

“For Freedom!”

An Expository Commentary On Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

The First in a Series of Expositions of the Letters of Paul

To Mike, Rod, Ken, and Shane -

Fellow students of the Apostle Paul

Purpose

The purpose of this expositional commentary on Paul's Galatian letter is three-fold.

- To exegete the biblical text in light of the original setting and circumstances of the letter's composition
- To interpret the text of Galatians in light of the church's on-going reflection upon the meaning of the text, with consideration given to the significant debates (some historic and some contemporary) over the text and its meaning
- To develop application arising from the exposition of the text, drawing upon historic and Reformed sources (with special emphasis given to the Reformed confessions and to the commentaries of Martin Luther and John Calvin). The reader will also find frequent references to recommended Reformed sources for further reflection and study

The text of the "For Freedom!" falls somewhere between biblical exposition and a commentary. The text has not professionally edited so as to make it available free of charge to listeners of the Blessed Hope Podcast who complete the fourteen episodes of Season One

History

This expositional commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians began as a series of sermons first preached at Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim, CA (URCNA) in 1998, and revised in 2017. The 2017 sermons were, in turn, edited and became the script for the Blessed Hope Podcast Season One series on the Book of Galatians. The script was revised and edited again in 2022 as a premium for listeners to the Blessed Hope Podcast.

The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

Introduction

With good reason, the Book of Galatians has been called the *magna carte* of Christian liberty. There is perhaps no portion of Holy Scripture which packs the punch of Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. In this letter, Paul lays out as passionate a defense of the gospel as can be found in all the New Testament. He warns his readers of their immediate peril. He scolds his readers for not rebuffing the false teachers in their midst. He also assures his readers that God's covenant promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ and if they sow to the Spirit they will reap the harvest.

It becomes readily apparent to the reader that the apostle is angry when he writes his Galatian epistle. Paul calls the Galatians "foolish" (Galatians 3:1), going so far as to tell them that if they wish to insist upon the necessity of the circumcision of Gentile converts, then they might as well go the whole way and emasculate themselves (Galatians 5:12). Granted, these are strong words from the apostle, but then much was at stake—the gospel.

The churches to which Paul is writing are congregations that he himself helped to establish not long before in the Roman province of *Pontus Galatica*. These events are recounted in Acts 13-14. Some background is important so as to help us understand the circumstances which prompted Paul to compose this letter. The new churches of Galatia included congregations in the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.¹ Galatia gets its name from invading Celts who moved east across the Danube river and the Bosphorus to settle in central Asia Minor (Anatolia)—modern Turkey. These invaders were identified as Gauls by ancient writers, hence *Galatia*. The Greeks saw the Gauls as a warlike people, who, once having settled in Asia Minor, quickly identified with the local androgynous goddess, Agdistis, the "mother of gods" closely associated with the Phrygian goddess, Cybele.

In Paul's day, Galatia was made up of mostly Phrygians (local inhabitants going back generations) and Celts (the more recent intruders from Gaul). For the most part, people living in the region settled in small villages scattered among large tracts of land. Many worked as sheep herders and foresters. Some of the inhabitants became quite wealthy as local hardwood was widely exported and turned a handsome profit. The Phrygian cult of the "mother of the gods" was apparently widespread. Archaeological excavations throughout the region have turned up a number of grave-markers and tombstones with Phrygian cult symbols. There were also a number of temples dedicated to Zeus as well. According to Luke's account in the Book of Acts, confirmed through recent archeological research, there were a significant number of Jews

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, New International Greek Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 5. Without evidence or argument Beker boldly states, "the Galatian churches (Gal. 1:2) were located in the Northern part of Asia Minor, that is the territory around Ancyra and Pessinus (and not in the Roman province of "Galatia"). See J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in the Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 41-42.

and synagogues scattered throughout the area.²

Paul visited the city of Lystra on both his first and second missionary journeys. Lystra was located on an ancient road running from Ephesus to Sardis, then on to Psidian Antioch, then to Iconium and Lystra, and on to Derbe, passing through the Cilician Gates to Tarsus (Paul's hometown), and finally on to Syrian Antioch in what is now the Hatay region of Turkey. After healing a man who was lame from birth (recounted in Acts 14:8-10), Paul was mistaken for Zeus, only to be attacked by an angry mob. Riled up by local Jews from neighboring Psidion Antioch, the mob attempted to kill Paul by stoning.

Incidentally, Paul first met Timothy in Lystra. The site has been only partially excavated. Nearby Derbe too has been partially excavated. This small hamlet was sort of a city of refuge for Paul, a place where Christians believed the gospel without much opposition, and where Paul and Barnabas fled after being nearly stoned to death in the neighboring cities of Lystra and Psidion Antioch. The remains of the latter are quite extensive.

Paul and Barnabas visited Psidion Antioch on their first missionary journey (according to Acts 13:13-52) and after preaching in the synagogue there were driven out by local Jews. The two preachers fled to Derbe. Paul returned to the Psidion Antioch later to appoint elders (Acts 14:21-23) because a church had taken root there despite previous and fierce opposition. Paul probably returned on his third journey (Acts 18:23). The final city, Iconium, was yet another place from which Paul was forced to flee after preaching the gospel. It is now the modern city of Konieh, home to 40,000 Turks.

The gospel was embraced by many in these cities, congregations were quickly established, but soon these same churches were tolerating, if not openly embracing, a form of teaching which directly contradicted the message the apostle recently taught them about the saving work of Jesus Christ. This created the crisis in the Galatian churches which prompts Paul to compose his Galatian letter. The presence of "men from James" challenging Paul's preaching produced a spiritual battle fought over the content of the gospel. Paul minces no words with those whom he regards as enemies of that gospel, men, who in his mind, were well-deserving of the divine anathema he pronounces upon them in the opening words of his letter.

Paul's purpose in writing Galatians is perhaps best summed-up by his exhortation in Galatians 5:1: "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" Jesus Christ's saving work bought his people freedom from the yoke of the law. But those challenging Paul sought to re-enslave the Galatians. This is a battle waged over the content of the gospel and the blessing of Christian freedom which that gospel produces. The reader of Galatians is summoned to join the battle which continues into the present.

The metaphor of slavery was a familiar one to Paul's audience, which is why he uses it to explain humanity's plight (sin and guilt) and God's method of deliverance (faith and

² G. W. Hansen, "Galatians, Letter to" in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 323-326. See also, Mark Fairchild, "Turkey's Unexcavated Synagogues: Could the World's Earliest Known Synagogue Be Buried Amid Rubble?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 38, no. 4 (July / August 2012), 34-41, 65.

justification).³ Slaves were a large social caste found throughout the entirety of the Roman empire. Those aqueducts, forums, temples, and amphitheaters required massive amounts of back-breaking labor to build. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world could be a death sentence, especially to those working in mines or as oarsmen who were chained to their station. But some slaves fared quite well, especially those who did household work or served their masters in business and administrative tasks.

In Paul's day, slavery was not raced based as in antebellum America. The caste of slaves in Paul's world was made up of those who were unfortunately on the losing side of war with Rome, and were subsequently enslaved (sometimes for generations) after Roman conquest of their various homelands. By some estimates, the vast majority of white Europeans now living have ancestors enslaved in this manner.⁴ Slaves were marked by brands on their hands and foreheads.⁵ Slavery meant being owned by another—you were chattel (property). Slavery in the Roman empire was therefore a fitting image for being held captive by the power of sin.

But there were also a significant number of former slaves who had been set free from slavery (manumission), so those who heard Paul preach could immediately understand Paul's metaphor of being enslaved by sin, then set free, the manumission payment being Christ's death as payment for freedom from that which formerly enslaved us (sin and death). When Paul speaks of fallen humanity as slaves to sin, yet being freed so as to become bond-servants of Jesus, that too made sense to Paul's audience. Slaves were often purchased by others, new masters whom they now served. Paul appeals to Jesus' promise to set his people free from sin and death to serve the Savior. Jesus is after all the most gracious of masters—*“my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:30).

The slavery metaphor also works well to illustrate why the Christian life can be understood in terms of a newly freed slave learning to live as a free person. Once we have been set from bondage to sin, we struggle to live as free men and women. We have known nothing else but a former life of slavery. Freedom can be a scary thing to a newly freed person. There is a powerful pull to return to that which makes sense, in this case, trying to keep the law to escape slavery to sin's bondage.

For a zealous Jew, however, the very idea that the law of Moses enslaved, caused sin to rise in the human heart, which resulted in the curse and death (a common theme in Paul's preaching) was not a positive metaphor, but an altogether dangerous one. To the Jewish mind, obedience to God's commandments earned a degree of righteousness before God. Possessing the law was not akin to slavery to its stipulations. Rather, possessing the law as a people demonstrated Jewish superiority precisely because Jews possessed YHWH's law, something about which of

³ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans *Novum Testamentum*, Supplement 61 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 123-132.

⁴ Jean Manco, Ancestral Journeys: The Peopling of Europe from the First Venturers to the Vikings (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 198.

⁵ We may think of the implications this has for understanding the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation—666.

no Greco-Roman pagan could boast. Hearing Paul speak of Jesus as liberating people from the law was tantamount to challenging Israel's *raison d'être*.

Given this context, it should come as no surprise that those opposing Paul's gospel, known to us as Judaizers (Galatians 2:14), were seeking to defend Jewish traditions and practice, the so-called "ethnic badges," which included circumcision, feasts, dietary laws. Yet many Jews did come to acknowledge that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. The news coming to Galatia from Jerusalem was that a miracle-working prophet named Jesus was crucified by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and then had risen from the dead, and was seen by many eyewitnesses. Jesus claimed to usher in the kingdom of God. All of this was too powerful to ignore. If the Judaizers saw Paul as betraying the Judaism of their collective fathers, Paul saw the Judaizers as a sect of false teachers who were distorting the gospel revealed to him by none other than the risen Jesus. We will have more to say about the Judaizers momentarily. This was a dispute which must be resolved, and one which Paul saw as necessary to the survival of the new churches in Galatia.

Given Paul's "no-holds barred" defense of the gospel in this letter—and let me emphasize again, a gospel which was personally revealed to him by Jesus while Paul was on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19)—many of the readers of this epistle see their own struggles to defend the gospel in their own time and place (specifically the doctrine of justification by faith alone) as arising from and kindred to Paul's efforts to oppose the Judaizers in Galatia.

This short but powerful epistle was beloved by the Protestant Reformers, who saw in the Roman church on the eve of the Protestant Reformation, a church committing many of the same sorts of doctrinal errors as the Judaizers once taught in Galatia. Many professing Christians have mistakenly thought that the outcome for them on judgment day would be determined by their own good works and personal righteousness based upon a righteousness achieved (i.e., earned or gained) through personal obedience to the law (the Ten Commandments), the possession of more good works than sins, baptism as an act of obedience, along with devotion to the church and participation in its ceremonies (as often as one could). This perpetual quest for personal righteousness reflected much of what the Judaizers understood about righteousness and how it ought to be earned.

Martin Luther absolutely loved the Letter to the Galatians, declaring this "is my epistle, to which I am betrothed. It is my Katie von Bora."⁶ Many (me included) consider Luther's Commentary on Galatians to be his greatest legacy. John Calvin described Paul's Galatian letter as a defense of "a fundamental article of the Christian faith," which at the same time exposed Paul's opponents (the Judaizers) as wicked and dangerous, because their false teaching "darkens the clearness of the Gospel with ancient shadows."⁷ That is precisely what Calvin thought the Roman church had done to apostolic and biblical Christianity.

⁶ Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1-4, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, eds., Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), ix.

⁷ John Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 11, trans., T.H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 3, 7.

Although both Luther and Calvin saw in the Roman church of their day errors quite similar to Paul's Judaizing opponents in Galatians, a number of contemporary New Testament scholars caution us that the teaching of Judaizers in Galatia was much different than the Romanism which Luther and those following him encountered in much of the medieval church.⁸ The advocates of the so-called "New Perspective" on Paul (hereafter the NPP), claim that Luther and those who followed him (i.e., those who identify with the Protestant Reformation), tend to read their own struggles with unresolved guilt fostered by medieval Catholicism back into Paul's struggle with the Judaizers of Galatia, thereby distorting the true nature of Paul's dispute with them over the meaning of the righteousness of God.⁹

Yet, as I will contend in what follows, no one "gets" Paul like Martin Luther. There are more similarities between Rome on the eve of the Reformation and Paul's first century Jewish opponents than many modern NPP critics are willing to admit. Donald Hagner notes,

. . . although the contexts were decidedly different, Paul's argument against works righteousness is similar to Luther's, who after all is dependant upon Paul. Both writers were concerned with salvation, how sinners can stand justified before God. For Paul and for Luther, all of humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, are under judgment as sinners. The law, as Paul argues, followed by Luther, has no answer to this universal problem, neither for Jews nor the Gentiles. The solution to humanity's common plight is found in one way only: by faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.¹⁰

Stephen Westerholm is no doubt correct when he asserts "there is more of Paul in Luther than many twentieth-century scholars are inclined to allow . . . Students who want to understand Paul but feel they have nothing to learn from a Martin Luther should consider a career in metallurgy. Exegesis is learned from the masters."¹¹

Throughout what follows, my operating assumption is that exposition of the biblical text should always be conducted with the goal of understanding what the text meant to the original audience in light of the historical situation of both the author and his audience. Yet, because private interpretation can be a dangerous thing (about which the Apostle Peter warns us in 2

⁸ After summarizing his view that Luther fundamentally misunderstood the meaning of Paul's phrase "works of law" in Galatians 2:16 (more on that to follow), Dunn contends "what was overlooked then, however, and all too often since then, was that sixteenth century Reformation concerns and situation were not the first century situation and concerns of Paul." James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," in Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza, *Perspectives on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 134-143.

⁹ Krister Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 86-87. Stendahl speaks of Luther as a spiritual explorer, a "Christopher Columbus," who refused to take "the wise and sound consolation from his spiritual directors," and who instead sought to find "new and good land on the other side of what was thought to be the abyss" (83).

¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *How New Is the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 6.

¹¹ Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 173.

Peter 1:10), I also think it wise that exegesis be done with the light of the disciplines of systematic and historical theology providing illumination in the background. Christians should read the biblical text in light of the church's on-going reflection and study of that text. We seek to understand what Paul said to the churches in Galatia and how they (and we) should understand him and act upon his instructions (application).

At the same time, we must be careful not to read contemporary debates among the small clique of professional New Testament scholars back into the biblical text, thereby arriving at an interpretation of Paul which says much to our fellow wonky scholars, while saying very little about the doctrinal controversies which are currently being waged over the same ground as Paul and his Judaizing opponents. I see a sort of a "new perspectalizing of Paul" taking place, which assumes that critical scholarship can tell us more about righteousness than can a heart-felt sense of our guilt before a holy God as experienced by Martin Luther. While NPP advocates tell us that Paul is condemning the Judaizers because they were boasting about their ethnic badges and cutting Gentiles off from the people of God (pun intended), instead in this letter we will find Paul speaking primarily to the question of how sinful people are delivered from the guilt and power of their sin. Paul is not only warning the Galatians that "works of law" cannot justify them, he is warning God's people of this same error across the ages.

Thus I agree with Luther when he tells us,

This is where our theology is rooted: we teach how to spot the difference between these two types of righteousness, the active [i.e., "earned"] and the passive [i.e. received through faith]. The result is that socially acceptable behavior and faith, works and grace, politics and theology should not be mixed up or confused one with the other. Both are necessary, but both should be restrained within their own proper boundaries. Christian righteousness is binding on the new man, but the righteousness of the law is binding on the old man who has been born of flesh and blood. On this old man, as you would with an old mule, you should put such a heavy load that it will wear him out, and he should not enjoy the freedom of the spirit given by grace.¹²

Any attempt to earn righteousness by law-keeping should cause us to despair and seek relief in the gospel. If true, the "get in by grace, stay in by good works" mind-set of many NPP advocates will merely keep resurrecting the "old man" who we ought to be striving to kill off. Echoing Paul, Luther reminds me that I am not a mule carrying an intolerable burden. In Christ, I am a freedman, my sins now washed away and covered by Christ's righteousness. I am no longer enslaved by the law which constantly exposes my every sin.

NPP folk tend to be functional biblicists,¹³ who do not see themselves bound by Reformation

¹² Martin Luther, Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1535); Lecture Notes Transcribed by Students & Presented in Today's English, trans., Haroldo Camacho (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2018), xxvii.

¹³ Biblicism is the attempt to engage in biblical interpretation in isolation, apart from the church's long-standing debate and reflection upon the matters under discussion. NPP scholars are very well-grounded in Second Temple Jewish source materials, but seem largely indifferent to the history of debate in the Christian church over justification and contemporary

era confessions, doctrines, or to the on-going debate about how it is that someone who is sinful can be declared righteous before a holy God.¹⁴ Granted, every doctrine we believe and confess must arise from a careful reading of Scripture. To understand Galatians we need to know the reasons for its composition and the historical circumstances under which it was sent. But the NPP folks have built a Procrustean Bed (a truncated understanding of Second Temple Judaism) into which every piece of biblical and historical data must be rammed. This can be seen in N. T. Wright's insistence that Paul's letter to the Galatians must be read through the lens of Israel's history, not the contemporary situation in Galatia. While true to a certain degree (since Paul does repeatedly appeal to Moses and Abraham), Wright's approach to Galatians steers us in a wrong direction due to his prior assumptions about righteousness and "works of law."¹⁵ One critic of the NPP put it aptly when he noted the NPP methodology consistently "ends up lording it over the data."¹⁶

According to the NPP, Second Temple era Jews taught that God was gracious toward his people, Israel, supposedly overwhelming evidence that Second Temple Judaism was not a religion of works-righteousness. Therefore, on NPP operating assumptions, Martin Luther erred in taking Paul to mean that the Judaziers taught personal salvation came through works of righteousness. Thus, for NPP devotees, the gospel is not about individual salvation (how someone "gets saved"), but rather about how Jews and Gentiles who believed that Jesus was the Messiah were to get along together in the church.¹⁷ The Reformation, they say or imply, led to an unfortunate dead-end, a divided church, and brought about many of the ills of the modern world.

I remain well-satisfied that when properly understood, what Paul says to the Galatians about

disputes. One example of this sort of biblicism is found in Constantine Campbell's *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 452, to which I refer throughout this study. Campbell contends that asking about Paul's millennial view is irrelevant, because this was not an issue for Paul. That may be true within the narrow confines of biblical studies. But the fact of the matter is that the church has debated eschatological views from its earliest days and must look to Paul, in part, for answers. Should not interpreters of Paul conduct their inquiry in light of the church's on-going dialog and wisdom on such matters? Dismissing contemporary questions under the guise that the biblical writers were not interested our questions does caution us not to put questions to the biblical writers they do not address or answer. Yet, it is not as though Paul has nothing to say about matters which impact contemporary eschatological debate.

¹⁴ According to E. P. Sanders, "I intend to exclude one of the traditional ways of setting up the discussion of Paul's theology; by describing first the plight of man to which Paul saw Christ as offering a solution." See E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 442.

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, A Theology of Paul and His Letters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 16; See N. T. Wright, Galatians: Commentaries for Christian Formation (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), 31-41.

¹⁶ Moises Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," in The Westminster Theological Journal, Vol. 53 (1991), 353.

¹⁷ Says James D. G. Dunn: "All this confirms the earlier important thesis of Stendahl, that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual's relation to God, but primarily in the context of Paul the Jew wrestling with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now that it has reached its climax in Jesus Christ." See James D. G. Dunn, "A New Perspective on Paul," reprinted in Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1990), 202.

God's righteousness and how it is received, he says to us (i.e., from the biblical text, not from a Reformation confession which summarizes the biblical text). For reasons we will take up momentarily, Luther and Calvin (the "Old Perspective on Paul"-OPP) understood Paul properly, despite the NPP insistence to the contrary.

Who? When? What? Why?

Before we begin working our way through the text of Paul's letter to the Galatians, it is vital to consider the historical situation which led to the epistle's composition. Asking and answering these basic questions (Who? When? What? Why?) provides the context for properly interpreting the Book of Galatians as well as many of the subsequent letters of Paul. Background and context will help us better understand the specific issues and controversies raised by Paul within the letter.

We begin with the question of authorship and authenticity—who wrote this epistle? Paul is universally regarded as the author of Galatians, identifying himself as such in the opening verse (1:1). He also makes a number of personal references and refers to common knowledge throughout the body of the letter. E. D. Burton notes that "there is no other letter which has any better claim to be regarded as [Paul's] work than Galatians itself."¹⁸ Even a well-known critical scholar, W. G. Kümmel states that those who dispute the authenticity of this letter "have quite rightly not been taken seriously."¹⁹

When the Galatian letter was written is a matter of some dispute. Paul's circular letter to the various congregations in Galatia was likely written in A.D. 48, prior to the Jerusalem Council which is recounted in Acts 15:1-21 and dated later in the same year, or the year following.²⁰ The Jerusalem Council was a significant event in the apostolic church and Paul makes no mention of it in his letter to the Galatians—an important point since the council ruled on the same dispute Paul was dealing with in Galatia.²¹ Had this council taken place before Paul set quill to parchment, this would have been a very strong argument in his favor against the Judaizers. But he says nothing to the Galatians about this ruling, which is a very good reason to believe

¹⁸ Ernest De Witt Burton, The Epistle to the Galatians, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1980), lxv.

¹⁹ W. G. Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament, rev. ed (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1977), 304.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, "Council, Jerusalem," in D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, in New Bible Dictionary (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), s.v. "Council, Jerusalem."

