 3:24)... [What] Paul is speaking in that passage.. is... true of everyone who really and truly comes to Jesus Christ as the Saviour from sin. The consciousness of sin alone leads men to turn to the Saviour from sin, and the consciousness of sin comes only when men are brought face to face with the law of God... The Spirit of God has not lost his power. In his own good time, he will send his messengers even to a wicked and adulterous and careless generation. He will cause Mount Sinai to overhang and shoot forth flames; he will convict men of sin; he will break down men's pride; he will melt their stony hearts. Then he will lead them to the Saviour of their souls.

² There is, in addition, a hyper-Calvinistic preparationism, according to which sinners cannot even be invited or commanded to come to Christ until they have had 'a thorough law work'. See my *Assurance in the New Covenant*.

³ I have fully documented this. See, for instance, my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Assurance; 'Was Isaiah a Preparationist?'; 'Preparationism in New England'; 'The Law and the Confessions'*.

Preparationism by the law. And, please note, preaching the law to sinners is not an option; it is not *one* way of bringing sinners to Christ. Oh no! It is *the* way. The law must be preached, the full force of Mount Sinai must be laid upon sinners, shooting its flames upon them, and all this must be preached to prepare sinners for Christ:

The consciousness of sin alone leads men to turn to the Saviour from sin, and the consciousness of sin comes only when men are brought face to face with the law of God.

Not until sinners have had ‘a thorough law work’ will they be brought to Christ. But once they have been preached into that state, then the Spirit ‘will lead them to the Saviour of their souls’. But not before! Machen has left nobody in any doubt. Nor have the *Banner*. This is preparationism of a high order!

I am not saying Machen is alone in this. Both he and the *Banner* are repeating centuries-old legal teaching. Calvin made precisely the same mistake.⁴ It was carried over by the Puritans into the Westminster and 1689 Particular Baptist Confessions, but not, I am delighted to record, into the 1644 Particular Baptist Confession.⁵ Listen to what its compilers stated:

The tenders of the gospel to the conversion of sinners, is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the law, or preceding ministry of the law, but only and alone the naked soul, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen again, being made a Prince and a Saviour for such sinners.

If only the *Banner* would publish that, and not Machen on the law! Wishing for the moon, alas!

Before I move on, let me just say that I am not saying that the law should never be preached in the days of the new covenant. I would not dream of saying such a thing! The law is a part of all Scripture, and, if used properly (1 Tim. 1:8) it is profitable (2 Tim. 3:15-17). But that means it must only be preached as

⁴ See my *Christ*.

⁵ See my ‘The Law and the Confessions’.

warranted by Christ and the apostles,⁶ not Reformed theology. To demand the preaching of the law before preaching Christ, however, is not to be countenanced. It has no scriptural basis.

And that takes me to the central point. Machen's argument for preparationism by the law is based on an appalling and utterly misleading mis-translation of Galatians 3.

Let me quote the passage in the AV or KJV, that which has caused untold damage to a countless number:

Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster (Gal. 3:24-25).

This translation, alas, repeats (whether deliberately or not, I do not know) the mistake of the Geneva Version:

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

Tyndale, however, got much closer. Alas, the AV translators failed to take proper account of Tyndale here. This is how he translates the passage:

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster unto the time of Christ that we might be made righteous by faith. But after that faith is come, now are we no longer under a schoolmaster.

Now these versions, as I say, are guilty, to a varying degree, of one of the most glaringly bad translations of any passage in the entire Bible. It has caused immense harm. Machen, in this present *Banner* article, is perpetuating that bad translation and the consequent damage it has inflicted on countless souls. I find it hard to credit that such a scholar as Machen, who published notes on part of Galatians,⁷ did not realise this. Likewise, I also find it

⁶ See, for instance, my 'Separation Essential: No Mixture! Deut. 22:9-11'.

⁷ J.Gresham Machen: *Machen's Notes on Galatians: Notes on Biblical Exposition and Other Aids to the Interpretation of the Epistle to the*

hard to credit that the *Banner* publishers are ignorant of it. Ah, well...

Let us get nearer to what Paul actually wrote:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made... Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Gal. 3:19-25).

This translation is a great improvement on the others. It is much closer to Paul's words. But let me set out what the apostle actually did say:

If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before [the] faith [that is, the gospel] came, we [that is, the Jews] were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith [that is, the gospel] would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian [better, child-custodian] until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that [the] faith [that is, the gospel] has come, we are no longer under a guardian [that is, a child-custodian] (Gal. 3:22-25).

