The New Way of the Spirit: Part Two

Contrary to what I once thought, the New Testament emphatically rejects a law-based approach to faith and practice. No one is clearer on this than Paul. According to Paul “we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6).

But then I must reiterate something else, lest there be any confusion: Christ’s call to discipleship is a call to the very highest spiritual standards imaginable. The Sermon on the Mount makes this very clear. Jesus calls us to no anger, no lust, no divorce, no retaliation, no worrying, no judging, and no hypocrisy (no play-acting, no pretension and no putting on airs). He calls us to absolute truthfulness, love, forgiveness and trust. He envisions a new humanity acting better than anyone has ever imagined. And there are other lists, like 1 Corinthians 5:11 ff.: no sexual immorality, no greed, no idolatry (not giving our finest life energy to anything or anyone other than God), no slander, no drunkenness, no swindling. Every one of these lists counts. Jesus is calling us to the highest standards imaginable, to standards that have almost never been seen on this earth.

The issue is how to get there, how to attain these standards, how to live this life. And the typical “religious” answer – the answer you’ll hear in most churches one way or another – is almost invariably to get there on your own resources, by your own power, to just do it, to read the written code and do it, beat yourself if you have to, but just do it. And Paul is saying: You can’t. I’ve tried it all. I still do. I beat my body. And now it’s report card day, and we’re all still getting C’s and D’s. Because the truth is: You can’t, you can’t just do it, because you keep leaving the Spirit of God out of the equation. And you’ll never be able to do these things until you are led by the Spirit, and filled with the Spirit, until you see the sacred in everyday life, until you sense the Spirit of God all around you, until you begin to have transforming moments when you are so overcome with the Spirit of God that it’s like an electrical flow, liquid fire, an intense, penetrating warmth surging through you, until you’re energized by God and full of his life in you. And then you’ll be able to move mountains. But until then you won’t be able to do much. Because these things can’t be done in the old way of the written code.

If you follow the old way of the written code, you’ll be overwhelmed with failure, yours and everybody else’s. You’ll be constantly critical; you’ll alienate everyone. You’ll be bitter and resentful – at success, at grace, at forgiveness, at everything. You’ll divide and fragment; remember that the letter kills. You’ll end up playacting all the time. You’ll always be cycling in and out of depression and anxiety. And you won’t ever get near the high call of discipleship. In fact, Paul goes on in Romans 7 (verses 15ff.) to say: You’ll end up a walking civil war, desiring to do what is good, but not being able to, not doing the good you want to do, and still doing the evil you don’t want to do. Like how many of us? And that’s got to end, because there’s a world to save – there’s a world to be brought together in Christ; there are 9/11s and Christchurches to prevent – and none of this can be done in the old way of the written code.
So what is Paul saying? He’s saying that we don’t have to figure out some system, break some code that people never agree on anyway and that just keeps getting more and more intricate and complicated and restrictive. It’s the nature of law always to expand, never to contract. Every new situation calls for new law. Legal systems never get simpler or shorter or easier to comply with. But it’s not that you have to break some code. It’s that you have to open your life to the Spirit of God. The code has already been broken. God forgave us all our sins. He canceled the written code, Paul says in Colossians 2:13-15, with all its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us. He took it away, nailing it to the cross, reassuring us in the most graphic way imaginable of his love for us and his forgiveness of us. The code has already been broken, and the life you’ve always wanted is the life led by the Spirit.

So what do I do with Scripture? I study it, and I study it hard. I find in Scripture the primary instructions, the wisest insights, and the guiding principles for every aspect of life. I weigh every word and phrase carefully – as the word of God. I will do everything I possibly can to be true to the original intent of each text. But I will not read Scripture as if it were legal material when Paul is emphatically clear that it is not. If I truly believe the Scriptures, I cannot treat them as law. In fact, the old way of the written code ends up “killing” even Scripture – robbing Scripture of paradox, and mystery, and multiple perspectives, and real-life humanity and turning it all into flat, boring prose that reads like a law code or assembly instructions for a bicycle. Now I know that Scripture is not just inspired; it’s intended to inspire us. It’s meant to release us into the new way of the Spirit.

So who especially still needs to be warned against the old way of the written code? Perhaps not many of us. By the grace of God, there are fewer and fewer legalists in church. I will note, however, that people who consider themselves freed from a letter-of-the-law approach will at the strangest moments revert to it, insist, for instance, that women be silent in church, or insist that other good and caring people, people of faith, otherwise be discriminated against. On the basis of what? Law, I guess. But then it’s not just about us. For 2000 years law has triumphed over gospel, and people everywhere suffer for it. So the word must go out from those who know better. It’s likely true that each of us have friends and family who still insist on treating Scripture as law. They live in the wrong story. And one way or another, some time or other, they have to hear this from someone.

The new way of the Spirit is the story we can find ourselves in, our true selves, the selves we were born to be. And you know this story is true. You know what it’s like when someone holds you up to the written code, and nails you to it. You know the fear, the shame, the embarrassment, the seething resentment, the alienation you feel, and the moral paralysis. And then you know what it’s like when someone responds to you in the new way of the Spirit – listens to you, sees you, really sees you, seeks to understand you, acts in the spirit of Christ, forgives you and empowers you, believes in you, and trusts you. Be that story for others. Live that story for others. This is the story we find ourselves in. And we are no longer lost.
God is always calling us to life in the new way of the Spirit. To see the beauty in the here-and-now. To see in the wonders of the ordinary the presence of God. To live vibrantly, expectantly, increasingly fearlessly. To seek and to treasure transforming moments when you are so overcome with the Spirit of God that it’s like an electrical flow, liquid fire, an intense, penetrating warmth surging through you. To tap into the creativity of God and live with enthusiasm, that is, with God-energy. To let go of fear and self-consciousness and attachment to things, and consequently to find both the peace and the power to get on with God’s calling in your life, to do the tasks he has given you in his kingdom. To seek truth, fearing no question or no issue, knowing that the Spirit of God will lead you into all truth, will lead you to see things as they are. In short, to discover the new way of the Spirit in all its energy, zest, life and creative flow.

– Dale Pauls