²¹ For discussion of the issues surrounding the date and composition of this letter see: F. F. Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 173-187; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 289-303; Ronald Y. K. Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 1-32; Douglas J. Moo, Galatians: Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2013), 2-18; and Richard N. Longenecker, Galatians, vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), lvii-cxix. N. T. Wright's take on the occasion for Paul's Galatian letter (NPP) can be found in: Wright, Galatians, 3-41.

that Paul wrote this letter prior to the council.²²

We can be certain that Galatians was written at some point after Paul first visited *Pontus Galatica*. By comparing Paul's personal comments in Galatians with the first two missionary journeys recounted in the Book of Acts (as many have done), we know that Paul visited the southern part of Galatia during the missionary journey described in Acts 14:21, and then followed up by revisiting the region (as in Acts 14:22-25).²³ In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul recounts his visit to Jerusalem on the occasion of a great famine which hit the city as described in Acts 11:27-30. In Galatians 4:13, Paul refers to having preached the gospel to the Galatians previously. All this points in the direction that Galatians was written in the days preceding the Jerusalem Council, when the pressing question of Gentile conformity to the law of Moses was hotly debated before being definitively settled by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.²⁴

This chronology also helps resolve the apparent disagreement between James (where in chapter 2:14-26 of his epistle, James seems to speak of justification by faith and works) and Paul, who clearly teaches justification *sola fide*. At the Jerusalem Council, James endorses Paul's work among the Gentiles, shedding light on the meaning of James' comments about justification in his own epistle, which may be the only New Testament epistle written prior to Paul's Galatian letter.²⁵ James is not contradicting Paul, but explaining that a justifying faith will produce good works.

If Galatians was written prior to the Jerusalem Council, then there are sufficient grounds to believe that Galatians is Paul's earliest letter included in the canon of the New Testament. This is a strong indication that Paul was preaching justification *sola fide* on his first missionary journey throughout Galatia and that through this message God called many Jews and Gentiles to faith in Jesus in Psidion Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. As proclaimed from Paul's lips, through the power of the Holy Spirit, his gospel was embraced through faith. This was the gospel of Jesus Christ, revealed to Paul. It is upon this message that Christ's church was founded (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20).

The next two questions "*what* is in the Book of Galatians?" and "*why* was it written?" are closely related and bring us to the heart of the letter. As for what is in Galatians, some (i.e.,

²² B. B. Warfield offers his "probable" opinion that Galatians was written from Ephesus in A.D. 57 shortly before (weeks or months) Paul composed his First Corinthian letter. This is the rare case where Warfield swings and misses. See, B. B. Warfield, "*The Date of the Epistle to the Galatians: And Certain Passages in the First Epistle to the Corinthians*" in *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* Vol. 4, No. 1/2 (Jun. - Dec., 1884), 50-64. Warfield follows the lead of J. B. Lightfoot, who made what many consider the most compelling case for the "northern hypothesis" and a date of authorship in the mid-fifties of the first century. See J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. 10th ed. 1890; repr: London: Macmillan, 1986), 18-56.

²³ Moo, *Galatians*, 16-18.

²⁴ Wright, *Galatians*, 21.

²⁵ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 21-22; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 26.

Hans Dieter Betz²⁶) have argued that Galatians is an apologetic for Paul's gospel grounded in forensic (legal) rhetoric. Of course, this was immediately challenged by other scholars who claim the letter's style is more "deliberative rhetoric," while others still said the letter combined the two formats.²⁷ This discussion seems rather artificial and strained to me, and rather beside the point. Paul uses classical rhetoric at points, but not rigidly as claimed by Betz. Good outlines of Galatians demonstrating this to be the case can be found in the commentaries written by Douglas Moo, F. F. Bruce, and Ronald Fung.

The presence of those identified as "Judaizers" (ἰουδαϊζῶ, *ioudaīzō*) in the Gospels, in the Book of Acts, and in Paul's letters, indicate that Jewish customs and practices were commonplace among the first Christians, many of whom were recent converts from Judaism. Others are identified as "God-fearing" Gentiles who were in the process of conversion to Judaism or interested in Jewish ethical teaching. According to Longenecker, "Paul's opponents were Jewish Christians – or, more accurately, Christian Jews – who came from the Jerusalem church to Paul's churches in Galatia with a message stressing the need for Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the rudiments of the cultic calendar, both for full acceptance by God and as a proper Christian lifestyle."²⁸

Jews lived throughout the Greco-Roman world and were surprisingly quite diverse in their zeal and practice. There are nominal Jews mentioned in the New Testament, those who maintained Jewish customs and practices in the midst of the Greco-Roman world, probably as a way to keep their distinct Jewish identity from being lost amid life in pagan Greco-Roman culture. Such Jews practiced circumcision, kept the Sabbath and observed the dietary laws *most* of the time, but did not necessarily distance themselves from Gentiles. Others kept the same Jewish practices, but saw them as a means of separating themselves from the Gentiles (as well as from those Jews who had become Christians). There were also those who believed that strict observance to the law of Moses was necessary to be counted as righteous before God. They considered Gentiles be "dogs" (unclean). The observant were zealous to defend the faith of their fathers, not because of tradition, but from conviction. The New Testament makes reference to Jews in each of these categories. But the Judaizers in Galatia were a group especially zealous for the law, circumcision, the Sabbath, and the customs of Judaism, even after coming to believe that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. In their eyes, Paul was either a false teacher or an apostate.

The issue dividing the churches of Galatia can be summarized as follows; "must Gentile believers in Jesus live like Jews in order to be faithful Christians?" The Judaizers (the "circumcision party" or the "agitators") were Jews who came to believe that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. They also insisted that Gentile converts to Christianity strive to keep the law of Moses, because submission to circumcision was seen as an essential element of Christian piety.

²⁶ Hans Dieter Betz, Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 14-25.

²⁷ Moo, Galatians, 62-63.

²⁸ Longenecker, Galatians, xciv. Fung, Galatians, 8.

Just as Abraham was himself a Gentile convert, Gentile converts must do as Abraham did, submit to circumcision as an act of obedience.²⁹ Debate over the relationship between Abraham's faith and obedience plays a central role in Paul's Galatian letter, as it does in his letter to the Romans. According to the Judaizers, those properly converted (i.e., who embrace Jesus without giving up Judaism) must realize "the full implications of their Jewish faith."³⁰ Gentile converts are to believe in Jesus, but live as Jews. Paul sees things much differently.

According to Luke's account in Acts 13-15, as a result of fierce Jewish opposition to Paul's proclamation of Christ crucified in the synagogues of the region, Paul and Barnabas turned to preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). Many were converted. But soon after Paul and Barnabas left Galatia, apparently, Jewish converts to Christianity (influenced by converts among the Pharisees who came from Jerusalem and Palestine) began teaching in the churches that Gentile converts must submit to the law of Moses and undergo circumcision in order to be regarded as "right before God" (justified).

Why Did Paul Write Galatians?

So, why did Paul write this letter? In Galatians 1:7, Paul refers to unnamed individuals whom he says were troubling the Galatians soon after he had departed the area. These false teachers were undermining Paul's gospel by claiming that his preaching was actually dangerous since it did not require obedience to the law of God as a condition of deliverance from the wrath of God. Furthermore, they claimed, Paul's authority was inferior to that of other apostles such as Peter and James, who were more closely associated with Jesus, the Jerusalem church, and Judaism (Galatians 2:1-14).

The Judaizers, apparently, did not openly deny that the death of Christ was necessary to secure forgiveness of sin and to be delivered from the wrath of God which is to come. These false teachers were more subtle than that. It is likely that they saw Jesus as Israel's Messiah whose death removed the guilt of past sin. But the Judaizers also were teaching that faith in Jesus Christ was not sufficient to render one as "righteous" before God. A Gentile convert must add to their faith in Jesus as Messiah "works of law," including the "badges" or "emblems" of national Israel. These badges were circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, the keeping of certain dietary laws, the celebration of Jewish feasts, and understanding continuing obedience to the law of Moses as essential in order to maintain one's place in the covenant community.

Upon conversion, Gentile believers were to self-consciously identify with Israel's history which now becomes their own. Submitting to circumcision made one a child of Abraham. Striving to keep the law tied a Christian to Moses and to Israel's distinctive history. Believing in Jesus

²⁹ Moo, Galatians, 224.

³⁰ James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993),

made one a Christian but did not negate the need for circumcision and obedience to law.³¹ In Galatians 4:10, Paul mentions that the false teachers were instructing their converts to observe the feast days. As a result, Paul says, such people “*desire to be under law*” (Galatians 4:21). At a fundamental level keeping the Jewish feasts was symptomatic of someone striving to be justified by commandment keeping. Yet, we know that because of human sinfulness, sufficient obedience to stand before God on judgment day is an impossibility with eternal consequences.

This same group of false teachers is very likely represented at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) by those whom Luke describes as men who came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “*unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*” (Acts 15:1). In their misguided zeal to preserve the traditions of their fathers, these false teachers were raising a very serious challenge to the gospel through their insistence that Gentile converts must not only become followers of Jesus, as they had done, but Gentiles too must submit to ritual circumcision in order to be regarded as righteous before God. Paul responds to these false teachers with what can only be described as righteous anger.

Paul’s anger is also aroused because the criticism raised against him was deeply personal. Only recently, Paul helped to establish these churches by preaching Christ crucified throughout the area (Galatians 3:1), though it was his own illness and time spent in the area recuperating, which providentially made this possible (Galatians 4:13). The Galatians, many of whom were Gentiles (Galatians 4:8), warmly welcomed Paul during his first visit (Galatians 4:14-15). But now many of these same people had been deceived by those whom Paul describes as those who “*trouble you*” and as those “*who unsettle you*” (Galatians 1:7; 5:12). These agitators had come into Galatia from Judea looking to add new converts to their movement and boasting about the “*flesh*” of their converts (Galatians 6:13). “*Paul’s intention is to rescue his Galatian congregations from falling from grace (5:4), a possibility that causes him deep personal anguish (3:1; 4:19; 5:12).*”³²

Westerholm captures Paul’s response well when he points out that “*the fundamental question addressed by Galatians thus is not ‘What is wrong with Judaism (or the Sinaitic law)?’ but what is wrong with humanity that Judaism and the Sinaitic law cannot remedy?*”³³ The answer? “*Only faith in Jesus Christ, provides a solution for humanities captivity to sin.*”³⁴ The law of God is not the problem. The problem is that because of human sinfulness, God’s law—the revelation of his will for humanity—stands over us as the bar of judgment. If not kept perfectly and entirely, the law can only condemn.

It is difficult to imagine a sterner rebuke to a group of churches, than Paul’s Epistle to the

³¹ Moo, Galatians, 16-18.

³² Frank Thielman, Paul and the Law (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 120.

³³ Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 381.

³⁴ Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul, 381.

Galatians. One writer describes Galatians as “one of the fiercest and most polemical writings in all the Bible.”³⁵ Indeed it is.

Additional thoughts on the Judaizers and the New Perspective on Paul³⁶

As mentioned previously, much of the Old Perspective approach to understanding the Judaizers has been challenged by advocates of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” a term coined by James D. G. Dunn.

One reason why the Reformation consensus came to be challenged after Enlightenment views on faith and reason came to prominence (which is an important discussion in its own right but we must leave that for another time) was that Judaism was increasingly identified as anti-Christian. This was not a new view, but by the end of the eighteenth century there was renewed emphasis across Europe (especially in Eastern Europe) to move Jews into their own communities, away from most “Christian” citizens. Later on, those holding a Darwinian anthropology began embracing the idea that Jews were an inferior race to white northern Europeans (especially Aryans–nordic Germans). Many European cities had established Jewish ghettos, and there were regional Jewish settlements (the Pale of Settlement, for example). Pogroms were not uncommon.

After the rise of Nazism and the subsequent Holocaust, seeing the evils which had been carried out upon Jews by a supposed “Christian” culture and society (Germany), a number of biblical scholars (most notably E. P. Sanders) sought to re-evaluate first century Judaism. It seemed to many that the Reformation’s decrying of Jewish legalism was partially to blame for the rise of anti-Semitism and national socialism. The Reformation consensus on Judaism was now thought to be in need of serious re-evaluation.

Krister Stendahl’s 1963 essay, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” argued that Martin Luther read his own guilt-ridden experience back into Paul’s letters—mistakenly seeing the semi-Pelagianism of Rome in the Judaism opposed by Paul. This, Stendahl argued, was a complete misreading of Paul, who had a robust faith, not a guilty conscience like Luther. According to Stendahl, the Reformation was not a recovery of the gospel, but a detour which led to the unfortunate fractioning of Christ’s church because of a doctrine Martin Luther supposedly misunderstood.

Spurred on by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1946-47), the renewed study of Judaism focused upon Second Temple Judaism (that period from the days of Ezra, through the Maccabean period, until the time of Paul, before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Diaspora of A.D. 70). Many scholars began to challenge the idea that Paul was reacting against

³⁵ Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 1.

³⁶ Some of what follows is taken the Lexham Bible Dictionary entry on “Judaizers,” edited, and abridged.

Jewish works-righteousness, because the Reformers and their theological children had mistakenly concluded that Judaism was a religion of salvation by works, comparable to the various forms of works-righteousness which appeared at times among Christians—most notably Roman Catholicism at the time of the Reformation.

In the 1970's, E. P. Sanders published two ground-breaking works (Paul and Palestinian Judaism, and Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People) using Second Temple Jewish sources to argue that the Judaism of the period was not legalistic as the Protestant consensus had maintained. Sanders argued for “covenantal nomism,” a view which contends that Jews entered God’s covenant by grace (the Jews were God’s “chosen” people), but stayed in that covenant through law-keeping (obedience). So, whatever Paul meant by justification by faith, it must mean something other than a rejection of law-keeping and legalism, typical of the Reformation consensus because this was now thought to be a misrepresentation of Judaism. Paul could not be affirming “faith alone,” because this ignored or downplayed the faith/obedience synthesis found in Jewish sources. Sanders’ work generated renewed interest in Paul and Second Temple Judaism. But it was open season on Luther and confessional Protestantism.

The two most prominent advocates of the NPP are N. T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn. Following the trajectory set in motion by Sanders, both described those in Galatia who opposed Paul as holding to a variety of covenantal nomism. Judaism, supposedly, was not a legalistic religion since it was grounded in God’s election of his chosen people. Nevertheless, some of the more zealous Jews (who are identified as Judaizers by Paul) insisted that it was ethnic “boundary markers” or “badges” (i.e., Sabbath-keeping and circumcision) which marked off the people of God from pagan Gentiles. “Works of the law” (a phrase used by Paul in Galatians 2:16) did not refer to good works as in the Protestant consensus, which Wright dismisses as “muddled” and in need of correction through “historical exegesis,” as though the prior debates ignored the historical circumstances faced by Paul.³⁷ Rather, “works of law” refers to Jewish practices (the so called “ethnic badges”), which overly zealous Jews believed excluded Gentiles from membership in the people of God. Gentile converts were not circumcised, they did not keep a kosher household, observe the Sabbath or the Jewish feasts. How could such people be numbered among the people of God? God’s Messiah, Jesus, was a Jew after all. So Christians must live like Jews. And Paul’s corrective, supposedly, is to for Jews to affirm that by faith Gentiles too are members of God’s messianic people and true children of Abraham.³⁸

Therefore, according to the NPP, the problem in Galatia was not works-righteousness (legalism) but a misguided Jewish superiority over godless Gentiles. Remediating this Jewish boasting is what Paul’s doctrine of justification was meant to address, not the matter of how an individual sinner finds forgiveness before a holy (righteous) God. According to Dunn, Paul insists that Jewish nationalism and ethnic badges should not divide the people of God. To do so is wrong. God’s kingdom is inclusive of all those who embrace Jesus as Messiah and seek to do his will, whether they be Jew or Gentile. On the other hand, Wright’s approach can be

³⁷ Wright, Galatians, 117-119.

³⁸ Wright, Galatians, 120.

summarized as follows: “when Paul claims we are justified by faith, he is saying that God has declared someone to be in the covenant, but that this person will be finally justified by God through his Spirit-enabled good works.”³⁹ To put this as simply as possible, “we get in by grace, but stay in by good works.” There is an initial justification by faith, but a final judgment according to works.⁴⁰ The gospel is essentially that “Jesus is Lord,” because he has won the victory over the Gentile gods and pagan rulers.⁴¹ There is nothing here at all about sinners finding relief from their guilt before a holy God, as you would find in Luther or (dare I say it), in Paul, who regarded himself as the “chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:16 KJV).

There have been a number of important responses to the NPP, and we can but briefly survey them here, although we will return to them in more detail as we proceed. Several responses to NPP point out that evidence of Jewish legalism *is* widely found in Second Temple Judaism.⁴² As I see it, Sanders and other NPP writers who followed him, took a slice of the Second Temple pie (there is indeed some evidence pointing to a gracious understanding of Israel’s relationship to YHWH) and made this single slice the whole pie by ignoring or downplaying the legalistic elements which are found throughout the same Second Temple sources.

It has also been pointed out that Paul had a much more pessimistic view of human nature than Second Temple writers (taking the Fall of Adam as his starting point). Many Jews of that era were more optimistic about human nature and ability than Paul. If true, this would actually mirror the semi-Pelagianism found in Christian teaching across time, which Augustinians in the church have long opposed. Human sinfulness cannot be resolved apart from a consideration of God’s intrinsic holiness. Plight precedes solution.

Finally, and perhaps more important, if we take Galatians as a window (as a primary source) into what certain Jews in Galatia were actually teaching (especially those with ties to Jewish Christianity in Judea), they were, in fact, legalists insisting upon justification grounded in works of law. Paul was opposed to them because they were denying the gospel revealed to him by Jesus.

The critical questions raised by the NPP remain: How are those Gentiles who believed Paul’s gospel, said to be ‘justified’ (made right) before God? Does this mean Gentiles are included among the people of God regardless of race, or lack of Jewish ethnic badges, by the

³⁹ Taken from the Lexham Bible Dictionary on “*Judaizers*,” edited and abridged.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 139.

⁴¹ N. T. Wright, “The Letter to The Romans,” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2002), 416.

⁴² D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., Justification and Variegated Nomism, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001-2004), and Mark Adam Elliot, The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of Pre-Christian Judaism (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

“righteousness” judge?⁴³ Or does Paul mean that all who trust in Jesus Christ receive (via imputation) a righteous standing from God which was earned by the obedience of Jesus? Do Gentiles need to keep the law in order to be justified, or is obedience required to maintain their current justified status? Paul’s answer to these questions is spelled out in his letters—quite emphatically in his letter to the Galatians. As we go forward, these issues will continue to surface.

My own take on the controversy generated by the NPP is that Luther and Calvin get Paul mostly right, while Wright gets many key points in Paul’s thought wrong (bad pun, but I couldn’t resist). That said, NPP scholarship does push us to better understand the historical situation in Paul’s day, especially the nature and character of Second Temple Judaism. In one sense they are right. Paul should not be read as though he was responding to the errors of Tridentine Roman Catholicism. On the other hand, the Roman church at the eve of the Reformation largely did understand justification in a manner remarkably similar to the agitators in Galatia. Therefore, a careful consideration of the conflict between Paul and the Judaizers in Galatia sheds great light on our understanding of the meaning of justification by faith alone and the righteousness of God. This is the gospel Paul preached and the message we must embrace through faith.

⁴³ The phrase “the righteousness of God” is understood by NPP writers as a subjective genitive. They draw support from, Ernst Kasemann, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1892), 21-32; and from Peter Stuhlmacher, Paul’s Letter to the Romans (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 29-32. Yet, note the refutation of this reading by Charles Lee Irons, The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation, WUNT 2/386 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 296-300.

An Outline of Paul's Letter to the Galatians⁴⁴

I. SALUTATION (1:1-5)

Excursus - Paul's two age theological framework: "this age" and the "age to come"

II. NO OTHER GOSPEL (1:6-10)

A. Paul's astonishment (1:6-9)

B. Paul is not an ear-tickler (1:10)

Application

III. THE SOURCES OF PAUL'S GOSPEL (1:11-2:14)

A. Paul's gospel comes through revelation (1:11-12)

B. Paul's earlier career (1:13-14)

C. Paul's apostolic call (1:15-17)

D. Paul meets members of the Jerusalem church (1:18-20)

E. Paul in Syria and Cilicia (1:21-24)

F. The conference in Jerusalem (2:1-10)

G. Conflict in Antioch (2:11-14)

IV. FAITH RECEIVES THE PROMISE (2:15-5:1)

A. Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith (2:15-21)

Application

B. The primacy of faith over law (3:1-6)

C. The blessing of Abraham (3:7-9)

⁴⁴ The outline is adapted from F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, New International Greek Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 57.

D. The curse of the law (3:10-14)

E. The priority and superiority of the promise (3:15-18)

Application

F. The purpose of the law (3:19-22)

Excursus - The Ten Commandments in the New Testament

G. Liberation from the law (3:23-25)

H. Gentiles and Jews one in Christ (3:26-29)

I. From slavery to sonship (4:1-7)

Application

J. No turning back! (4:8-11)

K. Paul's personal appeal (4:12-20)

Application

L. A lesson in the history of the covenants (4:21-31)

Application

V. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (5:1-12)

A. The law demands obedience (5:1-6)

B. Warnings for those who oppose Paul's gospel (5:7-12)

VI. FLESH AND SPIRIT (5:13-26)

A. The way of the Spirit is love (5:13-15)

B. Walking by the Spirit (5:16-18)

C. The works of the flesh (5:19-21)

D. The fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26)

VII. SOWING and REAPING (6:1-10)

Application

VIII. CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND Final GREETINGS (6:11-18)

- A. The true ground of boasting (6:11-16)**
- B. The marks of Jesus (6:17)**
- C. The benediction (6:18)**

Application

IX. POSTSCRIPT TO GALATIANS (Acts 15:6-41)

- A. Background**
- B. The occasion (Acts 15:1-4)**
- C. The nature of the dispute (15:5-12)**
- D. Words from James (Acts 15:13-21)**
- E. The decision (Acts 15:22-29)**
- F. The reading of the council's letter in Antioch (Acts 15:30-35)**

I. SALUTATION (1:1-5)

1 Paul, an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – 2 and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

In the opening five verses of the Epistle to the Galatians (the salutation),⁴⁵ Paul extends no personal greetings to his readers nor does he indulge in unnecessary small talk. There is a reason why Paul gets right to his point—the gospel is at stake. Paul is indignant upon hearing the news coming to him from Galatia about false teachers who are distorting the gospel, so he minces no words.

Paul opens his letter with a rebuke (verses 1-2), appealing to his own authority as an apostle.⁴⁶ Because Paul is an apostle, he possesses the same authority as “the twelve”—those whom Jesus called at the beginning of his public ministry (Matthew 10:1 ff.). Even though Paul was not a follower of Jesus from the beginning (as in the case of Peter, James, John), he did meet another essential qualification to be an apostle. Paul was a witness to Christ’s resurrection.⁴⁷ According to Acts 9:1-19, the risen Jesus appeared to him while Paul was headed to Damascus. In Paul’s case, Christ’s appearance to him may not have come the first Easter as with the twelve, but nevertheless he was personally called by Jesus to this office and then directly commissioned for a specific purpose, namely the preaching of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17– “*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power*”).