Having elsewhere fully set out my arguments for this rendering of the apostle's words,⁸ I will not stop to repeat those arguments here. But the truth is, this passage has nothing to say about personal experience. It has nothing to say about preaching the law to prepare sinners for Christ. The words 'to bring us' are a downright imposition on the text. The translators (and those who argue on the basis of the inserted text) are guilty of putting words in the apostle's mouth. It ought to stop. I am amazed that the *Banner* contains such material, perpetuating a falsehood. Yes, I use the word. The evidence of the mis-translation is there for all

Galatians From the Writings of J.Gresham Machen, John H. Skilton (ed.), Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., New Jersey, 1977.

⁸ See my *Three Verses Misunderstood*.

to see. There is no excuse for the publication of this kind of misleading material. It should be immediately withdrawn, and never repeated.

In Galatians 3, Paul teaches us that the Jews were under the law – an integral, inseparable,⁹ part of a temporary covenant which was introduced, added by God, alongside the Abrahamic covenant, this Mosaic covenant to last only until the coming of the Seed, Christ, who would abolish it by fulfilling it and rendering it obsolete (Matt. 5:17-22; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 7:12,18-22; 8:13).¹⁰ During the time that Israel was under the Mosaic covenant with its law, it served as a child custodian to discipline and imprison Israel. The passage has nothing to do with the idea of a schoolmaster and education!¹¹ Nor does it have anything to say about personal experience of conversion.¹² Paul is concerned with epochs – the epoch of the law, the time of the law, and the epoch or age of the gospel, the new covenant. The time of the law is over and done with. That age, the epoch of the law, has passed, all by God’s design. Shadow has been superseded by reality, fulfilment, by the bringing in of the new covenant, the better or superior covenant (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; Hebrews *passim*).

⁹ See my ‘What God Has Joined... Covenant and Law Inseparable’.

¹⁰ See my *Christ, Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

¹¹ The Greek word is *paidagōgos*. The word is a combination of *pais* (child) and *agōgos* (leader), derived from *agō*, ‘to drive, to lead by laying hold of, to conduct’ with the idea of discipline. As Thayer explains: ‘The name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys... The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them, before reaching the age of manhood... The name carries with it an idea of severity (as of a stern censor and enforcer of morals)’. And the child-custodian’s job was not to *bring* the immature boy anywhere; rather, he had to discipline and protect the boy *until* he reached maturity. During that time, the Jews ‘were held prisoners by the law, locked up’ by the law (Gal. 3:23, NIV), ‘kept under guard by the law’, confined by the law.

¹² Of course, the apostle moves on to personal experience in verse 26, but this is beside the material point here. In Gal. 4 he returns to epochs.

Galatians 3 gives no warrant for preaching the law to sinners to prepare them for Christ. None whatsoever! For those who still think it does, or that preparation by the law is the way to address Gentile unbelievers today, in the days of the new covenant, I have a question or two. Could we given one example – one example – in all the Bible where any non-Israelite was brought to Christ through the law? Did any preacher, as recorded in Scripture, ever preach the law to Gentiles to prepare them for Christ? Why not? If Machen and the *Banner* are right, no sinner can ever be saved without first having been taken to Moses and given a thorough law work. Preachers who do not preach the law, who do not preach the law before they preach the gospel, must, therefore, be going about their work in completely the wrong way. And the ‘conversions’ they see must be false.

I close by reminding us all of what Christ declared:

When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin... concerning sin, because they do not believe in me (John 16:8-9).

And we know why sinners will be condemned:

Whoever believes in [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:18,36).

For conviction and condemnation in the days of the new covenant, therefore, not a whiff of Moses, but all to do with Christ.

And we have Paul’s assertions which are clarity itself. How these do not silence the preparationists, once and for all, I simply cannot fathom:

Christ did not send me... but to preach the gospel... For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach

Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men... And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:2).

Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

What we proclaim is... Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

If I may accommodate the apostle's words, this is my reply to all preparationists – Calvin, Puritans, Westminster, 1689, Machen, *Banner*, whoever – every gospel preacher can declare, ought to declare: 'Christ did not send me to preach the law but to preach the gospel... Preparationists demand law, but I preach Christ... I do not come proclaiming to you the law.... For I am determined to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified'.