

“The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

2 Corinthians 3:6

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Pelagius, it is sometimes said, has the distinction of being the only truly world class British heretic. The debates and disputes of the ancient and medieval church largely took place a long way away from our home, and were conducted by people who knew little of these islands. But Pelagius, a British monk, was an influential figure in Roman Christianity at the end of the fourth century, and his reservations at what he took to be the teaching of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, led to one of Christianity’s greatest theological disputes. As with so many historical arguments, reconstructing exactly what each thought can be rather hard: Pelagius views were misrepresented by his opponents, Augustine’s views develop as the debates become fiercer, but Pelagianism has come to mean – unfairly to its founder – the view that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts.

In fact, what worried Pelagius was the opposite – the seeming opinion of Augustine that our free choices did not matter because only God’s grace enabled us to act justly. If Christ has issued commands to his followers, Pelagius observes, the fulfilment of those commands must be attainable. Augustine, to an extent, does

not demur: it is perfectly possible – in abstract – for someone to live without sin. As a matter of fact, however, it doesn’t happen. We need the grace of God.

The passage we heard from the Second Letter to the Corinthians is the basis for one of Augustine’s celebrated “Anti-Pelagian” Treatises. Using the apostle’s contrast of Spirit and Letter, he sets out his understanding of Paul’s teaching on the relationship between the Old and the New Covenants, the Law of Moses and the Life of Christ, and it is a subject which has remained a central, and much misunderstood, aspect of Christian teaching ever since, as recent Pauline scholarship only serves to emphasise.

For a long time, the opinions of the Reformation dominated our understanding of Paul’s letters. Paul is contrasting faith with works, it was thought: the law is inadequate, something else is needed, Christ is that something else. Well, yes and no. Because what has come to be called the “new perspective on Paul” reminds us that Paul has no such problem with the law: it is the gift of God’s grace, just and holy and good. His description of his own life as a Pharisee – a description he gives in the letter to the Philippians – suggests no angst or crisis of faith in his previous life. What makes the difference is Christ, but it is the new thing which is important, not some pre-existing puzzle. The solution precedes the problem, we sometimes

say. Paul has seen Jesus, and knows that acceptance into the kingdom of God is by grace through faith in Christ, and not by circumcision or works of law, but quite why things were they way they were in the first place is something he is not very sure about.

Our reading's context is Paul's claim to a valid apostolic ministry. He needs no letter of recommendation. Instead he speaks of the Corinthian church as a letter, penned by Christ, written not on stone but on human hearts and delivered by Paul and his companions, ministers of a new covenant. The literal letter kills but the spirit gives life. By contrast it is the ministry of death which was chiselled in stone on the tablets of the law. The law could be understood to be the bringer of condemnation, but since the law is God's gift, how can this be so? Augustine – with characteristic common sense - urges us to understand the passage about the Spirit and the Letter in the context of Paul's explicit teaching on the coming of the law in Romans 7. The unfortunate tendency of humanity is not to choose the good. Selfishness and what Augustine might call misplaced desire all too often characterize our actions. But without the revelation of God, we are left not just in the mire, but not recognising the mire to be a mire at all. The coming of the law is the loving act of God, protecting his people, defending their identity as his chosen, establishing in fixed form for future generations the outworking of the covenant, the coming together, of God and Israel.

But the shining of a light, which is the coming of the law, will reveal everything there is to be revealed, good and bad. It is only possible to break a rule if there is a rule to be broken. Transgression, the identifiable act of sinning, becomes possible when there is a code to transgress. Thus it is that the law – God's gift of love and grace - becomes the focus of God's estrangement from his people because it reveals the wrongdoing which turns away from the love of God himself.

However, God's faithfulness to his covenant outlives and outweighs the recalcitrance of human disobedience and, in Jesus Christ, his promise to restore his people and make his name known to all nations has now come about. We do not join this new Israel by obeying the law, but by accepting the grace of Christ through faith. The former letter, chiselled in stone, was the law, and the law was what made the Old Covenant to be what it was. The new letter, written on our hearts, is Christ himself and it is Christ who makes the new Covenant – the church – to be what it was and is. God has done a new thing, and now everything is changed. New wine is for new wineskins, is our gospel reminds us.

Augustine and Paul both teach us that the light of Christ which enlightens the nations itself has its double side – illuminating us in our new life of grace, it exposes our inability to keep the law and to

live in accordance with God's will, without that grace, that light to show us the way. This is the key to Augustine's rejection of Pelagianism. It is simply not the case that I, a human being, am equipped to make the right and necessary choices on my own if life with God is what I seek. There is a contrast to be drawn between individual free choice – a category upheld as valuable above all things by our self-obsessed culture – and true freedom, *libertas*, which is the state to which we can be lifted by God's grace, by the love of God being poured into our hearts, enabling us to do so much more than we thought to be within ourselves, enabling us to be selfless and hence to be Christ-like because to be selfless is to live according to the love of God. What is ultimately real, ultimately creative, what makes things truly possible, what genuinely frees us from constraint and from our all too human fallibility, is the love of God, the love given and received in the eternal motion of the Trinity. And Augustine, in his magnificent treatise on that triune love, tells us plainly, that the love of God given and received, the love which flows between father and son, which overflows for the sake of the world, which draws each one of us into that life of eternal love, is nothing other than the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit which gives life.