Paul explains that he has been called to his apostolic office by Jesus *and* by the Father at whose right hand Jesus currently reigns, and who raised Jesus from the dead.⁴⁸ Therefore, Paul appeals to the churches in Galatia with the Lord’s authority, not his own. This apostolic authority is something false teachers cannot claim for themselves, and certainly ought not challenge. To challenge Paul is to challenge Jesus. This divinely-given authority is the basis for

⁴⁵ Betz argues the first five verses of Galatians is a formal epistolary prescript to a letter composed as a representative of the “apologetic letter” genre. See Betz, Galatians, 14-16.

⁴⁶ Wright asserts that “attack is the best form of defense.” Wright, Galatians, 46.

⁴⁷ Stanley Porter raises the possibility that Paul and Jesus had indeed crossed paths before Paul’s conversion. Porter’s case is based upon several lines of evidence. First, given the fact that Paul spent significant time in Jerusalem as a teen studying under Gamaliel in Pharisaical circles, Paul likely knew of Jesus if he had not seen him personally. Given Jesus’s controversial ministry among Jews in the city, a young man like Paul very likely would have been interested in evaluating Jesus for himself, possibly on one or more occasions. Porter also makes a strong case from several of Paul’s statements in Acts recounting his conversion which imply a personal knowledge of Jesus based upon a prior encounter. Finally, Porter points out that in 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul says as much. See, Stanley E. Porter, The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 33-38.

⁴⁸ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 73.

Paul's rebuke of those in Galatia who have departed from his teaching, the content of which came to him through a personal revelation from the Risen Lord.

While there is no hint of apostolic succession taught in the New Testament (i.e., Peter supposedly is the first Pope with an unbroken line of successors), when the original apostles die off, they do not replace themselves with new apostles, but with ministers, elders (also called bishops or overseers),⁴⁹ and deacons (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). No less than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) admits "there is no explicit statement regarding the Petrine secession in the New Testament." Benedict goes on to argue this is not an insurmountable problem because Rome's doctrine of Petrine succession is post-apostolic and dependent upon critical methodology in order to establish the premise that John, long after Peter was dead, "regarded the former's primacy, not as a thing of the past, but as a present reality for the church"⁵⁰ (presumably of the second century). Saying it is so, does not make it so, even when the future Pope is the one who says it.

The New Testament does, however, teach the principal of historical succession. The content of apostolic preaching (the rule of faith) is passed down to subsequent generations, even if the apostolic office is not.⁵¹ Calvin argues that "if the Church resides in the successors of the Apostles," as Rome argues "let us search for successors among those only who have faithfully handed down their doctrine to posterity."⁵² Calvin goes on to say,

. . . let the Pope, I say, be the successor of Peter, provided he perform the office of an Apostle. Wherein does Succession consist, if it be not in perpetuity of doctrine? But if the doctrine of the Apostles has been corrupted, nay, abolished and extinguished by those who would be regarded as their successors, who would not deride their foolish boasting?⁵³

The doctrine taught by those apostles commissioned directly by Jesus Christ to preach and to teach to his people will endure in Christ's church to the end of the age. Jesus' teaching will be passed down to successive generations of Christians, even if only through a small remnant who remain faithful. As Jesus promised his people, "*the gates of hell shall not prevail against*" my church (Matthew 16:18). Those opponents of Paul who have departed from his teaching will inevitably find themselves opposing not only Paul in the full authority of his apostolic office, but they also oppose Jesus who is anything but an absentee landlord of his church.

⁴⁹ Paul addresses the *presbyters* [elders] of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and says that the Holy Spirit has made them *episkopous* [bishops] of the church (20:28)

⁵⁰ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Called to Communion (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 65-66.

⁵¹ Michael J. Kruger, Christianity at the Crossroads (London: SPCK, 2017), 136-145.

⁵² John Calvin, "*The True Method of Reforming the Church*" in Selected Works of Calvin, Vol. 3, Tracts, Part 3, ed. Henry Beveridge, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) 263.

⁵³ Calvin, "*The True Method of Reforming the Church*," 263-265.

The fact that Paul is an apostle means that his call and his teaching about Jesus Christ did not come from his own imagination or selfish ambitions. His gospel is not a human invention. Paul's gospel is not *his* invention. Nor is it a departure from the earlier teaching of Jesus and the apostles, a point Paul will make in the last half of chapter one. Rather, and this is no small point, so it bears repeating, the gospel Paul preached in Galatia had been revealed to him by none other than the Lord of his church—Jesus. As Paul will go on to say in Galatians 1:16, “[God] *was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*”

A key to understanding the authority of Paul's apostolic call is the fact that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. “The resurrection of Christ is the foundation stone of Paul's gospel, providing the basis for the offer of forgiveness of sins and justification.”⁵⁴ Notice too that Paul never speaks of Jesus raising himself since he “is passively acted upon by God.”⁵⁵ In mentioning the fact of Jesus' bodily resurrection in the opening salutation, Paul is making clear to the trouble-makers in Galatia that he was appointed by the same risen and glorified Lord Jesus who appeared to all of the other disciples. Paul will make this point explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-10, when he catalogues the witnesses to Christ's resurrection.

Now I would remind you, brothers [in Corinth], of the gospel I preached to you [the same gospel he has preached to the Galatians], which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (1 Corinthians 15:1-10).

Here, however, Paul speaks of “*all the brothers who are with me,*” reminding the Galatians that he is not an independent actor. He is one of those personally appointed by Jesus as a witness to the resurrection, and therefore stands squarely within the apostolic circle.

Whatever the Judaizers had been telling the Galatians about Paul's supposed lack of authority when comparing his office to that of the apostolic circle in Jerusalem, Paul begs to differ. In their propaganda against Paul, the Judaizers could argue (and very likely did, according to Galatians 1:11) that Paul's gospel was merely “*man's gospel*” or a “*human gospel.*” Paul, supposedly, was preaching a message which lowered the bar, so to speak, eliminating the

⁵⁴ Ben Witherington III, Paul's Narrative Thought World (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 179.

⁵⁵ Witherington, Paul's Narrative Thought World, 172.

requirements placed upon Gentile converts by the law and through the requirement of circumcision.⁵⁶ From the Judaizer's perspective, such a gospel was deficient, incomplete, and possibly heretical. Yet, Paul's apostolic authority, to which Jesus has called him, is the same as that of Peter and James. His gospel to the Gentiles is the message the two pillars of the Jerusalem church were preaching to the Jews, as later confirmed by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).⁵⁷

From what we know of him, there is absolutely no hint that Paul was a dissatisfied Jew seeking something more fulfilling than the Jewish faith in which had been raised. In Philippians 3:4b-6, Paul says of himself, *"if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."* Paul was not a religious pilgrim, or a spiritual tourist looking for the latest experience. His conversion is consistently presented throughout the Book of Acts (especially Acts 9:1-19) as dramatic and sudden, growing directly from his encounter with the Risen and Ascended Jesus while Saul was on his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest those Christians who had gone there from Jerusalem and settled among the Greek speaking Jewish community there⁵⁸. Christianity was a missionary religion from the beginning, as very early on Christians took the message of Christ crucified to areas north and east, Damascus being a very important place to plant a new church.

John Calvin describes Paul's conversion in vivid terms.

The Lord not only brought [Paul] under his own control, when he was raging like a wild beast, but immediately made a new and different man of him . . . But God's wonderful hand was openly shown, not only in such a cruel wolf being turned into a sheep, but also assuming the character of a shepherd.⁵⁹

God took a wolf (Saul of Tarsus), and transformed him into a sheep (Paul). God then turned this particular sheep into a shepherd—the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul makes frequent reference to the fact that while a distinct "ministry to Jews is certainly included in [his] call (see Acts 9:15), but will repeatedly emphasize in his letters that his call was particularly a call to preach to Gentiles" (Galatians 1:16; 1 Thess. 2:4; Romans 1:1, 5; 15:15-16).⁶⁰ If we were to discover one of Paul's business cards, it would surely read "Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle to the Gentiles," followed by the slogan, "I preach Christ and him crucified."

⁵⁶ Seyoon Kim, The Origin of Paul's Gospel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 67.

⁵⁷ More on the Jerusalem Council in the postscript.

⁵⁸ Martin Hengel, Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 85.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, The Acts of the Apostles, Vol. 1, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, trans., W. J. G. McDonald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 48.

⁶⁰ Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 219.

In verses 3-5, Paul extends a brief apostolic blessing to these churches he helped to found. A number of the Old Testament prophets believed that at some point in the future (i.e., in the coming messianic age) God will bring about a great restoration of the cosmos, which God's people will experience as YHWH's *shalom* (his word of peace). This *shalom* will bring rest to the weary people of God.⁶¹ Echoing this notion, Paul connects the blessing of grace and peace given in the name of Christ to the redemption that Jesus Christ accomplished for his people. The same risen Christ who sends his greetings to the Galatians through Paul, is the one who gave himself for our sins upon Calvary's cross. This is what is meant when we speak of Christ's passive obedience.⁶² Jesus laid down his life for his sheep. His life was not taken from him against his will (cf. John 10:11).

Jesus did this, Paul says, not to rescue us from temporal danger such as the violence that Paul experienced at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles on his first missionary journey in Galatia, who rejected the gospel that he was proclaiming, even threatening his life by attempting to stone him. Rather, Jesus gave himself up to deliver us from the powers of this present evil age (Galatians 1:4). This is the first mention in Paul's letters of his two-age eschatology, a key point in Paul's understanding of the course of redemptive history, and a point to be taken up shortly.

One writer describes this act of deliverance from this evil age as "an apocalyptic rescue operation,"⁶³ pointing to Paul's effort to call the erring Galatians back to God's method of rescuing sinners from this present evil age, through the cross of Jesus Christ, which, if embraced through faith, brings the people of God into the "new creation," which has been inaugurated through Christ's death and resurrection.⁶⁴ If the Galatians insist upon counting on personal obedience to the law as the means of gaining a right-standing before God (after professing faith in Jesus), this amounts to out and out rejection of that which YHWH has done in Christ (dying for our sins and then raising him from the dead) ensuring participation in YHWH's *shalom* as foretold by Israel's prophets.⁶⁵ The Judaizers may claim to be the defenders and champions of the law, but they fail to understand their own prophets and the work of the Messiah which the prophets foretold.

Excursus – Paul's two age theological framework: "this age" and the "age to come"

⁶¹ Moo, Galatians, 71.

⁶² See the discussion and definition in Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 379-382.

⁶³ Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection" in The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 11, ed., Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 202.

⁶⁴ G. K. Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology: Understanding of the Old Testament in the New (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 18-21.

⁶⁵ Moo, Galatians, 71.

Paul's fundamental understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ is closely tied to the apostle's understanding of the present course of human history in which Jesus plays the central role in God's purposes and plan of redemption. Paul defines the course of redemptive history as comprised of two distinct "ages" or "realms." "This present age" (i.e., Galatians 1:4) stands in sharp contrast to that which the apostle identifies as "the age to come" (i.e., Ephesians 1:21).⁶⁶

In every case when the term appears in the New Testament, "this age" is characterized as a period of domination by human sinfulness and is associated with things which are temporal and destined to perish. "This age" is the present period of time which is destined to end when the Lord returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. Paul's use of "this age" closely corresponds to John's use of *kosmos* (world) in his letters.⁶⁷

"This age" is qualitatively different from "age to come," which is spoken of throughout the New Testament (and especially in the letters of Paul) as an age of resurrection life, the new creation, the age of the Spirit, and always associated with things eternal. "This age" is that period of time which precedes the coming of the Lord. Paul describes it as an evil age in an ethical sense, not because the material world is evil. As Paul says, it is dominated by worldly wisdom and philosophical speculation (1 Corinthians 1:20). This is an age in which Satan blinds the minds of those apart from Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4). In 2 Corinthians 4:18, Paul speaks of the contrast as one of things visible and invisible. "*We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*" Note the contrast between the temporal (this age) and the eternal (the age to come). Paul introduces his two age eschatology in the opening lines of Galatians because this age is dominated by those who think that human merit is the basis for a right-standing before God—as did the Judaizers.⁶⁸

It is significant that Paul mentions Jesus' resurrection before speaking of "this present evil age." It is futile to attempt to make full sense of Paul's letters (and especially Paul's eschatology) apart from the events of Good Friday and Easter. The cross and resurrection of Jesus dominates Paul's thinking. He preached a crucified and risen Savior. When Jesus died on the cross, the guilt and power of sin (which characterize this present evil age) was broken. When the Father raised Jesus from the dead, the Risen Jesus ushers in the age to come (in principle) which will only be fully realized on the day of Christ's return at the end of the age—the final consummation. Apart from his resurrection, Christ's cross is a symbol of death and defeat. But the empty tomb shouts at us that Christ's cross was the great victory over the guilt and power

⁶⁶ Constantine Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 65-102; Richard B. Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 245-299; Andrew T. Lincoln, Paradise Now and Not Yet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 168-195; Moo, A Theology of Paul and His Letters, 27-39; Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, trans., John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 44-90; and Geerhardus Vos, The Pauline Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 1-41;

⁶⁷ Fung, Galatians, 41.

⁶⁸ Anders Nygren, Commentary on Romans (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 297.

of sin. Our Lord's ascension to the right hand of the Father to rule over all things confirms the extent of Christ's victory over death and the grave.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the supreme fact of Christianity and confirms the Christian truth claim. B. B. Warfield made this point unequivocally in a sermon entitled, "The Risen Christ," when he declared, "the resurrection of Christ is the fundamental fact of Christianity."⁶⁹ That said, Christ's resurrection is not *merely* proof of Christianity—although it is certainly that. Herman Ridderbos contends, "for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the central event of redemptive history. Consequently it is the center of his preaching. [Paul's] eschatology (which is his theology) is pointedly `resurrection eschatology.'"⁷⁰ Ridderbos also notes, "Paul's eschatology is not determined by any traditional eschatological schema, but by the actual acting of God in Christ. This is the fundamental Christological character of his eschatology."⁷¹ Geerhardus Vos agrees, "Paul has first made [Christ's death and resurrection] a focus of fundamental Christian teaching and built around it the entire conception of the faith advocated and propagated by him."⁷²

Throughout his letters, Paul contends this present evil age will give way on the day of Jesus' return to the glories of the age to come, just as Jesus went from death (Good Friday) to resurrection life (Easter Sunday). Paul describes a tension between what Jesus has already accomplished (in his death, resurrection, and ascension) and what remains to be fulfilled at the final once for all consummation; when Jesus returns on the day of resurrection and brings about the final manifestation of the wrath of God (cf. Romans 2:5, 5:9, Ephesians 2:3), elsewhere spoken of as the day of judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10). This tension is often described as the "already" and the "not yet" and is found throughout the letters of Paul. What we are "in Christ" anticipates and foreshadows the glories of "the age to come."

Primarily, however, Paul's two-age eschatology points ahead to that one critical event which brings about the end of the curse (sin, guilt, and death), and in which all the promises of God are fully realized (forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life).⁷³ That event, of course, is the bodily return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. As Paul puts it in Titus 2:13, we are "*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*" The heart of New Testament eschatology is not the hope of a millennial age in which this present "evil" age is progressively transformed into some sort of earthly utopia either before or after Christ returns. Biblical eschatology cannot be

⁶⁹ B. B. Warfield, "The Christ That Paul Preached," in The Person and Work of Christ (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1950), 543.

⁷⁰ Cited in: Richard Gaffin, Resurrection and Redemption: A Study of Paul's Soteriology (Phillipsburg, P & R, 1987), 14.

⁷¹ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 52.

⁷² Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 147.

⁷³ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 53-57.

viewed through the lens of secular and cultural progress, nor current events. The end of human history comes about at Jesus Christ's second advent described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. For Paul, Christ's second advent is the final consummation. This present age with its sin and death will come to a final and dramatic end (as will all things temporal). Yet, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, the age to come is even now a present reality (through the work of the Holy Spirit), but awaits that moment when the Lord returns and the temporal finally gives way to the eternal.

Because his two age eschatology is focused squarely upon Christ's bodily resurrection (the already) and his second coming (the "not yet"), there is no "in between" age, such as that proposed by millenarians.⁷⁴ Paul does not anticipate a glorious golden age upon the earth before Christ returns. Paul is not a post-millenarian. The gospel and the kingdom will spread to the ends of the earth, but Paul never states that the earth will be transformed through great cultural, religious, and economic progress (as a consequence of the spread of Christ's kingdom) before the Lord's return.⁷⁵ Paul sees this transformation occurring in all its fullness when Jesus returns, but not before.

But neither is Paul a premillennarian.⁷⁶ Nowhere does he tell us that when Jesus returns, he will establish a visible kingdom upon the earth inhabited by people in natural bodies, apparently living among those who have been raised and given glorified bodies when Jesus returns (and how will that work?), only to follow Satan *en masse* when he is released from the abyss and a time of apostasy begins before the final judgment—and this after Jesus has ruled over the earth for a thousand years. The presence of evil in the millennial age is a huge problem for all forms of premillennialism.

On the day our Lord returns (the last day, when the trumpet sounds, cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57), God's people will receive their full and final inheritance, not in an earthly millennial age where we live upon this earth, procreate, go about some sort of improved but temporal life while Satan is bound for a thousand years. The promised blessings (eternal, not temporal) come in the consummated new creation. Paul speaks directly to this expectation in Romans 16:20, when he writes, "*the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet*" words which point to the ultimate fulfillment of Genesis 3:15: "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel,*" and now read in the light of Psalm 8:6, which Paul sees as fulfilled in Christ ("*You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet*"). Jesus won the promised victory over Satan on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Satan is currently bound through the preaching of the gospel and through the providence of God. But as Paul tells the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:7-9, Satan will be released in the final days, an act associated

⁷⁴ As illustrated in the chart found in Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 38.

⁷⁵ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 440.

⁷⁶ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 562, citing from Scott M. Lewis.

with the appearance of a final Antichrist (the Man of Sin), after a restraint of some sort is lifted, only to be destroyed by Jesus at his second advent (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Paul's two age eschatology can be seen in various ways throughout Paul's letters.⁷⁷ Here are several examples:

- First, the contrast which Paul develops in Romans 5:12-19 and in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49, between Adam (the first man, the biological and federal head of the human race, whose disobedience brought about sin, guilt, and death) and the "last" Adam (Christ), whose one act of obedience brings righteousness and life to his people. Adam is of this age, Christ is of the age to come.
- Second, Paul's contrast between "flesh," (what we are in Adam, fallen, and "jars of clay" -2 Corinthians 4:7) and "the gift of the Spirit." Those who are indwelt by the Spirit possess eternal life according to 2 Corinthians 2:4-18, where Paul contrasts what is seen with what is unseen.⁷⁸ Paul also speaks of those who are sealed by the indwelling Holy Spirit until the day of the redemption of our bodies at the resurrection (Ephesians 1:11-14).
- Third, Paul contrasts death as the inevitable outcome of life in this present evil age with eternal life, which is described as participation in the new creation, inaugurated by Jesus at his resurrection (Romans 8:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45, 47; Colossians 1:15-17).
- Fourth, Paul speaks of the wrath of God, which is the fate of all things associated with "this age" in contrast with the reception of the promised inheritance (all that is ours in Christ, i.e., resurrection life, eschatological glory, etc., as in I Thessalonians 1:10; Ephesians 2:3, 5:6).
- Fifth, Paul contrasts the law (associated with this age, and a major point of discussion in Galatians 2-4) with the gospel (God's work of redemption in Christ). This, of course, is a major theme in confessional Protestant theology.
- Sixth, Paul sets out the fact that his Christian readers possess a simultaneous earthly citizenship, while at the same time they are said to be citizens of heaven, who are presently seated and raised with Christ (Philippians 3:20-21; Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1-5).
- Seventh, an important example we should mention here refers specifically to the issue Paul faces in Galatia; the two kinds of righteousness (mentioned by Luther, among others). On the one hand, there is a righteousness gained through obedience (which,

⁷⁷ For an exhaustive study, see Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory.

⁷⁸ Mark Seifrid remind us that Paul is not speaking in platonic terms but eschatological terms. What is present now is contrasted with what is to come. See Mark A. Seifrid, The Second Letter to the Corinthians, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 219.

Paul says is rubbish, Philippians 3:8) and amounts to rejecting Christ and giving up on the work of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:1-6). This kind of righteousness belongs to this present evil age. On the other, there is the free gift of righteousness which comes to us from through faith in Jesus (Romans 3:19-25; Philippians 3:9) which is the righteousness of the age to come. The Judaizers sought the former, while Paul preaches the latter, a righteousness from God that is revealed in the gospel, which is received through faith, and which cannot be earned by conformity to Jewish law.

This two-age eschatology—which is foundational to a number of theological assertions Paul will make throughout his letters is not only very problematic for millennialism (pre and post), it is also the basis for Paul’s understanding of the course of redemptive history. Campbell is correct when he insists, “Paul’s two-age eschatological structure is beyond doubt.”⁷⁹

Antecedents to the way of thinking associated with the Judaizers can be found in the Old Testament (i.e., Genesis 4:1-16). One such example is Cain’s offering from the soil (the work of his own hands), which is a transparent attempt to earn favor with God. Cain represents the mind-set of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). For Paul, this present evil age is perhaps best characterized by our bondage to sin, brought to light by the law of God (cf. Romans 7:7-8). The false teachers who are troubling the Galatians are clearly theologians of “this age,” basing their hopes *not* upon the finished work of Christ and his imputed righteousness received by faith alone, but instead, upon the supposed merit of good works and human righteousness.

This brings us to the body of the letter, Paul defense of the gospel.

II. NO OTHER GOSPEL (1:6-10)

A. Paul’s astonishment (1:6-9)

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Pulling no punches, Paul gets right to his reason for writing in verses 6-9. Paul is shocked by both the gravity of the error and at the speed at which the Galatians were so favorably responding to it. Paul had not been gone from the region very long, before the fruit of Satanic

⁷⁹ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 373.

deception was present in the same churches where Paul had been so warmly and received just months earlier. The controversy unfolded quite rapidly. The word translated as “astonished” (θαυμάζω), conveys the idea of rebuke as well as surprise.⁸⁰ The bad news of what was transpiring in Galatia may have come to Paul about the time “certain men came from James” arrived in Antioch (Galatians 2:12), where Paul was now based.⁸¹

One reason for his amazement at the situation is probably tied to the fact that Paul will recount in the next chapter that even Peter and Barnabas had been taken in by these false teachers (Galatians 2:11-13). In verse 11, Paul describes his confrontation with Peter who gave in to the pressure to conform to those coming from Jerusalem: “*but when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned.*” A transcript of that conversation would sure be interesting! It did not take long for the false teachers to gain many converts—yet another reason for Paul’s astonishment. Yet, this should not really surprise us. The default setting of our fallen nature is the law written upon our hearts (Romans 2:12-16), so we will naturally gravitate toward law-keeping and obedience as the basis for our standing before God. But the gospel is an external word, “good news,” a message we must hear, and which must be proclaimed to us.

The hook used by the false teachers in Galatia was, no doubt, the fact that many converts to Christianity continued to observe Jewish customs (as noted earlier). This was common in the early church. People already thought in terms of obedience to commandments and gaining personal merit by doing do. When Judaizers insisted that observing these practices earned righteousness and were required for justification, it was not as though the idea was completely foreign, even if it was a departure from Paul’s teaching.

Paul describes those Galatians who embraced this false teaching as “*quickly deserting [Christ] who called you.*” In identifying those who were turning away from Christ, Paul uses a term describing a soldier’s desertion from his military post, or one who participates in political revolt. The word can even be used of a change in religion or philosophy.⁸² The false teachers have not improved upon the gospel, nor have they slightly modified it for a specific cultural context. By changing or modifying (however slightly) the content of the gospel which Paul previously taught them, Paul says, they have deserted Christ.⁸³ The false teachers are deserters and traitors. Calvin says of them, “to desert the Son of God is dishonorable and disgraceful, but to desert him when he has called us freely to salvation is far worse, because his goodness

⁸⁰ Longenecker, Galatians, on Galatians 1:6.

⁸¹ Wright, Galatians, 62.

⁸² Cf. the discussions in Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 80, and; Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 43-44.

⁸³ According to the church father Chrysostom, “it is the policy of Satan not to set his snares in open view; had they urged them to fall away from Christ, they would have been shunned as deceivers and corrupters, but suffering them so far to continue in the faith, and putting upon their error the name of the Gospel, without fear they undermined the building employing the terms which they used as a sort of curtain to conceal the destroyers themselves.” Philip Schaff, ed., “Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon,” vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), on Galatians 1:6.

toward us makes our ingratitude even more sinful.”⁸⁴

The doctrine of calling plays an important role in Paul’s theology.⁸⁵ The verb “to call” has the sense of being summoned to perform a particular task. It is a word Paul uses to emphasize God’s initiative in salvation.⁸⁶ Paul has been called by Jesus and the Father to faith in Jesus and to his particular office—Apostle to the Gentiles. There is both a soteriological and vocational use of calling implied here. Paul was called to believe in Jesus in order to preach the gospel Jesus revealed to him. Paul will go on to affirm that both Jew and Gentile alike are *called* to faith in Jesus Christ (emphasizing God’s saving initiative) through that same gospel which the apostle was called to preach as apostle to the Gentiles (vocation). The response of faith by those called through the preached gospel incorporates both groups as united members of Christ’s church, which Paul will later describe as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

As with many issues raised by Paul in his letters, the Old Testament background is important since it was Paul’s frame of reference. Just as Israel was *called* to return to the promised land (Canaan) at the time of the return from exile (from Babylon), so too, Jew and Gentiles throughout Galatia have been *called* through the proclamation of Christ crucified.⁸⁷ The church as the “New Israel” is an important sub-theme throughout Galatians, as seen in several echoes from the Old Testament.⁸⁸ The language of a new exodus also echoes throughout the letter. Paul expresses his shock that the Judaizers were, in an ironic sense, re-enacting the events of Exodus 32, the account of Israel’s apostasy soon after YHWH gave his people the law at Mount Sinai. Why would the Galatians place themselves in such peril?⁸⁹ Had they not read the same Old Testament they are now claiming to defend?

If the Judaizers succeed in Galatia, they will re-enslave the very people for whom Christ died to set free—hence his exhortation in Galatians 5:1: “*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” Just as disobedient Israel was taken into captivity because they came under God’s covenant judgment after sustained and prolonged disobedience, so too, the Judaizers and those who follow them also risk coming under God’s judgment. The fact that Jew and Gentile were both called through the gospel of Jesus Christ means that a new age in redemptive history has dawned. The “age to come” is being realized

⁸⁴ Cited in Gerald L. Bray, Timothy F. George, and Scott M. Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), on Galatians 1:6.

⁸⁵ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 235-236; Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 470-72; Michael S. Horton, The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 560-575; Westminster Confession of Faith, 10:1-4.

⁸⁶ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 80.

⁸⁷ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 135.

⁸⁸ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 135 ff

⁸⁹ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 136.

through the breaking in of the age to come. The Judaizers do not represent the faithful defenders of Israel as they claim. Ironically, they are to be regarded as apostates from the true Israel, the church of Jesus Christ.

By teaching a “different gospel” from that which Paul was teaching, the Judaizers were promoting that which is “no gospel,” at all. There is only one gospel, revealed by Jesus to Paul, which the apostle, in turn, proclaimed to the Galatians.⁹⁰ This gospel is concisely defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 in terms of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, and elsewhere in terms of justification (being reckoned as righteous), as well as in Romans 1:16-17, where the gospel is said to be the power of God, for in it, the righteousness of God is revealed.⁹¹ For Paul, the message of the gospel is the proclamation of the doing and dying of Jesus Christ (Christ’s life of obedience, his death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures). The doing and dying of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation.

As such, the term “gospel” in this narrow sense refers to Christ’s historical work to provide for the salvation of sinners, both in his death for our sins and in his fulfilling of all righteousness through his perfect obedience. The gospel is objective, something done for us. It is a declarative message. It is “good news” to be announced through preaching. The gospel is anchored in human history in those specific acts which Christ has done for his people in time and space. It is “outside of ourselves,” as Luther spoke of it.⁹² The gospel is not what the Holy Spirit is doing *in* us. The gospel is about what God has done *for* us, which the Holy Spirit applies *to* us (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14). The gospel as preached by Paul is, as Herman Ridderbos reminds us, an announcement of the eschatological event, the long anticipated revelation of that which has previously been hidden in the Old Testament and which can be summarized in a single word—Christ!⁹³ Simply put, Jesus has come to save us from the guilt of our sins!

Paul speaks of the false teachers as “distorting” the gospel, a term which is in the aorist tense, meaning that a complete and thorough change was made to the content of what was preached.⁹⁴ Paul’s gospel has been mutated and transformed by the Judaizers into a message with grossly distorted content, making it something completely different than the message revealed to Paul by Jesus, and which Paul proclaimed throughout Galatia. This mutated message is identified as “another gospel,” which is “no gospel.” The true gospel is said to be

⁹⁰ Turretin reminds us “from this it will appear that nothing is received by us to be believed or done which was not delivered by Christ and the apostles; and whatever is rejected by us has no foundation in their writings, but is beyond what is written (*par ho gegraphtai*) and beyond that gospel which they preached.” See Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), III.63.

⁹¹ In Romans 1:17, the verb ἀποκαλύπτεται (“is revealed”) is in the present tense, which indicates that whenever the gospel is preached, at that time, God bestows a righteous status upon all who believe it.

⁹² Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 124-5.

⁹³ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 47-48.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Ernest De Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978), sec. 35.

“of Christ,” because it was revealed personally to Paul by Jesus. As Luther cautions,

The whole world has been taken in by this — especially those who would like to pose as more righteous and holy than others, such as the monks and the religious vigilantes. These confess with their mouths that they are sinners and that they sin daily but that their sins are neither so many nor so huge that they can’t take them away through their own works. As if that were not enough, they will dare bring their own righteousness and meritorious works to the judgment seat of God demanding the reward of eternal life from the Judge’s hand.⁹⁵

It is significant that Paul will later warn the Corinthians that this different gospel will inevitably produce a different Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 11:4, 14, Paul writes “*if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. . . . And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.*” Paul’s gospel centers around Christ’s work in history to save us from our sins. A false gospel and a false Jesus are ever present threats to the people of God. The Judaizers have managed to detach Jesus from the gospel he revealed to Paul and transform it into a message of “try harder,” “do more,” “do not eat this,” and “cut off that.”

The content of what is preached (the gospel as revealed by Jesus to Paul) does not depend on the reputation or the abilities of the messenger who proclaims it. Paul says that even if an angel from heaven comes and preaches a message different from what Paul already preached to the Galatians, the angel is to be anathematized! As only he can, Luther puts the matter as follows: “that which does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter and Paul be the teachers. On the other hand, that which does teach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod should propound it.”⁹⁶ Paul is even forced to confront the esteemed apostle Peter to his face when the latter gets caught with the smell of pork on his breath (Galatians 2:12), and then gives in to pressure from the men from James. Paul must correct Peter before all the church because, as Paul says, the gospel is at stake (Galatians 2:14).

In his condemnation of those preaching this different gospel, Paul uses the term “*anathema*,” which means to be accursed, or dedicated for destruction.⁹⁷ To put in plain language, Paul is saying if anyone comes and preaches to you a gospel different from the one I preached to you, they will fall under God’s curse! This is no slight thing, and the warning comes with the full authority of Paul’s office as the Apostle to the Gentiles, which is but another way of saying that the warning comes with the authority of Jesus. Luther’s appeal here is wise, pastoral, and echoes the warning from Paul.

⁹⁵ Luther, Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1535) Lect. 3, on Gal 1:4.

⁹⁶ Luther, “*Preface to the Epistle of James*,” Luther’s Works, Vol. 7, 384 ff.

⁹⁷ “The Pauline use of ἀνάθεμα is along the lines of the LXX. For Paul the word denotes the object of a curse.” See Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–), s.v. “ἀνάθεμα.”

Let us join with Paul and condemn every teaching, whether it comes from heaven or earth or anywhere else, that asks us to trust in works, righteousness or merits other than what comes from Jesus Christ. If we say that the popes have been doing this, we are not being disrespectful to them so much as faithful to Christ. After all, we must prefer Christ to the popes, and if they do not like this then we must condemn them for it.⁹⁸

B. Paul is not an ear-tickler (1:10)

10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

This verse is difficult to translate, and there is uncertainty about whether Paul's question is attached to what has gone before, introduces what follows, or is a flash of exasperation.⁹⁹ After Paul preached the gospel and then left the area, opponents began to question Paul's motives in addition to challenging his gospel. Despite accusations coming from the Judaizers to the effect that Paul is merely trying to please people by preaching a gospel that does not require rigorous obedience to the commandments (i.e., "the works of law," cf. Galatians 2:16),¹⁰⁰ Paul is not interested in pleasing his audiences any more than he is trying to appease God through his own efforts. Rather, Paul's sole focus is upon pleasing Jesus, his new master.¹⁰¹

Application

Paul's warnings to the Galatians should ring in our ears today. To his amazement, a false gospel arose in the Galatian churches almost immediately after he left the area and was widely accepted in the same churches in which Paul and Barnabas had preached in person. Grounded in wide-spread Jewish customs and practices, the false message was so compelling that even Peter and Barnabas were taken in for a time. Just as no counterfeit would make purple seven dollar bills with Mickey Mouse's likeness on them, neither does a false teacher show up and announce, "Hi, everyone, I'm a false teacher." They always have a hook. Luther understood well how such deception works

The ministers of Satan insinuate themselves into people's minds by promising them something better. They admit that those who preached the gospel to them made a good

⁹⁸ Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, on Galatians 1:10.

⁹⁹ Longenecker, Galatians, on Galatians 1:10.

¹⁰⁰ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 85. Bruce cite's Bultmann's comments: "By preaching a law-free gospel, Paul was pleasing men by making the way of salvation easier for them and trying to persuade God to accept them on less arduous terms than those laid down in the law."

¹⁰¹ Moo, Galatians, 83-86.

start but say that this is not enough They confirm true doctrine but then go on to point out where it needs to be improved. This was how the false apostles gained access to the Galatians.¹⁰²

We should not be surprised then when theologians, pastors, and elders, fall from grace and begin teaching another gospel. Sad to say, we should expect this to happen. It is not a matter of “if,” but “when.” Paul’s exhortation to the Galatians warns us to always be on our guard against those who teach that the death of Jesus Christ is not sufficient in and of itself to save us from God’s wrath in the judgment yet to come. The false gospel—Christ plus something we do—makes a great deal of sense to those who think that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is primarily about ethics (conduct), and that sound doctrine is a distant second to proper behavior. This hook is often used by contemporary false teachers.

The reason why this happens is rather obvious. If someone believes that Christianity is essentially about making bad people into good people, or making good people into better people, then Paul’s stress upon Christ crucified for sinners will sound odd or seem offensive. Paul tells us that the cross is foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is both to modern Americans. The generic American civil religion is the religion of Cain; “do what is right in your own eyes” (cf. Genesis 4:3). This way of thinking arises from the sentiment that people are intrinsically good and fully capable of coming up with something on their own which will be acceptable to God. “All God wants is our best,” is Cain’s motto. No, what God demands of us under the law—perfect obedience—he freely grants to us in the gospel, which Paul defines as the good news of the death, resurrection, and obedience of Jesus, for us and in our place. The law commands us “to do.” The gospel calls us “to believe.”

There will always be those in our midst urging us to soften the offense of the cross, or perhaps, to remove the offense altogether. Given Paul’s view of human sinfulness (“*there is no one who seeks God*”—Romans 3:11), we must remind ourselves that it is God who seeks sinners as seen in Paul’s emphasis upon calling as God’s initiative, made effectual by the Holy Spirit working in and through the preached gospel. It is through the proclamation of the gospel, but only through the proclamation of that gospel, that God calls men and women to faith in Jesus. We ought never entertain the thought of changing or “softening” our gospel to make it more inclusive and less offensive, lest our gospel become no gospel at all and we fall under Paul’s anathema.

It is also clear from Paul’s opening words to the Galatians that the issue which generates his anger is the content of what is preached, not the reputation or the abilities of the preacher. A preacher’s credentials should have little to do with how charismatic or compelling he may be, but with whether or not he preaches the gospel faithfully. Faithfulness to the gospel is the standard by which a minister of word and sacrament in Christ’s church will be judged by the Lord of the church. Granted, there is no excuse for bad or boring preaching. Nor is there any excuse for preaching which is poorly organized, confusing, difficult to understand, or

¹⁰² Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, on Galatians 1:9.

otherwise not compelling. In an entertainment-based, social media driven culture such as ours, we have been thoroughly trained to evaluate things by how they make us feel, or by how they hold our diminished attention spans, or even worse, by whether or not we are entertained. This is not a good thing because these things are obstacles to the “hearing with faith” required by the gospel.

Paul lost so much ground so quickly because, by his own admission, the Judaizers were more charismatic and entertaining than he. They were willing to preach what people wanted and expected to hear—the gospel of Cain, “God wants our best efforts.” We are all capable of doing our best, at least once in a while. Faith in God’s promise (which does justify) is deceptively replaced by a list of things we can do to give to God our best (which cannot justify). In the case of the Judaizers in Galatia, the list informing Gentiles how to live as Jews was drawn from the Old Testament, so it sounded “biblical.” And in a sense it was. As Paul will go on to explain, the commandments were not given to show us what to do to earn a right-standing before God through “works of law,” but instead, to show us our sins and drive us to the cross of Christ.

We live at a different time and under vastly different circumstances than in first century *Pontus Galatica*, but the principle Paul hammers home remains the same. The temptation is great to tolerate a false gospel in which it is taught that our justification stems, in part, from the merit of human works, or the performance of religious rituals even if no one today insists upon circumcision as necessary for justification. Many of our contemporaries still view matters of sin and grace through the lens of Cain—how can we condemn someone who sincerely tries their hardest? As seen in recent doctrinal knowledge surveys, many Christians will tell us that doctrine does not much matter, and that what really matters is love and unity, so we must embrace anyone and everyone who claims to be a Christian, in spite of their teaching about justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. We witness this today when people tell us that the Protestant Reformation is over and that we should end our 450+ year dispute with Rome about the gospel for the sake of joint co-operation in the culture wars, social justice, and third world-evangelism. But then, how do we evangelize without an evangel? A different gospel is no gospel according to Paul. A non-gospel can save no one.

Let us carefully weigh the ramifications of the true gospel and what is lost if we capitulate to modern Judaizers. Paul’s gospel teaches us that Jesus Christ has died for all of our sins (past, present, and future), and that the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us through faith alone received as a free gift. When we truly measure ourselves in light of our obedience to the Ten Commandments, we know that we have not the slightest chance of earning enough merit, or possessing enough good works to stand in God’s presence. Paul’s gospel shows us that every sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ alone can know that their sins are forgiven and that they are headed for life eternal when they die.

For Paul, the only way for sinful men and women to stand before the Holy God in the judgment yet to come are to possess the merits of Jesus through faith. So, it would figure that this would be the place where Satan would direct his attacks—rarely in frontal assaults, more often in subtle re-definition. For the gospel as taught by Paul is “all of Christ.” But Satan will find a way to make it “some of Christ and some of me.” For a gospel that is “some of Christ and some of me,” is a different gospel from that which Paul taught, and tragically, is no gospel

at all.

This is why we must always be willing to fight for the gospel. If we lose the gospel, we have lost everything. But if we have the gospel we have everything we need for our only comfort in life and in death. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, revealed to Paul, and proclaimed to the Galatians, through faith, we have Jesus and all his saving merits. What else could we possibly need?

III. THE SOURCE OF PAUL'S GOSPEL (1:11-2:14)

As Paul continues to make his point—the false gospel of the Judaizers is a dangerous misreading of redemptive history, ignoring Jesus Christ's role in fulfilling the requirements of the Sinai covenant—the apostle recounts his personal history, focusing upon the significant events and the time line which followed his conversion.¹⁰³ The purpose of the details of Paul's biography detailed in his Galatian letter is to confirm the source of his gospel. As he does so, we also get an important, albeit brief look at Paul's biography, including his life before his conversion, his time in Arabia,¹⁰⁴ and his subsequent meeting with Peter and James in Jerusalem. Recounting this history is vital to Paul's defense of his apostolic authority at the beginning of his Gentile mission, which led to his preaching the gospel given him throughout the Galatian region. Paul recounts how he went from being a rising star in Judaism and one of the chief opponents of Christianity, to becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles, now preaching the gospel of Christ crucified, a gospel which is the same as that taught by the other apostles.

A. Paul's gospel comes through revelation (1:11-12)

11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In verses 11-12, Paul makes his first point in defense of his apostolic office and his gospel.¹⁰⁵ The sad fact that Paul "would have his readers know" indicates that the Galatians either forgot (which is possible) ignore (also possible), rejected (which some had done) or else did not know (for which there is no excuse), the truth they are to embrace and then follow. To express his

¹⁰³ For detailed accounts of Paul's life and times see: F. F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), and Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Paul is not referring to the Arabian peninsula, but to the Nabatean kingdom, located to the south of Damascus and to the east of Jerusalem, with its amazing capital, the red rock city of Petra.

¹⁰⁵ Longenecker contends that these two verses function as the thesis statement of the epistle. Longenecker, *Galatians*, on Galatians 1:11-12.

concern for the Galatians, Paul uses a friendly term “brothers” when speaking of the Galatians—a term drawn from the Old Testament and used in reference to his fellow Israelites.¹⁰⁶ Paul uses the word “brothers” sparingly with the Galatians, and there is the real possibility he uses the term here to shame the Galatians, reminding them that genuine brothers, those whose bond of fellowship arises from their faith in Jesus Christ, should know the truth Paul taught them when he was with them previously.¹⁰⁷ For whatever reason, they do *not* know, and this is a problem.

To give this point some teeth, Paul reiterates that the gospel of Christ crucified is not a figment of his imagination. The gospel that Paul preached in Galatia had been personally revealed to him by Jesus. This gospel is centered in the objective and historical work of Jesus Christ *for us*; the facts of his life, death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures, as Paul recounts in 1 Corinthians 15:1-9. In Romans 1:16-17, Paul defines the gospel in terms of the revelation of the righteousness of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. If preaching the gospel is proclaiming the facts associated with Christ’s messianic mission, the charge of novelty made against Paul by his Judaizing opponents collapses. The facts surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection were public events and common knowledge. Given the offense of the gospel and that it is characterized as a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile (cf. I Corinthians 1:23), Paul would have never invented such a gospel, or sacrifice so much on a personal level, to preach an utterly offensive message in an effort to create a circle of followers.

It was also well-known among the Jewish community that at one time, Paul opposed the new sect of “Christians” with great zeal—sufficient zeal for Paul to travel 135 miles to Damascus to keep the fledgling Christian movement from spreading beyond the confines of Judea. Many Christians apparently fled to Damascus from Jerusalem immediately after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7), to join with Christians already in the area.¹⁰⁸ In Acts 8:1, we learn that Paul whole-heartedly approved of Stephen’s execution by stoning, and helped to instigate a great persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. According to Luke’s account (Acts 8:1-3), Paul’s zeal was so great he is described as ravaging the church, even dragging men and women off to prison.

What accounts for such a dramatic change in Paul after he participated in this persecution, and then served as the Sanhedrin’s agent to make the trek to Damascus to inform the Jewish leaders there of a new wave of infidels fleeing to their city to escape justice in Jerusalem? The Judaizers may have been claiming that Paul departed from Jewish Christianity to gain followers for himself, or that he was self-deceived, and therefore a false teacher. Paul blows this accusation apart by merely recounting the reasons for the change—the personal appearance of Jesus who said to him “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4).

¹⁰⁶ Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, The Epistles of Paul to the Churches of Galatia, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 56-57.

¹⁰⁸ Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 79-80; Hengel, Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity, 81-91.

Paul spells out to the Galatians how at the time of his conversion, the message he is now preaching was revealed to him by none other than the Risen Jesus. As Paul puts it in Galatians 1:16, “*God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*” God confirmed this call through the ministry of Ananias (a Christian in Damascus), and later, through the other apostles, who confirm the content of Paul’s gospel. This is why Paul can state in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 that the Gospel he preached to the Corinthians, is “*what I received and delivered to you.*” The word Paul uses, “receive” (*paralambano*), is a technical term which the Rabbis used to describe the transmission of sacred tradition.¹⁰⁹ Jesus’ call of Paul to his apostolic office, in which the content of the gospel was revealed to him by the Lord, was also confirmed and fleshed out in more detail by Paul’s later contact with the other apostles.

We do not know if Paul had witnessed Jesus preach or teach, or if he had even personally seen Jesus before the Lord’s death and resurrection.¹¹⁰ Regardless, there was much for Paul to learn from the original apostles, such as the details of Jesus’ messianic mission as found in the Gospels, along with further elaboration of the basic historical facts found in the content of the sermons recorded in the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts, and likely passed on to Paul by Peter during Paul’s fifteen day stay with Peter, roughly three years after Paul’s conversion (Galatians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:3 ff.).

In addition, our Lord’s teaching had been memorized and passed on to the apostolic circle, so that they in turn, could preach the message which Jesus taught them (as recorded in Luke 10). One New Testament scholar points out that there are over “twenty-five instances where Paul certainly or probably makes reference or allusion to a saying of Jesus. In addition, [there are] over forty possible echoes of a saying of Jesus . . . distributed throughout all of the Pauline letters.”¹¹¹ After Jesus Christ appeared to him, the primary influence upon Paul’s thinking about the Old Testament (much of which Paul had memorized or could cite with familiarity) was the lens of fulfillment of so many of its prophecies in and through the messianic mission of Jesus. Old Testament images and phrases are in the background of virtually everything Paul teaches and writes (echoes of which appear frequently in his letters), now understood and re-interpreted in light of Jesus’ messianic mission.¹¹² This mitigates the assertion made by critical scholars that Paul had little, if any, first-hand knowledge of Jesus, hence, the absurd contention that Paul was “the founder of Christianity.”

¹⁰⁹ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), s.v. “*παραλαμβάνω*.”

¹¹⁰ See note 48.

¹¹¹ S. Kim, “*Jesus, Sayings of*,” *Dictionary of Paul*, 490.

¹¹² Richard B. Hays put it this way: “In Paul we encounter a first-century Jewish thinker who, while undergoing a profound disjuncture with his own religious tradition, grappled his way through to a vigorous and theologically generative reappropriation of Israel’s Scriptures. However great the tensions between his heritage and his new Christian convictions, he insistently sought to show that his proclamation of the gospel was grounded in the witness of Israel’s sacred texts.” See Hays, *The Echo of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

B. Paul's earlier career (1:13-14)

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

The second line of defense taken by Paul is found in verses 13-14, where Paul recounts his own personal history as both a persecutor of the church and a young buck who was rapidly advancing in Judaism. As mentioned, Paul acted in a violent way, hunting down and arresting Christians in Jerusalem. He was fully bent upon destroying Christ's church before it could spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem. Yet, someone with Paul's background, and who then undergoes such a sudden and dramatic conversion, might turn out to be someone whose character is suspect, or someone who faces serious mental health challenges. The Galatians knew of Paul's former way of life as the rising star of Judaism. The Judaizers were using his past against him for their own advantage. We can almost hear them claiming that Paul is a dangerous lone-ranger, a theological innovator, a religious entrepreneur seeking to create his own religious sect.

The term Paul uses "to persecute," comes from a word which means to pursue or hunt down. Paul advanced in Judaism as a trailblazer, relentlessly pursuing all those whom he regarded as enemies of the religion of Israel.¹¹³ According to Luke (Acts 8:1-4), Paul went house to house, looking for Christians, only to discover that when they fled from him, they took the gospel with them, causing it to spread further—an instance of the law of unintended consequences. Paul refers to his prior zeal in 1 Corinthians 15:9, when he speaks of himself as "*the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*" In Philippians 3:6, he describes himself "*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*" No doubt, much of this took place in Jerusalem (as mentioned in Acts 7-8), but Paul's intention to stop the spread of Christianity extended as far as Damascus and perhaps beyond. In Acts 26:11, Paul says, "*I punished [Christians] often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*"

As he describes it here, Paul's advance in Judaism echoes Jesus' "advance" (increase) in wisdom and stature as mentioned in Luke 2:52. There is also a loud echo from the account of Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, whose zeal in keeping the law is recounted in Numbers 25:6-15, when an Israelite brought a Midianite women into his tent in the sight of all Israel. Outraged, Phinehas ran a spear through the couple *in flagrante delicto*. The account of Phinehas, whose zeal for YHWH's "jealousy" was widely hailed in Judaism, came to the minds of the disciples when Jesus drove the money-changers from the temple (cf. John 2:17).¹¹⁴ In the spirit of Phinehas, Saul of Tarsus' personal ambition was to cut-down all opposition to Judaism, exceeding his contemporaries in his zeal for the faith of the Jewish fathers. Paul was a new Phinehas, a man who was extremely zealous to defend the religion of Israel.

¹¹³ Burton, Galatians, 45.

¹¹⁴ Moo, Galatians, 101.

C. Paul's apostolic call (1:15-17)

15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

The third point Paul makes in his own defense is reminding the Galatians (in vv. 15-17) of the sovereign and gracious nature of God's call to his office of Apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road about three years after our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, and probably not long after the martyrdom of Stephen. Paul looks back on his life through the eyes of faith. In one sense, his call to apostleship was a call from his birth, literally from his mother's womb. Paul's emphasis falls upon God's sovereign act in calling him to faith and then equipping him to be the pre-eminent missionary to the Gentiles. The God who called Paul to his office is the same God who called Abraham from Ur of Chaldees to the land of promise. The same God called Moses to lead the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt to cross the Red Sea and to eventually enter the same land which God promised to Abraham in fulfillment of that promise. Now he has called Paul to preach to the Gentiles so that they too might become children of Abraham and heirs to all that God had promised him.

In speaking of his birth and life in this way, Paul is placing himself squarely in the history of Israel.¹¹⁵ He knows by speaking like this anyone familiar with the Old Testament will immediately think of Jeremiah, about whom YHWH declared in Jeremiah 1:5, "*before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*" Paul's words also harken us back to the Servant Song of Isaiah 49:1-7, where the prophet Isaiah foretells that Jesus, the coming servant and Messiah, would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring his salvation to the ends of the earth. It is not accidental that Isaiah's prophecy is quoted by Paul and Barnabas while preaching in Psidion Antioch, one of the cities in Galatia.¹¹⁶ Luke's account in Acts 13:46-50, describes what happened.

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly [while in Psidion Antioch], saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

Like the prophets of Israel (especially Isaiah and Jeremiah) Paul was chosen by God before his

¹¹⁵ Wright, Galatians, 31-41.

¹¹⁶ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 92.

own birth to preach Jesus Christ to the Gentile nations. Paul is now a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, the servant-king foretold by Isaiah. It is in this light that Paul speaks of God as revealing his Son “to him” as an “apocalypsis” or unveiling. This unveiling occurred on the Damascus Road, when scales (symbolic of unbelief) fell from Paul’s eyes. According to Luke (Acts 9:8-9), the appearance of Jesus left Paul blind and helpless. *“Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”* Paul will mention trouble with his eyesight in Galatians 6:11, but we do not know if there is a connection to his blindness when Jesus appeared to him, or if Paul had subsequently contracted one of the many common eye-ailments of his day (i.e., conjunctivitis).

Damascus is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. It is mentioned in Genesis 14:15, 15:2,¹¹⁷ as prominent during the time of Abraham. We know little about the Christians who were in Damascus when Paul arrived, beside the fact that the Holy Spirit led one of them, Ananias, to minister to Paul. The story of Paul’s time in Damascus (from Acts 9:10-25) is worth reading.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

It is remarkable that Paul began preaching just as soon as he regained his sight and strength,

¹¹⁷ Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 76.

and after being baptized. Saul was now Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. He went into the same synagogues he set out to warn about Christian refugees, and to the shock of those in the synagogue, Paul began to preach Christ crucified. His preaching is said to “confound the Jews” by proving Jesus is the Christ. Paul was very likely using messianic prophecy and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ to make the case that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, and that Israel’s long anticipated salvation from sin and the promised restoration was accomplished by Jesus through his life of obedience, his death upon the cross, and his bodily resurrection.

But once in Galatia, the tables were turned on Paul. He had been the persecutor, now he is the persecuted. He was the man filled with rage, seeking to hunt down and arrest Christians. This time it is Paul who is the object of hatred from those to whom he was preaching, who, in turn, were seeking to arrest, imprison, and likely execute him. Jesus commissioned Paul to preach the gospel which Jesus revealed to him. That gospel stirred Paul’s countryman to wrath and anger. Soon they were plotting to kill Paul, who learned of their plot and escaped over the city’s wall.

Instead of returning home to Jerusalem, Paul went to Arabia, before eventually returning to Jerusalem three years later. Arabia refers to the wilderness area south of Damascus and east of Jerusalem (in modern day Jordan), not limited to the Arabian peninsula. Some have speculated that Paul went out into the wilderness to commune with God (as Moses and Elijah had done). It is much more likely that Paul went into this region to fulfill his mission to preach to the Gentiles the gospel Jesus revealed to him.¹¹⁸ How long Paul stayed in the wilderness of Arabia is unknown to us, but at some point he returned to Damascus.

D. Paul meets members of the Jerusalem church (1:18-20)

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother. 20 (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)

The fourth point Paul raises in defense of his authority over against the Judaizers (vv. 1:18-20) is to recount his two post-conversion visits to Jerusalem. The first came after returning from Damascus, and the second after his subsequent ministry in Syria and Cilicia which was a single Roman province with two large cities, Syrian Antioch, and Paul’s hometown of Tarsus. Paul’s first trip to Jerusalem included a fifteen day visit with Cephas (Peter’s Aramaic name). In Acts 9:26-27, Luke recounts that “*when [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.*” Imagine getting the news that the most notorious enemy of the new Christian faith, a man who had once sought your arrest and imprisonment, had been converted and now wants to meet with you. A fair bit of skepticism would be in order. Was it a trick? A plot by the Sanhedrin? Barnabas filled the role

¹¹⁸ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 96.

for Paul in Jerusalem which Ananias filled in Damascus.¹¹⁹

Eventually, Peter and Paul did get together, and we can only imagine what they discussed. Peter must have been a tremendous source of information to Paul regarding the historical events surrounding the life and ministry of our Lord. During this same visit, Paul also met with James, the Lord's brother.

However, Paul did not spend all of his time with Peter and James. According to Acts 9:28-30, "[Paul] *went in and out among them [the apostles] at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.*" The Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews, as was Paul, who was raised in a Hellenistic Jewish home as a Roman citizen in Tarsus. Once, again, Paul's former countrymen tried to kill him. Fierce opposition to his subsequent ministry in Galatia was nothing new. Repeatedly, Paul faced personal danger. Yet, the way in which the Judaizers infiltrated and then undermined entire Christian congregations throughout Galatia was something altogether new to him. Paul will contend against them with everything in him, because the gospel is at stake.

E. Paul in Syria and Cilicia (1:21-24)

21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23 They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God because of me.

In verses 21-24, Paul explains to the Galatians how he had labored in Cilicia and Tarsus (nearby), even though his conversion was not yet widely known throughout the churches. Luke tells us that Paul was in this region because the Hellenists had driven him from Jerusalem after his stay with Peter. According to Acts 9:30-31, "*when the brothers learned,*" of the plot against Paul, "*they brought him down to Caesarea,*" the closest seaport, "*and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*" This was a period of great growth as the gospel was expanding beyond Jerusalem into Gentile regions to the north and east in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It was a time of peace (little persecution) and awe at the things the Lord was doing among his people.

As the gospel was spreading, some of this due to the preaching of Paul, believers were learning of Paul's conversion and praising God. It was becoming clear to all, that the dangerous wolf, had become a shepherd.

F. The conference in Jerusalem (2:1-10)

¹¹⁹ Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 83.

1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – 5 to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. 6 And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), 9 and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul recounts his second visit to Jerusalem. A bit of chronology and historical background is important. We start with what we know of Paul's biography. Saul of Tarsus was likely born about a decade after Jesus. We do not know Saul's date of birth since the Jews did not consider such dates important, even if the Romans did.¹²⁰ Tarsus is a city on the southern coast of modern Turkey, Paul's hometown, not far from Galatia, and now home to some three million people. The church father, Jerome, claimed Paul's parents were originally from Galilee, which meant that Aramaic and Hebrew were spoken in the home, even if Paul grew up in the Hellenistic culture of Asia Minor and was fluent in Greek and probably Latin.¹²¹ As Hengel notes, "intellectually Paul moves between two worlds: he lived in two different language areas and cultures," Hellenistic and Hebrew.¹²²

We also know that Paul was a Roman citizen. He does tell us his father was from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5), which included tribal land near Jerusalem. He was trained as a Pharisee in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), under one of the leading Rabbis of the period, Gamaliel who was a son or grandson of the influential Rabbi Hillel. Paul speaks of himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5), which may mean he has no Gentile blood, or that he is contrasting himself with the Hellenistic Greeks around whom he had been raised.¹²³ Paul was also trained as a tent-maker (Acts 18:3), his secular vocation-his "day job." If Paul reached the status of

¹²⁰ Martin Goodman, Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations (New York, Vintage Books, 2007), 232-33.

¹²¹ W. R. Stegner, "Jew, Paul, the" in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 503-511.

¹²² Hengel, Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity, 82.

¹²³ Stegner, "Jew, Paul, the" 504.

Rabbi by the time he appears in the biblical record, he would have been married (a requirement for Rabbis). By the time he writes his first Corinthians letter in 55-56 A.D., he was not married. The presumption is that Mrs. Paul had died by that time and that Paul was a widower, but we cannot say for sure.¹²⁴

There is a physical description of Paul, written about 160 A.D., in an apocryphal writing, known as the *Acts of Paul*. Its veracity is a matter of some debate. Often, there is enough truth in such accounts that they gain acceptance. Here is what we have:

And he (Onesiphorus) proceed along the royal highway to Lystra and stood expecting him, and according to the information of Titus, he inspected them that came. And he saw Paul coming, a man small in stature, bald-headed, crooked in legs, healthy, with eyebrows joining, nose rather long [lit. somewhat hooked], full of grace; for sometimes he appeared like a man, but sometimes he had the face of an angel.¹²⁵

If we date Paul's conversion about 33 A.D., this would mean that his first visit to Jerusalem occurred about 35-36 A.D. After being threatened by the Hellenists, Paul left Jerusalem, headed north ("went down"), and then likely remained in and around Syria and Cilicia until about 46 A.D., when Paul made his second visit to Jerusalem as recounted here. The period of time from Paul's conversion until his second visit to Jerusalem is approximately twelve to fourteen years, give or take a few months.¹²⁶ During this time, Tiberius (d. 37), then Gaius (better known to us as the sadistic Caligula—d. 41), ruled the Roman empire, while the emperor when Paul writes Galatians was Claudius (d. 54). There is nothing fictional here, but concrete history in real places at specific times.

Paul's second visit to Jerusalem (after his conversion) was likely the famine-relief visit mentioned in Acts 11:27-30. This visit occurs prior to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15—an important event discussed in more detail in the postscript. We can place Paul's second visit in historical context by cross referencing Paul's biography here with Luke's account in Acts. In Acts 11:28, we read of the prophecy of Agabus, who through the Holy Spirit, predicted the coming famine in Jerusalem which prompted Paul and Barnabas to take the famine relief money they collected from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem. According to Luke, Acts 11:28, "*one of them [a prophet] named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).*" This is one of the few predicative prophecies in the New Testament and it prompts Paul to return to Jerusalem, "*because of a revelation*" (i.e., Agabus' prophecy). This particular famine is supported by the Roman historian Suetonius, who speaks of a series of droughts and bad harvests occurring at this time.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 288.

¹²⁵ M. R. James, *The Acts of Paul*, in The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 273, and cited in Daniel J. Theron, Evidence of Tradition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 35.

¹²⁶ Moo, Galatians, 121.

¹²⁷ Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 150.

In a private interview with many of the first disciples and those in the apostolic circle (*“those who seemed influential”*) who were in Jerusalem when he arrived, Paul set his teaching before them for evaluation and confirmation (*“the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles”*). This was not so much for their approval, but an acknowledgment of their authority so that there would be no division between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul also did so to ensure that the offering taken from among the Gentile churches on behalf of the Jerusalem church could be formally received and accepted. Paul recounts the details of this meeting to make it clear to the Judaizers in Galatia that his gospel was not only revealed to him by Jesus Christ, but that it was the same gospel believed and taught in the Jerusalem church. Paul’s gospel was approved by Peter, James, and John, the leaders of the church.¹²⁸ The “different gospel” being preached by the Judaizers, was rejected.

In verses 3-6, Paul addresses what is perhaps the most sinister threat facing the Galatian churches, the deceptive nature of actions of the Judaizers, characterized as false brothers who were secretly sneaking in to spy on the Christian liberty of those who embraced the gospel. Paul uses this occasion to inform the Galatians that Titus, a Gentile, who was traveling with Paul, was not compelled by the Jerusalem church to be circumcised. This rams home the point that the Judaizers in Galatia did not have the support of the Jerusalem church, which they may have been claiming. The Judaizers are the innovators, not Paul.

This is a very important point in Paul’s defense, given the fact that these false brothers deceptively infiltrated the ranks of the believers at Antioch (recorded in Acts 15:1), and were teaching a different gospel (which Paul has stated is no gospel). The false gospel claims that *“unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* These agitators were apparently the same ones deceiving the Galatian Christians, and who later show up at the Jerusalem Council to protest Paul’s doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, only to be rebuffed by the leaders of the assembled church.

Paul condemns the Judaizers by exposing their deceitful behavior. Men who proclaim the truth do not need to operate in such deceptive ways. Paul charges that *“they slipped in to spy on our liberty,”* specifically, in this case, the doctrine that the Gentiles were justified by faith alone, apart from keeping the law of Moses and submitting to circumcision. The false teachers sought to re-enslave those Christians for whom Christ died in order to set free, thereby denying the gospel Paul was preaching. As Paul will go on to say in chapter 5:1 of Galatians, *“for freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* Paul’s recounting of these events is a serious warning to the Galatians. If they give into those same men whom the apostolic church will soon rebuke, then Christ will be of no value to them! Those open to the Judaizing message are deserting Jesus Christ and risk falling from grace! The stakes could not be higher.

Informing the Galatians of what happened when Paul reported to the leaders of the Jerusalem church, Paul describes the basis for the church in Jerusalem extending to him, Barnabas, and perhaps even Titus, the right hand of fellowship (verse 7). *“On the contrary . . . they saw that I*

¹²⁸ See the discussion of this in Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 108-111.

had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised." Paul finishes the point he made in verse 1. The leaders of the Jerusalem church added nothing to the message Paul was preaching to the Gentiles, such as the requirement to be circumcised, or to keep certain aspects of the ceremonial law. All Peter, James, and John later asked of them is that the Gentile churches remember the poor. In no uncertain terms, this declaration means that circumcision is not part of the gospel.

That circumcision is not part of the gospel is also evident in the diverse ministry of the church to both Jew and Gentile. Peter's gospel to the Jews is the same as Paul's gospel preached to the Gentiles. As Paul states in verses 8-10, there was a very positive outcome from the meeting between Paul and the apostolic leadership of the Jerusalem church. The apostles clearly recognized that God was at work in Paul's efforts to reach the Gentiles, every bit as much as he was at work in Peter's efforts to reach the Jews. Peter and Paul were preaching the same gospel, albeit to different audiences.

The leaders of the church also recognized "the grace" bestowed upon Paul, acknowledging God's call of Paul to his apostolic office. They also acknowledged that the mission of Paul and Barnabas was to go back to the Gentiles and continue preaching to them. They even extended to Paul the "*right hand of fellowship*." Meanwhile, the apostles in Jerusalem will continue their own efforts to reach the Jews by preaching Christ crucified and justification, by grace alone, through faith alone. Paul recognizes that Peter, James (our Lord's brother), and John are the leaders of the church, picking up on the theme of the church as God's temple, with these three being "pillars" of that temple of which John will later describe in an eschatological sense when referring to the church in Philadelphia (cf. Revelation 3:12).¹²⁹

But this is not the end of the story. Peter will soon find himself under great pressure from "the men from James." So much so that Peter caves in to them by withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles, a move which gave the Judaizers in Galatia much ammunition to use against Paul and his gospel. Paul must confront Peter to his face. As Paul says, the gospel is a stake.

G. Conflict in Antioch (2:11-14)

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

As new churches were established in Gentile areas north of Palestine, one pressing question

¹²⁹ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 122.

needed to be addressed. How were Jews and Gentiles to get along with one another in these new churches? This was especially the case in Asia Minor where Jews lived in many cities among large Gentile populations. Jewish Christians remained steeped in Jewish life and culture. No doubt, they struggled with the fact that recent Gentile converts had different sexual mores, ate things Jews did not, and who, when pressed about matters of the law may have asked, “who is this Moses fellow you keep talking about?” How would close fellowship between Jewish believers and “unclean” Gentiles in Galatia and Antioch be seen back in Jerusalem? The dicey relationship between Jew and Gentile meant that a collision between the weak-willed Peter and the iron-willed Paul was at some point inevitable. In verses 11-14, Paul demonstrates that even apostles must have their doctrine and conduct checked in the light of Scripture, specifically the revelation of Jesus about the gospel.

Moving on from recounting his second post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, Paul tells the Galatians how he was forced to confront Peter to his face when the latter had caved in to pressure from messengers from James possibly claiming they were sent by the Jerusalem church. This confrontation likely occurred not long after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch after their prior visit to Jerusalem. As N. T. Wright points out, it is easy to overlook the fact that the reason why this seems so vivid in Paul’s account is because these events had taken place quite recently.¹³⁰

There is a noticeable progression in Paul’s recounting of his relationship with Peter, especially in light of the burgeoning Gentile mission undertaken by Paul, Barnabas, and others. Paul describes being Peter’s guest for fifteen days during his first trip to Jerusalem post-conversion (Galatians 1:18-20). Then, he speaks of Peter as a fellow apostle when recounting his second trip to Jerusalem (2:1-10), before, finally, describing a confrontation with Peter when the latter falls into serious doctrinal error (Galatians 2:11-14).¹³¹ While it is difficult to know how much of this is a word for word account of what Paul said to Peter and how much is a summation, what follows amounts to a major confrontation between the two men over the ground and meaning of the doctrine of justification.

We know from Luke’s account in Acts that Gentiles and Jews previously enjoyed table fellowship together in Antioch (where Paul and Peter later have their confrontation). Both groups participated in the Lord’s Supper as one body, with Peter apparently approving of the practice. In Acts 10:9-48, we read of Peter’s vision and visit to the Gentile Cornelius’ home (the so-called Pentecost of the Gentiles), where the Holy Spirit told Peter that “all foods were clean.” From these events Peter concluded, “*truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*” (Acts 10:34). As recounted by Luke, the Gentiles were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, just as occurred with the Jewish believers. At first Peter saw Jew and Gentile on an equal footing before God.¹³² A

¹³⁰ Wright, Galatians, 109.

¹³¹ Fung, Galatians, 104-105.

¹³² B. B. Blue, “*Food Offered to Idols and Jewish Food Laws*” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 307.

common faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah and the Son of God who died for their sins who was then raised from the dead produced a remarkable fellowship between Jew and Gentile, who, otherwise would have little if anything to do with each other. That is, *until "certain men came from James."*

Professor Bruce thinks these men "from James" who arrived in Antioch were trying to convince the Jewish brothers of something along the lines of "we in Jerusalem hear that those of you in Antioch are in the habit of practicing regular table fellowship with Gentiles." This practice was causing great concern among the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem who feared such close associations might make efforts to evangelize Jews much more difficult. This was also a time of increasing Jewish militancy against their Roman occupiers. About this time, the Romans crucified several prominent leaders of the zealots in Palestine. With such tensions in the air, any Jews, including Peter, who fraternized with Gentiles and adopted Gentile ways were increasingly seen by the fellow Jews as traitors, fraternizing with godless and unclean Gentiles.¹³³

Under such circumstances we can see why men like James, Peter, Barnabas, and the Jewish believers in Antioch, would be troubled by too close an association with Gentiles. The churches had enjoyed an extended time of peace and numerical growth, but now political trouble was brewing back in Jerusalem and the church was worried. How would what was happening in Galatia impact the on-going and apparently successful evangelization of Jews throughout Palestine and southeast Asia Minor where Antioch was located?

According to Paul (see the discussion of Galatians 2:16 below), the issue raised by the Judaizers in Galatia was the matter of *how* Gentiles join the church—through faith in Jesus or through works of law? The confusion they caused bled over into the practice of table fellowship bringing racial tension and division. But on the NPP reading of these events, this was essentially a debate over whether Gentiles should embrace Jewish customs (including circumcision) in order to be welcomed to table fellowship.¹³⁴ Since NPP advocates understand the dispute as a matter of "who is in the church?" the Pauline answer they propose is that all believers are children of Abraham, including Gentiles. Therefore it is wrong for the agitators to seek to exclude Gentiles from the table merely on ethnic and cultural grounds, rather than accept them on the ground that Gentiles too are children of Abraham through faith in Israel's Messiah.

But it is clear from Paul's account that the point of contention raised by the agitators is one of how Jewish believers in Jesus should understand the role which human effort plays in acquiring a righteous status before God (justification). This not just a question of "who is in?" (NPP), but a more fundamental question of "how did they get in?" (OPP). Was faith in Jesus sufficient to justify unclean and godless Gentiles apart from any merit earned through personal obedience? Paul's answer is a resounding, "yes!" He recounts the issue as primarily one of

¹³³ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 130.

¹³⁴ Wright, Galatians, 62.

soteriology (how are sinful people made right with God?) and only secondarily ecclesiology, (should ethnic and cultural differences be used by Jewish Christians to exclude Gentile converts?) The confusion about the gospel in the Galatian churches caused by the agitators, is answered by Paul reaffirming the doctrine of justification of sinful people (Jew or Gentile) through faith apart from works of law.

We do know that on those occasions when it was necessary for James to make a decision about whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be justified, James comes down on the side of Gentile justification *sola fide* (Acts 11:1-18; and Acts 15).¹³⁵ Yet increasing ethnic and racial tensions was a matter of concern on the part of Jewish Christians, which meant that too much fraternizing with Gentile Christians would make it difficult for the Jerusalem church to support the Gentile mission.

Because of the pressure which the men from James were able to exert upon him, Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles. Peter even talked the otherwise reliable Barnabas into doing the same. But as Paul sees it, Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentiles exposed a serious misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul charges that Peter's decision was motivated by "fear." Paul even describes Peter's and Barnabas' actions as hypocritical, using the term (*hypokrisis*), which literally means "play-acting," pointing to Peter's lack of courage in standing up to the pressure to distance himself from the Gentile believers.¹³⁶ Peter said one thing *before* the men from James arrived (it is okay to eat with Gentiles), but did the *opposite* after (he withdrew from table fellowship). Fear of confrontation was an unfortunate personality trait which Peter manifested previously at our Lord's trial before Caiaphus. According to Matthew 26:69-70, "*now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before them all, saying, 'I do not know what you mean.'*" In Galatia, Peter caves in because of his fear of the "men from James."

Paul does not give us many specifics. Whether Peter was afraid that eating with Gentiles would compromise missionary efforts to the Jews (possible), or if he was afraid of being ostracized by others in the Jerusalem church (also possible), or even if he was afraid of bodily harm from Jews who wanted to eliminate all contact with Gentiles (not as likely), is not quite clear. We are only told that because of external pressure, Peter ceased table fellowship with Gentiles, when as Paul says, Peter had previously lived like a Gentile.

There is no indication in the text of a personality conflict between Paul and Peter, as critical scholars often claim.¹³⁷ The dispute was about the ground of the Gentile mission; the doctrine of justification by faith, apart from works (Galatians 2:16). This is why, in verse 11, Paul says that Peter's conduct "*was not in step with the truth of the gospel,*" an indication that Peter's actions

¹³⁵ Moo, Galatians, 147-148.

¹³⁶ Fung, Galatians, 109.

¹³⁷ Moo, Galatians, 146.

amounted to a reversal of the position he previously took in Antioch. Peter's hypocritical play-acting was a "defection or deviation from that truth."¹³⁸ This was no small matter which explains why Paul opposed Peter (*anthistemi*) "to his face," before them all (i.e., before the church). Withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles amounts to acting contrary to "the truth of the gospel." Says Paul "if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Peter's withdrawal from the "uncircumcised" was causing division between Jew and Gentile, based upon confusion about the relationship of faith and works. Since this issue involved error which effected the preaching of the gospel, the mistaken notion that one must be circumcised to be ceremonially clean, it could not be handled privately as required in Matthew 18:15-20.

The issue then, is that messengers from James convinced Peter to avoid contact with Gentiles (even at table fellowship) because too close an association with Gentile Christians would cause problems for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere.¹³⁹ Assuming the best of motives on the part of James and Peter, they were concerned that such close ties between Jew and Gentile would have a negative effect upon the evangelism of Jews. But Paul sees things much differently. What does withdrawing from Gentiles say to them about their status before God, especially with the Gentile mission well under way? As T. David Gordon points out, "the concern of the entire letter is, in many ways, the concern of Paul's entire ministry, since Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles."¹⁴⁰ Paul is the missionary to the Gentiles, who now find themselves being told by Judiazers that they must be circumcised, and live like Jews in order to be declared "right" before God. If Peter and Barnabas were confused about this, then Paul must address head on the doctrine of justification with clarity and force because Paul knows full well that what Peter had done in Antioch would be used by the Judaizers in Galatia as proof that Gentiles who become Christians must live as cultural Jews in order to be justified before God.

If the best interpretation of these events is that the matter of believing Jewish believers ceasing from engaging in table fellowship with Gentile believers in Antioch is undermining the gospel as preached by Paul, giving ammunition to the Judaizers in Galatia, then this is *not* a case of Paul arguing that Jewish Christians cannot deny Gentiles entrance into the church on the basis of the so-called "ethnic badges" of Judaism as NPP folk erroneously contend. Jews denying table fellowship to Gentiles may not be the issue underlying Paul's doctrine of justification, but Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentile believers certainly becomes the occasion for Paul to explain what justification means and what it properly entails. This sounds like a minor matter, but it is hugely important because NPP advocates see this dispute (in the first of Paul's letters) as determinative of how we should understand all that Paul will subsequently

¹³⁸ Fung, Galatians, 109.

¹³⁹ Moo, Galatians, 147-148.

¹⁴⁰ T. David Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14," in Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David Van Drunen, eds., The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant, (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishers, 2009), 243.

say about justification.¹⁴¹

When NPP folk such as N. T. Wright, speak of Galatians as “much misunderstood” by the OPP,¹⁴² many of us are convinced that Wright is the one who misunderstands Paul. Wright contends that Galatians is not about people “getting saved,” but rather about the Messiah, who, through his death, gives to Abraham what YHWH promised him; “a single family in which believing Jews and believing Gentiles form one body.”¹⁴³ As noted previously, NPP advocates (Wright and Dunn, in the main) interpret Paul’s confrontation with Peter at Antioch to mean that Jews were denying table fellowship to Gentiles because Gentiles did not possess the proper ethnic badges (circumcision, keeping kosher table, observing feasts, etc.). The confrontation occurs when Jews excluded Gentiles from the people of God, resulting in the NPP setting a misguided trajectory for Paul’s discussion of justification which immediately follows.

According to the NPP, Paul’s subsequent discussion of justification by faith (Galatians 2:16) is not about receiving a right-standing before God (i.e., Christ’s death as a payment for sin, and Christ’s righteousness imputed to believers through faith alone), but rather, how Gentiles participate in the promise to Abraham by faith, and not by possessing the proper ethnic badges (i.e., “not by works”) as Jewish believers were contending. As Dunn puts it, “the leading edge of Paul’s thinking was the conviction that God’s purpose embraced Gentile as well as Jew, not the question of how a guilty man might find a gracious God.”¹⁴⁴ Similarly, for Wright, the goal of a proper understanding of Galatians 2 and the dispute between Peter and Paul, “is to rescue the ‘goal’ from Platonizing ‘going to heaven’ interpretations and the ‘means’ from paganizing ‘angry God punishing Jesus’ interpretations—and so to transform the normal perception of . . . ‘atonement theology,’”¹⁴⁵ and not to read Paul as preaching a method of “getting saved.” We should not miss Wright’s equation of the Reformation understanding of justification via an imputed righteousness with the fundamentalist preoccupation with “getting saved.” This a cheap shot and Wright surely knows better.

But if the NPP misreads Paul and the dispute in Antioch, what does Paul mean when he reminds Peter of the centrality of justification, *sola fide*, apart from works of the law? On the OPP view, when confronting Peter, Paul raises the doctrine of justification by faith to remind Jews that they, as well as the Gentiles, have been made right before God, solely on the basis of faith in Christ, not “works of law” (i.e., acts of obedience done in conformity to the law of

¹⁴¹ According to Wright, “the opening four verses of the section [Galatians 2:11-14] are crucial for understanding the argument of the whole letter.” Wright, Galatians, 109.

¹⁴² N. T. Wright, The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion (New York: Harper-One, 2016), 234.

¹⁴³ Wright, The Day the Revolution Began, 234.

¹⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, “*Works of the Law and the Curse of Law (Galatians 3:10-14)*,” in The New Perspective on Paul, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 130.

¹⁴⁵ Wright, The Day the Revolution Began, 234.

Moses). All believers (Jew and Gentile) presently possess a right-standing before God because the guilt of sin has been paid for by Christ in his suffering upon the cross, and that all believers are now regarded as righteous before God (whether they be circumcised or not) because Christ's righteousness is now theirs through faith (not circumcision). Paul is not talking about a future verdict, but a present reality—being justified. If true, what basis would Jews have for withdrawing from fellow justified sinners? The only possible reason is confusion about what “works of law” actually accomplish in terms of one's standing before God. Thinking such works “justify” undermines the gospel Paul had been preaching to the Gentiles.

This conflict reinforces Paul's prior point; the gospel is not something which he made up, but was revealed to him personally by Jesus, and then confirmed by the pillars of the church, Peter, James, and John in Paul's meetings with them and then later by the Jerusalem Council. Paul's challenge to Peter reminds us that the critical issue is not so much “who” is preaching, but “what” is being preached. Even the apostle Peter must be confronted when he falls into doctrinal error. Fortunately, Paul rescues Peter from very serious consequences including condemnation from the brothers because of his own hypocrisy.¹⁴⁶ By the time of the Jerusalem Council, held shortly after Paul composes his Galatian letter, Peter and James are both in agreement with Paul. The issue is the content of what is preached (justification by faith alone), and the standard is fidelity to the gospel revealed by Jesus.

IV. Faith Receives the Promise (2:15-5:1)

A. Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith (2:15-21)

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. 17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

In verses 15-16 of Galatians 2, we come to the heart of Paul's discussion of justification which he will proclaim throughout the rest of this letter and his subsequent epistles. Here, the apostle spells out the meaning of justification by faith (or if we use the complete theological formula, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone). Paul writes, *“we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one*

¹⁴⁶ Moo, Galatians, 145.

will be justified.” Verse 16 has been correctly identified as “the doctrine of justification in a nutshell.”¹⁴⁷ This is one of the clearest definitions in all the Bible regarding the doctrine of justification, that is, how we as sinners obtain a “right standing” before God.¹⁴⁸

Paul makes two critical points. Negatively speaking, Paul asserts in no uncertain terms that we *cannot* be justified by our obedience to the law of Moses (i.e., “works of law”). Positively speaking, Paul asserts that we are justified *only* through faith in Jesus Christ. The logic of verse 16 takes the form of a syllogism: *if* by faith *then* not by works. Both of these points need to be fleshed out in some detail.

We start with Paul’s positive assertion, we are justified through faith in Christ. The word to “justify” (*dikaioō*) as used throughout the Scriptures, especially by Paul, refers to how we as sinners who are guilty before God are declared “not guilty” and given a “right standing.”¹⁴⁹ Apart from Christ, we are guilty before God because of our sins including the actual sins we commit, our corrupt and sinful nature (the flesh) as well as our guilt in Adam (original sin), imputed to us since Adam is the federal head of the human race (Romans 5:12-19).¹⁵⁰ Justification refers to being “regarded,” “reckoned,” “accounted” or “credited” as “right,” “acquitted” or “not guilty” before God despite the fact that we continue to remain sinners.¹⁵¹ In Romans 4:5, Paul speaks of God justifying the ungodly through faith.

Justification, therefore, refers to the declaration that God makes about us when we come to faith in Christ. “For the one justified, the demands of the law have been fully met, so the one justified is declared righteous.”¹⁵² This once for all, “not guilty” declaration has nothing whatsoever to do with any process wherein we are transformed from sinner into saint as taught

¹⁴⁷ Fung, Galatians, 112.

¹⁴⁸ From the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, “Q. 33. What is justification? A. Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone. From *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 60. “How are you righteous before God?” A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments, of never having kept any of them, and of still being inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. —if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.”

¹⁴⁹ Michael Horton, Justification, Vol 2, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 288-305.

¹⁵⁰ J. V. Fesko, Death in Adam, Life in Christ: The Doctrine of Justification (Ferne Roth-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2016), 223-270.

¹⁵¹ See the following discussions: Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 138; and Fung, Galatians, 113.

¹⁵² Horton, Justification, Vol 2, 297.

by Rome.¹⁵³ The *Catholic Catechism* (1995) speaks of justification as “the sanctification of [our] whole being” confusing justification with sanctification, mistakenly grounding our justification in the new birth, baptism, and transformation by the Holy Spirit, and not solely based upon the merits of Christ received through faith alone, as Paul teaches here.¹⁵⁴

The way in which justification comes about is only through *faith in Jesus Christ*. It is Paul, not Martin Luther, who gives us the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, which is simply another way of affirming *solo Christo* (Christ alone). As laid out by Paul, faith in Christ points us to the only proper object of faith, the person and work of Jesus Christ. The faith which justifies is a faith which trusts in the merits earned for us by Jesus Christ. B. B. Warfield puts it nicely, stating . . .

It is, accordingly, solely from its object that faith derives its value Jesus Christ, God the Redeemer, is accordingly the one object of saving faith, presented to its embrace at first implicitly and in promise, and ever more and more openly until at last it is entirely explicit and we read that “a man is not justified save through faith in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁵

Yet, not everyone agrees. Some contemporary New Testament scholars (such as Richard Hays and advocates of the so-called “subjective view”)¹⁵⁶ argue that “faith *in* Christ” should be understood as the “faith *of* Christ,” meaning that, “we are saved by Jesus’ faithfulness, not by our own cognitive dispositions or confessional orthodoxy.”¹⁵⁷ This view is surprisingly popular, despite the untenable nature of seeing Jesus’ personal faith as what Paul has in mind.¹⁵⁸ When subjectivists reject the “objective view” (i.e., the way in which the Reformers understood faith as looking to an object, the person and work of Jesus), they run headlong into Paul’s declaration to the contrary in Romans 10:10, “*for with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*” Paul is not talking about Jesus’s own faithfulness,

¹⁵³ Turretin points out that “inherent righteousness cannot be the meritorious cause of our justification, we prove: (1) because no one is justified by an imperfect righteousness, since the judgment of God is according to truth and in it there is no room for a gracious acceptance; nor can deception consist with his law and justice. But inherent righteousness is not perfect, nor actual, nor habitual Our justification takes place without works; therefore also without inherent righteousness, which consists wholly in works or in habits from which works spring.” See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.640.

¹⁵⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995) secs. 1987-1995.

¹⁵⁵ B. B. Warfield, “*The Biblical Doctrine of Faith*,” in *Biblical Doctrines*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 502-03.

¹⁵⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

¹⁵⁷ Richard B. Hays, “*ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and Pauline Christianity: What is at Stake?*,” in *Pauline Theology*, Vol 4, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Atlanta: Scholars press, 1997), 46.

¹⁵⁸ Burton, *Galatians*, 121, considered the objective view “too clear to be questioned”; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1:203 n. 2, contends the subjective genitive is “altogether unconvincing.” Silva adds, “arguments usually advanced against the traditional interpretation are either irrelevant . . . or based on an inadequate understanding of the objective genitive.” See Moisés Silva, “Galatians,” in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 789.

which implies a universalism along the lines set out by neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Rather, the apostle is talking about our personal act of faith in Christ, with which one believes in Jesus, and is justified.¹⁵⁹

Negatively speaking, in Galatians 2:16, Paul explains that sinners (Jew or Gentile) cannot be justified—that is, given a right standing before God—through, because of, or on the basis of, our obedience to the law of Moses. Here again, we run into the NPP re-definition of key terms and phrases based upon their misreading of the dispute in Antioch, this time regarding the phrase, “the works of the law.” According to James Dunn, the phrase must be understood in light of the NPP understanding of the Antioch incident between Paul and Peter in which Jews were excluding Gentiles from the people of God based upon the lack of ethnic badges (i.e., circumcision). Says Dunn,

... works of law are what God expects of the people he has chosen as his own [i.e., in by grace], the obligations which membership of God’s covenant places upon them. But that included the obligation to maintain Israel’s distinctiveness from the other people not chosen by God [i.e., they stay in by works of law]. To live as God’s people was to live precisely in a manner which would show them to be different from other peoples. . . . It is equally obvious why the issue should come up in Antioch. For it was precisely in the social setting of the shared meal that Jewish distinctiveness would most be threatened.¹⁶⁰

According to Dunn, what Peter needed to understand was that faith in Jesus Christ brought Gentiles into the covenant with Israel, not Gentiles embracing Jewish ethnic badges in order to be numbered among the people of God.¹⁶¹ Therefore, the issue was not legalism (the Judaizing insistence upon the necessity of good works for salvation), but nomism (in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, one must add obedience to ensure escaping final condemnation).¹⁶² According to Dunn, then, Paul rebuked Peter, supposedly, for embracing Jewish nomism, because his withdrawal implied relying on works of law for justification.

But as many have pointed out, “works of law” refers to the whole of the law, not just the narrow list of “ethnic badges” as NPP advocates contend.¹⁶³ It will become clear in Galatians 3:15-25, that Paul has the whole law in view when speaking of “works of law” (i.e., obedience

¹⁵⁹ Horton, Justification, Vol 2, 429.

¹⁶⁰ Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 77-8.

¹⁶¹ Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 79.

¹⁶² Moo, Galatians, 159.

¹⁶³ According to Longenecker, “So Paul here in 2:16 uses ἔργων νόμου not just to refer to ‘the badges of Jewish covenantal nomism,’ though that may have been how other Jewish believers thought of them, but as a catch phrase to signal the whole legalistic complex of ideas having to do with winning God’s favor by a merit-amassing observance of Torah.” See Longenecker, Galatians, on 2:16.

to the law). Since Paul contends that such works come from the flesh (fallen human nature—more on this to follow), and not from the Spirit who gives life (v. 19), Paul must be thinking of the law in its entirety, even if the occasion for this particular debate is Peter’s giving in to pressure from those claiming to come from James to stop eating with Gentiles.¹⁶⁴

If NPP advocates are correct to point out that with the coming of Jesus a new age of salvation has come “because the era of the law is over, and good works cannot justify,”¹⁶⁵ they too glibly dismiss the fact that because of human sin, fallen human nature (the flesh) and weakness *post-lapsis* (after the Fall), neither Jew nor Gentile can fulfill the law so as to be justified “by works.” The irony is that Jewish Christians (a group in which Paul includes himself, when he speaks of “we”) who speak of “Gentile sinners,” were no more righteous than the Gentiles with whom they ceased sharing table fellowship.¹⁶⁶ Since justification is by faith and not by works, all believers in Jesus are declared righteous. This is a matter of legalism, at least in Galatia if not in Antioch. Can good works (in this case, circumcision) justify? No, says Paul rather loudly.¹⁶⁷ What does justify sinful Jews and Gentiles is faith in Jesus. This is precisely the point under attack by the Judaizers in Galatia who were teaching “*unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*” (Acts 15:1b).

Paul’s point to the Galatians is that there is absolutely nothing that we can do to earn this right standing before God through any degree of personal obedience to the law, including undergoing circumcision. Positively speaking, such a “right” standing must be given to us through faith in Jesus. If we are not clear about this (as when Peter became confused), then we are not clear about the gospel. As the logic of Galatians 2:16 unfolds it becomes clear that “we believe in Christ in order to find our justification in him rather than in our own works.”¹⁶⁸

In verse 15, Paul appeals to a contrast between those who are “Jews by birth” and those who are “Gentile sinners.” Paul brings into focus the “the sharp distinction between Jew and Gentile, for what made the Gentiles sinners in the estimation of the Jews was not only that they did not observe the law, but also that they did not even possess it and consequently lacked the possibility of obtaining righteousness through it.”¹⁶⁹ The Jews viewed the Gentiles as sinners, because the Gentile nations did not possess the law, therefore, they could not obey the law.

¹⁶⁴ Silva, “Galatians,” 790.

¹⁶⁵ Moo, Galatians, 159.

¹⁶⁶ Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul, 372-373.

¹⁶⁷ Chrysostom notes, “If the law cannot confer righteousness, it follows that circumcision is superfluous; and so far he now proves; but he proceeds to show that it is not only superfluous but dangerous.” Chrysostom, Homilies on Galatians, on 2:16.

¹⁶⁸ Horton, Justification, Vol 2, 427.

¹⁶⁹ Fung, Galatians, 113.

Gentiles were considered by the Jews to be unclean (in the ceremonial sense of the law) and many Jews spoke of them as “dogs.” The most pious among the Jews sought to distance themselves from Gentile foods, sexual immorality, and Gentile paganism.

Irony surfaces once again. The Jews who did possess the law, should have read the law through the eyes of faith. Had they done so, they would have known that they could not be justified before God by attempting to keep it. Why then, would the Judaizers insist that Gentiles must submit to the law of Moses in order to be justified? Sadly, as Paul will go on to show, they did not understand their own Scriptures, their history, nor could they read the Old Testament through the lens of Christ’s messianic mission¹⁷⁰—Jesus’ fulfillment of the law by rendering his personal, full, and complete obedience to it, throughout the course of his life.¹⁷¹ In response to the Peter’s withdrawal from the Gentiles (v. 14), Paul reminds him that even those who “*are by nature Jews and not Gentile sinners*” (v. 15) must understand that a sinful human being is not justified by any works of the law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 16). Of all people, it is the Jews who should recognize that works of law do not justify. Instead, they were regarding Gentiles as sinners when they themselves were every bit as guilty before God because of their own inability to keep righteous requirements of the law.

When Paul asserts that no one can be justified by works of law (a rather bold assertion which seems to be unsupported by argument) we need to consider that his statement is a very loud echo from Psalm 143, which provides the biblical rationale for his assertion.¹⁷² The Psalmist pled before YHWH (v. 2), “*enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.*” Paul replaces the word “living” with the word “flesh,” and adds a reference to the law of Moses (“works of law”). This is because the Judaizers in Galatia saw the cutting of the flesh (circumcision) not as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace God made with Abraham (recounted in Genesis 15 and 17), but as a meritorious “work” performed by Jews to mark them off as “righteous” in contrast to Gentile sinners who were uncircumcised. If the Sinai covenant supposedly excludes Gentiles, in Galatians 4:21-31, Paul will go on to point out to the agitators in Galatia that the Abrahamic covenant includes all Gentiles who have faith in Jesus.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Citing Galatians 2:16 Van Mastricht contends, “synonyms for the covenant of works are evident in the New Testament . . . Moreover, what is the ‘Law of Works’ if not the covenant of works.” Petrus Van Mastricht, Theoretical – Practical Theology: The Works of God and the Fall of Man, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Book, 2021), 3.389.

¹⁷¹ This is known in Reformed theology as Christ’s “active obedience.” According to Louis Berkhof, “Christ as Mediator entered the federal relation in which Adam stood in the state of integrity, in order to merit eternal life for the sinner. This constitutes the active obedience of Christ, consisting in all that Christ did to observe the law in its federal aspect, as the condition for obtaining eternal life.” See, Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 380.

¹⁷² Longenecker, Galatians, on Galatians 2:16. Silva notes the difficulties this raises for the NPP. “In the first place, this feature casts considerable doubt on the attempt to restrict ‘works of law’ to ceremonial practices. The latter certainly form part of the background to Gal. 2:16, but it is evident that the psalmist was hardly thinking of national ‘badges’ that distinguished him from the Gentiles. Paul’s appeal to the psalm, then, confirms what the context of Gal. 2–3 strongly suggests: the apostle is thinking of the dietary regulations and circumcision as part and parcel of the broader concept of the law considered as a whole, and therefore ‘works of law’ designates obedience to the commandments in toto.” See Silva, “Galatians,” 790.

¹⁷³ Gordon, “*Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14*,” 243.

When Paul uses the term “flesh” (*sarx*), translated as “no one” in v. 16 (ESV), he is not referring to our physical bodies, but to our innate sinfulness (our sinful nature) which is associated with this present evil age.¹⁷⁴ The proper understanding of the sign and seal of the covenant of grace (circumcision), was distorted by the Judaizers who were reading the gracious sign of the covenant made with Abraham through the lens of Sinai (and its blessing/curse principle), thereby turning circumcision into a work of the flesh, dividing Jew from Gentile.

In Galatians 2:15, Paul reinterprets Psalm 143 in the light of Jesus’s appearance to him on the Damascus Road, applying the Psalm’s plea to what the Judaizers were claiming for circumcision in Galatia. Psalm 143 is a confession that no one can claim to be righteous before God, so sinners must plead for YHWH’s mercy, not justice. Paul’s point is that no flesh (i.e., a sinful person), not even someone who has been circumcised can claim to be innocent of all wrong-doing. Any Jews who claim superiority over the Gentiles because they have been circumcised, are just as guilty as the Gentiles they condemn. The self-righteous cannot claim to have kept the law sufficiently to be justified before God.¹⁷⁵ Since we are all sinners by nature and by choice, no one can be justified by works—*except one*—and it is the Lord’s obedience which is the basis or ground for our justification. Jesus was virginally conceived without the stain of Adam’s sin and guilt, and throughout every moment of his life, Jesus Christ obeyed perfectly the law of Moses (Hebrews 5:8-9). He is the only obedient one who earned a righteous status before God on the basis of his own good works. His righteousness becomes ours—whether we be Jew or Gentile—only through faith in Jesus.

Returning to Paul’s syllogism in verse 16 one more time, so that we do not miss what is being said, *negatively speaking*, we cannot be justified by any obedience that we may muster “*because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” No one under the dominion of the flesh (*sarx*) can obey the law of Moses sufficiently to be counted as righteous. *Positively speaking*, Paul states his case as clearly as human speech will allow. We are justified only “*through faith in Jesus.*” Justification is a forensic or legal declaration meaning “to be declared righteous before God, that is, to enjoy a status or standing of being in a right relationship with God, of being accepted by him.”¹⁷⁶ This righteous status comes not through obedience to law [negatively], but as Paul says, this right standing comes only through faith in Christ [positively]. “If by faith then not by works.”

This bears repeating because this is so important to understand the gospel and because so many, including Peter and Barnabas in Antioch, the Judaizers in Galatia, Rome (at the time of the Reformation and down to the present day), along with advocates of the NPP, have, at different times, in different degrees, and in different ways, muddied the Pauline waters. Despite the contention of a cadre of critical New Testament scholars, it is the apostle Paul, not Martin Luther, who teaches the antithesis between law and gospel. And, dare I say it, Luther understands this Pauline *fundamentum* with much greater clarity than do those NPP devotees

¹⁷⁴ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 64-69.

¹⁷⁵ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 125.

¹⁷⁶ Fung, Galatians, 113.

who dismiss him.

Because there is no other way to stand before God other than through the merits of Jesus, received through faith alone, the doctrine of justification distinguishes biblical Christianity as a religion of grace from all other religions in the world, which are, essentially, religions of law and human merit. As Paul explains, when we come to faith in Christ, that is, when we first realize that we cannot be delivered from God's judgment through anything we can do, any ceremony we can perform, what we eat and do not eat, what parts of skin we cut from our bodies, and when we then look to Jesus Christ to have mercy upon us and deliver us from the guilt of our sin, we are justified, or given a "right status before God." Jesus Christ's death pays for the guilt of our sins and his law-keeping becomes ours through the means of faith, through which God reckons, credits, or imputes to us the righteousness earned by Jesus Christ. That God gives a right status to the sinner through faith alone means that God regards the sinner as though he or she had never sinned, and as though they had kept the law perfectly, because Jesus Christ actually did.

In verses 17-21, Paul elaborates on the doctrine of justification a bit further, apparently responding to a charge being made against Paul's gospel by the Judaizers that Paul's gospel leads to sin and license. Paul frames the matter as follows. *"But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."*

Again, Paul raises a two-fold defense of his teaching, laying out a negative assertion of what he does not mean in verses 17-18, and then offering a positive statement of what he does mean in verses 19-21. The Judaizers were apparently charging that Paul's gospel leads to license by lowering the bar of God's demands since Gentiles did not need to keep dietary laws, submit to circumcision, and were not required to live as Jews. This is very similar to an objection we still hear today, too much Christian liberty leads to abuse (antinomianism). Paul will deal with this matter briefly here, but he will return to the subject again in Galatians 5.

The fact that the gospel is centered entirely in God's gracious doing for sinners, not what sinners must do to appease God, will inevitably raise the question about what role the sinner is to perform in justification (salvation). There are some Reformed folk (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comes to mind), who have argued that unless this objection is raised when we are talking to someone about the gospel, we have not been clear enough about our justification being all of grace!¹⁷⁷ Paul emphatically contends that to be justified by faith in Christ does not lead to sin. *"Is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!* The latter is a strong expression in the original language (μη γένωτο), and is a characteristic Pauline expression of an unthinkable suggestion – "does Christ promote sin?" No way. No chance. Not on your life!

¹⁷⁷ "If your preaching of the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ does not provoke the charge from some of antinomianism, you are not preaching the gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ." Unsourced.

As he will do throughout his subsequent letters, Paul connects justification (the right standing that sinners possess before God in Christ) with the fact that the faith through which sinners receive the merits of Christ, is a faith which also manifests itself through love of neighbor (Romans 13:10). Another way of saying this is that justification (our right standing before God) is connected to sanctification, the process in which the power of sin over us is broken and the believer comes alive to God's commandments.¹⁷⁸

In Paul's thinking, there is no one justified by means of faith in Christ who does not immediately enter into the process of sanctification, which includes the progressive "killing off" of the old self (i.e., "the flesh," what we were while enslaved in sin before we came to faith in Christ) as well as the steady and progressive strengthening of the new self, now made alive Christ. This Pauline theme is reflected in the guilt, grace, gratitude structure of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Justifying faith manifests itself in a life of gratitude for what God has done for us, in which the law which once condemned us, is now seen from the perspective of faith as the rule of gratitude. The justified sinner will never stop to ask, "okay, I am justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Now how many sins can I commit and still remain a Christian? Where is the line beyond which I cannot cross?" Once justified, we come alive to the commandments of God. With ever-faltering steps, we live a life of gratitude, struggling to obey God's law, not to be justified, but because we are justified!

When Paul says in verse 18, "*if I re-build what I tore down,*" he is probably speaking of Peter's actions in Antioch, after his encounter with those sent by James. Contrary to the agitators, the sin is not rejecting the law as a means of justification, but trying to establish the law once again, after Jesus has fulfilled it and borne its course.¹⁷⁹ Whether intentionally or not, Peter is, in effect, seeking to rebuild the legalistic edifice through his compromise with the Jewish brethren, which had earlier been destroyed through his preaching of the gospel.¹⁸⁰

Should anyone—whether it be the Judaizers, or even someone such as Peter—attempt to argue that obedience to the law is a means of justification, they are, in fact, demonstrating that, "*I prove myself to be a transgressor.*" Such a person is lacking repentance and therefore subject to God's curse for denying the biblical gospel.¹⁸¹ Paul can say that Peter's withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles is "*not in line with the truth of the gospel.*" While to some, a little

¹⁷⁸ According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 75. What is sanctification? A. Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.

¹⁷⁹ Moo, *Galatians*, 166

¹⁸⁰ According to Longenecker, "For, Paul insists, to go back to the law (as a Christian) after having been done with the law (for both acceptance before God and living a life pleasing to him) is what really makes one a lawbreaker—which, of course, sounds paradoxical, but is what happens if one rejects legalism but still espouses nomism." See, Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 2:18.

¹⁸¹ Moo, *Galatians*, 166.

compromise may seem like a good way to keep the peace and avoid trouble, as Paul sees it, when the gospel is at stake, even the slightest compromise or deviation is serious. Peter needs to see the error of his decision to withdraw from the Gentiles because he clearly is in the wrong and his actions could lead to dire consequences for the Gentile mission.

In verse 19, Paul mentions that *“through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.* Through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul has been released from any obligation to obey the law as a means of justification. Elsewhere, Paul will speak of Christians dying to sin (Romans 6:2, 11), here he adds, Christian die to the law as well. This is why Paul has such a problem with Peter breaking fellowship with Gentile Christians. Breaking table fellowship is rebuilding that which the gospel has taken away, namely, bondage to the law, hence bondage to sin and death which comes through the law. Paul is focusing upon what theologians would later call the “second or theological use” of the law.¹⁸² According to this “second use” of the law, the law shows us our sin and drives us to Christ for forgiveness. Using the emphatic first person for emphasis, Paul says through the law, “I” died. The idea is that “I, Paul, the natural man, the slave of the old covenant,” died through law, since, as he goes on to say, in verse 20 *“I have been crucified with Christ.”* As someone once put it, “Paul died to the law in order to live to God.”

When Paul speaks of being *“crucified with Christ,”* he is not referring to some sort of subjective experience he had the time of his conversion (often referred to as “Christ mysticism”), but to the fact that his sin has been imputed to Christ, who then died upon the cross to make payment for that sin. Paul no longer lives as a slave to sin as he did before his conversion, when he was, without knowing it, a slave to the law, and under the law’s condemnation which is death. He can now say, *“it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”* As Ronald Fung puts it, “the self-righteous Pharisee who based his hope for righteousness and salvation on strict observance of law”¹⁸³ is no longer enslaved by these things. He is indwelt by Jesus Christ, who appeared to him, called him to faith, and baptized him with the Holy Spirit. Once united to Christ by faith, Paul is dead to the law but alive to Christ, who, Paul says, lives through him.

Paul is not a mystic. He is not talking about a “channeling” of Christ or manipulating Christ’s power through his apostolic office. Rather, Paul is speaking in terms of control since he is Christ’s bond-servant. As a Pharisee, Paul was enslaved by the law and in bondage to sin even while he saw himself as a defender of the law. But now, as a believer in Jesus Christ, Paul sees himself as a bond-servant under the control of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. This is why Paul can speak of, *Christ lives in me.* Says Paul, *the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Paul describes the change in life from what he was before to what he is now, using an adverb

¹⁸² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 614-15.

¹⁸³ Fung, *Galatians*, 123.

(now) which elsewhere in his letters indicates a key turning point in redemptive history.¹⁸⁴ Jesus Christ lives through him, because Jesus Christ gave himself for Paul's sins—the language of Jesus giving himself means that Jesus was not a passive victim of violence but was the active party.¹⁸⁵ With God's love as the basis for Christ's redemptive mission, it was Jesus who gave himself "on behalf of Paul," which is the basis for Paul's living by faith in the Son of God. Through faith, Paul is dead to the law, since he has been crucified with Christ and justified.

In verse 21, Paul returns to his original response to the objection that the Judaizers raised to Paul's gospel, that it leads to license. *I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*" Paul is telling the Judaizers, "look, if a justifying righteousness could be earned by obedience to the law of Moses, why did God in his grace send Christ to die for our sins? Why would Christ die for sinners, if we could be justified by means of circumcision and obedience to the law?" Paul states the obvious. The cross of Christ is the picture of human helplessness. Why did the Son of God suffer such unspeakable agony, *if* there were some other way to justify sinners? To argue as the Judaizers were that justification came by faith in Christ *plus* obedience to the law (circumcision), the Judaizers were, in effect, saying that the death of Christ was not sufficient to save sinners from the guilt of their sins.

The false gospel they were championing is essentially a message that Jesus' death did not fully accomplish our salvation. As Martin Luther once put it,

Anyone who is justified on the basis of the Law . . . has within himself the power to acquire righteousness If this is true, then it necessarily follows that Christ died to no purpose. For what need would a man have of Christ who loves him and gives Himself for him [if] he is able to obtain grace and eventually do good works and to merit eternal life Therefore let Christ be removed together with all his blessings because he is completely useless. But why is Christ born, crucified and dead? Why does He become my High Priest, who loves me and gives an inestimable sacrifice, Himself, for me? Why does he do all this? Simply to no purpose at all if the meaning of justification which the [false teachers] set forth is true, because I find righteousness in the Law or in myself, outside grace and outside Christ.¹⁸⁶

If we can be justified by something we do, whether that be obedience to the law, or undergoing circumcision, then Christ died for no purpose. But since Christ clearly died for sinners, as the Scriptures teach, the weight of Paul's argument begins to be felt. The death of Christ is itself a picture that fallen sinners can do nothing to save themselves, that Christ himself does what is necessary for sinners to be saved, or else Christ died in vain, which is where the false gospel inevitably takes us.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Romans 5:9, 11; 8:1; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Ephesians 3:5, 10; 5:8. See Hagner, How New Is the New Testament?, 108.

¹⁸⁵ Simon Gathercole, Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 25.

¹⁸⁶ Luther, Galatians, Vol. 26, 181-182.

Application

What does the conflict between Peter and Paul in Antioch say to us today? We start with the clarity and comfort of Paul's gospel. An old friend once said that hearing about a familiar doctrine such as justification was like hearing your favorite song after you had not heard it in a while. The doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone is the gospel. We all need to hear it regularly, and we need to let its sweetness ring in our ears and so comfort our consciences. This is where we find rest for our weary souls and peace for our troubled hearts. No matter how bad things get and how difficult the struggles of life can be, once we are reminded that God's anger towards our sin has been dealt with once and for all by Jesus Christ in his life and death for us, everything else comes into proper perspective and we gain the strength to endure.

Paul's challenge to Peter also reminds us that there will always be those who distort or who are willing to compromise the gospel and risk falling under Paul's anathema whenever the gospel being preached becomes faith in Christ *plus* some human contribution—in this case, circumcision. But a scenario we are more likely to face today, is when a minister who professes to believe the correct gospel yet behaves like Peter, and will not preach it for fear of scaring off so-called "seekers" (i.e., a targeted audience), or because of fear of upsetting people who sit under his preaching. A heresy trial is far easier to conduct than it is to test for a lack of courage or conviction. To profess the gospel but then not preach it is a victory for the spiritual descendants of the Judaizers. The false gospel of faith in Jesus plus "works of law" spreads more quickly when the real gospel is absent through silence.

Another scenario raised by Paul is that there will be those who preach Christ correctly, but from selfish or improper motives. Lacking omniscience, we cannot judge a preacher or teacher's intentions. But we can judge the doctrine and the content of their preaching—the point that Paul is making here using Peter as his chief example. As Paul concludes in Philippians 1:18: *"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."* Too often, we have this backwards. In an entertainment based culture such as ours, we tend to evaluate whether or not the preacher is a nice person, sincere, and entertaining. If he is, it is then easy to overlook the fact that he may not be preaching Christ crucified, or else preaching another gospel, that of faith in Christ plus the merit of human effort.

The doctrine of justification shouts to us that in Jesus Christ, we have everything that we need—the forgiveness of sin and a perfect righteousness which is the basis of our right standing before God. Through faith we have been crucified with Christ, so that the law can no longer condemn us. We come alive to the commandments and we are able to obey God's law, however imperfectly, without fear of God's judgment or condemnation since we are clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness. The person who possesses the merits Christ, through faith, knows that their own futile efforts to be obedient will not count against them, since Christ was perfectly obedient for them. His "works of the law" save us, not our "works of law." The one who has Christ has everything—all the riches and treasures of heaven. There is no sin that the blood of Christ cannot remove, and all of our half-hearted and self-centered attempts to obey God's law are now acceptable to God through Christ. As Paul says, it is for freedom that Christ

set us free!

This is why the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone is the heart of the Christian faith. Christ has lived for us, Christ has died for us, Christ was raised for us. That little phrase, if by faith then not by works, is perhaps the most wonderful phrase the human ear can hear. For through faith in Christ our sins have been washed away and Jesus Christ himself covers us with a robe of perfect righteousness.

It is a free gift . . .

It is all of grace . . .

It is received through faith in Christ, not by obedience to the law . . .

It comes not by works, but through faith . . .

It is Paul's gospel.

B. The primacy of faith over law: 3:1-6

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain? 5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith – 6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

As the reader of Galatians has come to realize, Paul's letter is filled with sharp contrasts which intensify in this chapter. In Galatians 3:1-9, Paul contrasts the authentic gospel he has been preaching which calls for the “hearing of faith,” with the false gospel grounded in the necessity of “works of law” as proclaimed by the agitators.

What we might not realize, however, is that many of Paul's Hellenized Gentile readers/hearers were influenced by stoic philosophy. The famed stoic philosopher, Seneca, was a contemporary of Paul. Stoicism held that enduring suffering tempered one's character as heat does to iron. Enduring suffering enabled a person to grow strong and resolute over time, so that they might realize their full potential. The stoic “keeps calm and carries on” in times of crisis. But as Paul points out in what follows, Jesus does not suffer for his own sake, but for ours. Jesus was crucified and suffered terribly. But Paul never mentions what we can learn from the example of Jesus' sufferings as might a teacher of stoic philosophy. Rather, the apostle describes how uniting our selves to crucified Jesus though faith meant that Jesus suffered for us and in our place. Paul's gospel is not about mastering our suffering and hardening our

character, but becoming a slave of Jesus who reveals himself to us in our weakness.¹⁸⁷

Paul had been absent from Galatia for but a brief period of time, yet soon after his departure a group of Jewish converts to Christianity (Judaizers) began openly denying the gospel which the apostle had just preached to them. Upon discovery that such a false gospel had spread rapidly in his absence, Paul expresses his profound concern for the Galatians. In Galatians 3:1-6, Paul now challenges the Galatians to recall how it was that they came to faith in the first place, through the preaching of the gospel and believing (in the sense of trusting) its contents (the person and work of Jesus).

Exasperated by news coming to him from Galatia, Paul warns his readers/hearers not to tolerate the error of the Judaizers. The Galatians had become Christians through faith in Jesus Christ, and now Paul learns they wish to give up and return to counting upon human effort and obedience. What happened? The Judaizers arriving on the scene and making their appeal to keeping the law of Moses as necessary for justification is what happened!

Paul applies a harsh label to these “foolish” Galatians. The term ἀνόητος (“foolish”) conveys the idea of an insufficient use of mental powers or a deficiency in understanding.¹⁸⁸ The NEB renders this as “you stupid Galatians.” A paraphrase like “you numskulls,” “or you nincompoops” or “you dunderheads” is not inappropriate. Paul is angry with the Galatians for being willing to grant an audience to those who are preaching a message much different from the gospel he preached to them previously. Angry, frustrated, disappointed, and no doubt, worried for their souls, Paul minces no words.

Many readers of this epistle notice the rather striking fact that Paul addresses his readers as “Galatians,” and not “Brethren” (as he did in 1:11). Nor does he use any terms of endearment when writing to people whom he knows quite well and from whom he has only recently departed. The Jewish converts among the Galatians have allowed themselves to be taken in because what they heard made some sense. The message of the Judaizers was filled of Old Testament language but interpreted apart from Christ. “Obey the commandments.” “Stop eating this.” “Cut that off.”

When Paul asks the Galatians the question, “*who has bewitched you?*” he uses a term which means to cast a spell upon someone using the “evil eye,” characteristic of ancient witchcraft.¹⁸⁹ The Galatians are acting like they are under a hypnotic spell cast upon them by the Judaizers, creating a theological daze, which rendered otherwise intelligent people incapable of sound judgment. The situation became so serious that Paul warns those among them who have been

¹⁸⁷ Joseph R. Dodson and David E. Briones, Paul and the Giants of Philosophy: Reading the Apostle in Greco-Roman Context (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 150-153.

¹⁸⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), s.v. “ἀνόητος.”

¹⁸⁹ Moo, Galatians, 181. Wright, Galatians, 186. Betz includes a list of ancient writers who use the term in a manner similar to Paul. See, Betz, Galatians, 131.

taken in by the spell of the evil eye now risk being severed from Christ and falling from grace (Galatians 5:4). We do not know who the “who” is, whether this has a generic meaning as in “those who have” (i.e. a group) or if there was a particular person (a “who,” someone with a name, face, and home address) who was the most prominent false teacher.

The Judaizing spell stands in sharp contrast to the gospel which he previously preached to them. “*It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified*” (3:1). Through his preaching, Jesus Christ’s saving work was set before the Galatians with such clarity that the person and work of Jesus Christ was openly displayed. Jesus was “publically placarded” through Paul’s preaching as though set out on a billboard for all to see.¹⁹⁰ The clarity of the message of Jesus’ saving work stands in sharp contrast to the dim haze of the Judaizer’s spell. In this we see a concrete example of the biblical metaphor of the light of truth chasing away the darkness of error.

Paul describes his preaching as the setting forth of Christ’s saving work in such a way that it were as though a picture of his saving work had been visible through his words, what famed Lakers’ broadcaster Chick Hearn called a “word’s eye view.” As Longenecker notes,

. . . The meaning “clearly portray” as on a public placard seems most congruous with the imagery “before your eyes.” It is best, therefore, to understand Paul here as describing his preaching to the Galatians under the figure of a public announcement or placarding of Jesus before them. What he had preached to them was so openly and clearly proclaimed that Paul is at a loss to know how his converts could ever have failed to see its significance or to appreciate its implications for the question at hand.¹⁹¹

Paul’s preaching was grounded in the historical events of the gospel, not in stories, anecdotes, or appeal to either human interest or experience. Paul preached Christ and him crucified. If the Galatians had fixed their eyes on the saving work of Jesus Christ set out in Paul’s gospel, they would not be in their present predicament; in a fog, under the spell of the evil eye of the false gospel of the Judaizers, and at risk of falling from grace (Galatians 5:4). It was not as though Paul’s preaching was unclear or vague. In Paul’s preaching of the gospel it were as though they had seen the saving act of Christ with their own eyes. The Galatians are without excuse for allowing themselves to be taken in.¹⁹²

In verses 2 and 5 of chapter 3, Paul asks two more rhetorical questions—as he is apt to

¹⁹⁰ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 148.

¹⁹¹ Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:1.

¹⁹² Longenecker adds, “For Paul, the gospel of Christ crucified so completely rules out any other supposed means of being righteous before God that he finds it utterly incomprehensible for anyone who had once embraced such a gospel ever to think of supplementing it in any way. To hold before one’s eyes ‘Jesus Christ having been crucified’ is to put an end to all forms of Jewish legalism, for ‘Christ crucified’ is not only the central kerygma of the Christian gospel but also the tenet of that gospel that most clearly distinguishes Christians from Jews. That was axiomatic for Paul, though his Galatian converts had to be told it again.” Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:1.

do-clarifying his first question regarding the manner of their deception. The contrast is between his gospel, which is centered in the placarding of Christ, and the false gospel of the Judaizers, which is based upon the supposed merit of human effort.¹⁹³ In verse 2, Paul's antithesis between the two (faith and works of law) is set out as follows: "*Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?*" Similarly, Paul asks in verse 5, "*did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*" In both cases, the answer to the rhetorical question is clearly the latter, "*the hearing of faith.*" The hearing of faith simply means believing what was preached—Jesus died upon the cross for sinners. Paul does not specify what miracles occurred in Galatia because whatever occurred among them was not as important as was the content of his preaching. The purpose of these miracles was not to wow or entertain the audience, but to confirm the truth of what was preached.

Paul presses the Galatians hard to recall how it was that each of them had entered into a relationship with the Risen Christ in the first place. They "*received the Holy Spirit*" through faith, when they first heard the gospel of Christ crucified and believed. The Galatians would not find the crucified Savior through obeying the law of Moses, avoiding certain foods, or cutting off pieces of skin. They did not receive the Holy Spirit by trying their hardest to comply with the demands of Jewish legalism. On the contrary, they received the Holy Spirit through faith in the content of Paul's preaching, the message of Christ crucified for sinners.

Paul says much the same thing elsewhere. In Romans 8:9 he writes, "*you, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*" In Ephesians 1:13, Paul puts it this way, "*in him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*" Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit is received at the beginning of the Christian life through means of faith in response to the preached gospel and the renewing work of the Spirit. To be in Christ is to be in the Holy Spirit and vice-versa. But to be in Christ and/or the Holy Spirit is *not* to be in the flesh. The "*flesh vs. Spirit*" is an important Pauline distinction, since "*flesh*" is associated with this present evil age, while the Spirit is the herald of the age to come.¹⁹⁴ No one had received the Holy Spirit through "*works of law.*" This is a point which should be self-evident to Paul's hearers who, presumably, have all received the Holy Spirit when they came to faith in Jesus.

But it is incorrect to assert that while the Christian life begins with the reception of the Holy Spirit through faith, new life is then maintained through human effort to obey the law. The "*get in by grace/faith, but stay in by human effort/works*" as taught in various forms by Federal Visioners, NPP devotees, and Romanism, is flatly refuted by the two rhetorical questions and answers Paul gives here. In light of these two questions, it bears repeating that

¹⁹³ Wright notes that despite Paul stating he has one question, he actually asks six. 1). Who has bewitched you? 2). Did you receive the Spirit through faith or works? 3). Are they really so foolish? 4). Having begun in the Spirit are you ending in the flesh? 5). Have they suffered so much in vain? 6). Did God give them his Spirit through faith or works. See Wright, Galatians, 186.

¹⁹⁴ Moo, A Theology of Paul and His Letters, 34; Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 348-358.

there is no sense here of nomism as claimed by NPP folk when they contend that one enters the covenant through grace/faith and maintains their place in the covenant through good works/obedience, yet which anticipates a final judgment according to our performance.¹⁹⁵ This is hardly a comforting thought! Because, if true, we must believe in Jesus and are justified at the beginning of the Christian life, but we will not enter eternal life until justified *again* by good works. The pink elephant in the NPP room is how many and what sort of good works will gain entrance for me?

In verses 3-4, Paul sets up another contrast, this time between a life “*begun with the Spirit*” and that of attempting to attain the goal (perfection) through means of human effort (in the “*flesh*”).¹⁹⁶ “Beginning with the Spirit refers to the inception of the Galatians’ Christian life when the Spirit was imparted and received by their hearing with faith (v. 2) the message of Christ.”¹⁹⁷ When we are justified through faith in Christ and then enter into union with him, we do so through a bond formed by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁸ But we continue on the Christian life in Christ through faith alone as well. We cannot attain “perfection” (ἐπιτελεσθε) in the flesh—i.e., through human effort or obedience.¹⁹⁹ We may hear in Paul’s words a possible echo from Jesus’ final words from the cross as recorded in John 18:28, *tetelestai*, “it is finished.” We cannot reach our goal (our heavenly inheritance) through obedience to the law of Moses, or through submission to ritual circumcision, or by keeping dietary laws. We only reach the goal through faith in Christ’s finished work for us.

Paul issues a stern warning to anyone who follows the latter approach by attempting to reach the goal by works of law, as many of the Galatians were now doing. To do so is to risk suffering much yet attaining nothing. To fall under the spell of the Judaizers is to give up on the merits of Jesus Christ’s obedience to the law of Moses which becomes ours through faith (cf.

¹⁹⁵ Moo notes that while Paul does challenge the Galatians to continue in the same manner as when they began the Christian life, the main force of Paul’s doctrine of justification falls upon “on what we might call ‘ultimate justification,’ vindication on the day of judgment.” See, Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters*, 56.

¹⁹⁶ Calvin observes, “and it was all wrong that their progress should not match their splendid beginning.” See John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, trans., T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 48.

¹⁹⁷ Fung, *Galatians*, 133.

¹⁹⁸ For a thorough discussion of the Reformed conception of union with Christ, see; Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 587-619.

¹⁹⁹ “The present infinitive passive verb ἐπιτελεσθε with the adverbial particle νῦν stresses the Galatian Christians’ present orientation: ‘now trying to attain perfection.’ One may debate whether the datives πνεύματι and σαρκί are to be taken as ‘the manner in which’ or ‘the instrument by which’ (cf. Schlier, *Galater*, 123). As F. F. Bruce says, ‘the distinction is more grammatical than substantial’ (*Galatians*, 150). The main point of Paul’s rhetorical question here, however, has to do with the incongruity of beginning one’s Christian life on one basis (‘with the Spirit’) and then shifting somewhere in progress to another basis (‘by human effort’). What Paul wants his converts to see is that the Christian life is one that starts, is maintained, and comes to culmination only through dependence on the activity of God’s Spirit (cf. 5:25; also see Phil 1:6, where the same verbs ἐνάρχομαι and ἐπιτελέω appear and where the point is made that completion of the Christian life comes about on the same basis as its inception, viz. by God’s working).” See Longenecker, *Galatians*, on Galatians 3:3.

Philippians 3:9), and instead count upon their own efforts and ability to obey the law. To do so is to take our eyes off the cross of Christ (which Paul has set out clearly) and instead fall under the spell of the bewitching eye, placing our hopes upon Jesus *plus* the merit of our own good works. It is to turn the gospel of Jesus Christ (the proclamation of his doing and dying) into a false gospel centered in human achievement and striving for greater obedience to the commandments found in the law of Moses. The Judaizing message that we start by faith but reach the goal by works is, as Paul says, a dangerous and deceptive spell. Paul's message stands in sharp contrast to theirs; we begin by faith in Christ and we reach the goal through faith in Christ. The faith which justifies also brings forth the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul will go on to say in Galatians 5:22-25.

Jew and Gentile, therefore, enter into God's gracious covenant through faith in Jesus Christ, they both receive the indwelling Holy Spirit who initiates the Christian life, and they remain in the covenant through faith in Jesus Christ via union with him through faith in a bond effected by the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, believers inevitably produce good works (the "fruit of the Spirit") because they are presently and will remain in union with Christ. Since true, we can see why Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentiles is such a serious matter. It amounts to a tearing apart of the body of Christ.

Verse 6 is critical to Paul's argument; *"just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* The answers to the rhetorical questions Paul asks are self-evident since they are confirmed by the Galatian's personal experience. As his favorite polemical tactic, Paul moves from making a theological point to recounting redemptive historical evidence to buttress his argument. Paul's gospel is nothing new. Throughout the course of redemptive history the gospel of Jesus has been foreshadowed throughout making Abraham central to Paul's main point.²⁰⁰ In verse 6, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 as a proof-text for his gospel because Abraham's faith and being reckoned "righteous" before God are intimately connected. Genesis 15:6 reads as follows: *"And [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."*

Far from being an invention to attract followers with an invented message, Paul appeals to the fact that Abraham is a real life historical (biblical) example that faith alone justifies. "Just as" takes the sense of "as we see" in the account of Abraham. Apparently, many Jews of Paul's day considered faith to be a meritorious work, something which God finds within the hearts of his people and which he rewards when they are subsequently obedient. Genesis 15:6 was often connected by the rabbis to the account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac before YHWH intervened (Genesis 22). Abraham was thought to be righteous because he raised the knife over Isaac and therefore believed that God regarded Abraham's faith as that one righteous act from which springs a life of good works. So then, Abraham's faith was understood as meritorious.²⁰¹ The Judaizers agreed. God rewarded Abraham because he believed as an act of obedience, or God regarded the act of believing as "righteousness."

²⁰⁰ "The apostle's point is not simply that we should believe as Abraham believed (though that is true enough and critically important), but that those who believe become the recipients of the redemptive blessings associated with the patriarch." See Silva, "Galatians," 790.

²⁰¹ Fung, Galatians, 135.

The biblical text is clear; Abraham believed God and was therefore accepted as righteous and in conformity with what God required, through faith. This did not come about through his good works.²⁰² As Stephen Westerholm puts it,

. . . that Abraham's route to righteousness was not peculiar to himself is apparent from the promise that in him all nations [i.e., the Gentiles] will be blessed: God would declare all righteous (Scripture was announcing in advance), who shared Abraham's faith Far from a blessing, the law brings a curse on those for whom it prescribes the path to righteousness . . . since it anathematizes all who do not continue in all the things written in the book of the law to do them.²⁰³

Genesis 15:6 is also cited by James who contends that Abraham's justifying faith manifests itself in the fruit of good works (James 2:23) and it is worth noting that Paul refers to Abraham seven more times in this chapter. Central to Paul's argument is the fact that Abraham is a key figure in God's gracious covenant, the benefits of which (forgiveness of sin, imputation of righteousness, and the promise of a glorious inheritance) are received through faith in the promise that "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" and delivered from the wrath of God at the end of the age (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13), whether they be Jew or Gentile.²⁰⁴

When Paul asks his two rhetorical questions in verse 2 and 5 contrasting "hearing of faith," with "works of law," he is refuting the argument of the Judaizers that Abraham's faith (the act of believing) is itself meritorious, or that God sees the presence of faith in the heart and the good works which follow as the ground of our right standing.²⁰⁵ For Paul, it is not the act of faith which justifies, but the object of faith who justifies.²⁰⁶ Abraham was declared righteous before God through his faith (trust) in God's promise (that he would be the father on many nations, that his descendants would be so numerous they cannot be counted, etc.) which, as the course of redemptive history unfolds, points ahead with increasing clarity to the age to come when the reception of Christ's righteousness through faith is tied to the reception of the Holy Spirit, both of which come through the "hearing of faith."

Therefore, Christians are to look to Christ's merits to justify because we know our own efforts to be justified are always insufficient and tainted by sin. Christ justifies us through the hearing of faith, so too, the Holy Spirit is received by the hearing of faith (trust), not by the merit of faith

²⁰² Moo, Galatians, 181.

²⁰³ Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul, 374-375.

²⁰⁴ "Abraham's faith was not specifically faith in Jesus Christ, but faith in God and his promise." See; Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:6.

²⁰⁵ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 148.

²⁰⁶ Warfield puts it this way. "The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Savior on whom it rests It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ It is not, strictly speaking, even faith that saves, but Christ that saves through faith." Warfield, "*The Biblical Doctrine of Faith*," 504.

(works).

Paul declares to the Judaizers that Gentiles are children of Abraham, even when not circumcised. The promises God made to Abraham were fulfilled by the reception of the Holy Spirit, something true of Gentile believers in both Galatia and Antioch, a point subsequently acknowledged by James and Peter at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). As Paul will go on to explain in Galatians 3:15ff, one of the chief errors of the Judaizers was to misunderstand that, properly understood, circumcision is a sign of God's gracious covenant with Abraham. The Judaizers mistakenly understood circumcision through the blessing/curse principle of the Sinai covenant (the law of Moses). If circumcised, supposedly, one earned YHWH's covenant blessing. If not, one came under YHWH's covenant curse, which is why the Judaizer's felt such discomfort eating with unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles eating their pork and beans at the same table with kosher table Jews.

The Sinai covenant, Paul says, does not annul the prior covenant God made with Abraham (Galatians 3:17). Since the Judaizers mistakenly believed that the Sinai covenant re-interpreted the Abrahamic covenant because it came 430 years *after* God's covenant with Abraham, circumcision was to be understood through the lens of blessing/curse. The Judaizers understood circumcision to be a meritorious work (something we do), not the sign of a gracious covenant (which is applied through faith in God's promise). The Gentiles, they thought, remained under God's curse until circumcised. Obedience to God's commandments proves that you have followed Abraham's example. Until circumcised, Gentiles cannot be counted as children of Abraham.²⁰⁷

This misunderstanding of the Abraham story is but one of the reasons why circumcision became such a flash point in Galatia and why properly understanding how Abraham was made right with God was central to Paul's argument. Circumcision is the means through which God's oft-repeated covenant promise ("I will be your God, and you will be my people") is ratified. The cutting of the foreskin—a knife/blood ritual, pointing ahead to Jesus's circumcision on the cross, a point Paul will make in Colossians 2:11-12—was to be performed on the eighth day as a sign and seal of the parent's faith in YHWH's promise. Through circumcision, parents trusted that their male child was a member of God's gracious covenant, and a recipient of its blessings, yet held responsible to its obligations. Circumcision was not necessary for justification, but faith like Abraham's was.

C. The Blessing of Abraham (3:7-9)

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

²⁰⁷ In the first-century Greco-Roman world of public baths (in larger Roman cities) and with few cultural taboos about male nudity, it was obvious who was and who was not circumcised.

In verses 7-9, Paul addresses the way in which God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled. Paul makes a very subtle but important shift in emphasis, moving from discussing an individual (Abraham) to discussing a group of individuals, Abraham's "children," or literally "sons of Abraham."²⁰⁸ Paul asks his hearers a series of personal questions in verses 1-6 to drive home his point. "Did you receive the Spirit and a right standing from God through faith or by works?" But in verses 7-9, Paul asks a much broader question, namely "who are the true people of God and on what basis does God accept them as such?" This is an argument aimed squarely at the Judaizers, forcing them to reconsider how they viewed Gentiles and their status before God in light of the biblical account of Abraham's justification before God by faith alone (Genesis 15:6).²⁰⁹

The Galatians (Judaizers included) must "know" how someone becomes a spiritual son of the great patriarch. No doubt, Paul has told them that Jesus is the eternal son of God. However, we become sons of God (and sons of Abraham and members of the covenant of grace) via faith and justification. To become a son of Abraham is to be numbered among "those who are of faith."²¹⁰ Biological descent or circumcision was not a factor. Faith in Jesus is.²¹¹

In linking justification by faith (in Galatians 2:16) with status as a son of Abraham here (Galatians 3:7), Paul adds substantial weight to his refutation of the Judaizing principle (legalism), especially since the Judaizers were appealing to submission to circumcision as an act of obedience (a good work) and therefore the external sign which supposedly characterized the true children of Abraham. According to the agitators, circumcised Jews who kept the law of Moses were the true children of Abraham. Gentiles who were not circumcised and who did not observe Jewish customs and culture were not. Paul begs to differ.

Since the consequence of their error is that the merits of Christ, received through faith are not sufficient to justify one before God, Paul refutes this error by simply asserting, "*it is those of faith,*" not those who are circumcised, "*who are the sons of Abraham.*" In putting the matter this way, Paul obliterates the boundary being drawn by the agitators between Jews and their ethnic badges and those Gentile converts who do not possess them. Being a child of Abraham, the historical father of the nation of Israel, does not depend upon ethnicity (Jewish ancestry), nor a ceremonial righteousness (keeping holy days), nor keeping a kosher diet, nor a surgical procedure (circumcision). It depends upon faith in Jesus Christ.

Connecting his theological point to redemptive history, Paul here asserts that the Scripture foresaw that all those united to Jesus Christ through faith alone are children of Abraham and

²⁰⁸ Wright speaks of the interpretation of this verse as a fork in the road between traditional exegesis (of the non-historical OPP sort) and "genuine historical exegesis," presumably his variety of NPP. See, Wright, Galatians, 191.

²⁰⁹ Moo, Galatians, 196.

²¹⁰ Moo, Galatians, 181.

²¹¹ Ridderbos, The Epistles of Paul to the Churches of Galatia, 119-120.

heirs of the blessing promised to the patriarch.²¹² Even Gentiles can claim Abraham as their spiritual father through faith in that one (Jesus) whom Abraham's faith anticipated when God promised to make him the father of a great nation and give him countless spiritual descendants, many of whom now live in Galatia. Paul will make much the same point to the Ephesians later in his ministry (2:11-22).

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

If Paul's argument to the Ephesians centers around membership in the household of God. In Galatia, Paul's argument centers around one's status as a "son of Abraham." God is bringing the Gentiles to faith as the culmination of his promise made to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) as reiterated by Israel's prophets. This promise has profound import in the history of redemption as revealed by God and as demonstrated by Paul to the Galatians. The promise made to Abraham does not come to realization through human obedience to the law of Moses, but to all who trust in Jesus whether they be Jew or Gentile. This is the chief indicator that the age to come is being realized in the midst of this present evil age.

In verse 8, Paul combines a number of echoes taken from Genesis 12, 22, 28 to make the point that the Gentiles (the nations) are indeed genuine heirs to all the promises God made to Abraham. Paul asserts that it is God who preached the gospel of justification to Abraham, who embraced that gospel with faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ as preached by Paul to the Galatians can be summarized here as follows:²¹³

²¹² "The singular ἡ γραφή ('the Scripture') refers to a particular portion of Scripture (cf. Rom 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; see also Luke 4:21; John 19:36–37; Acts 8:35), viz., the last part of the Abrahamic covenant, the 'Blessing of Abraham' section that is repeated a number of times in the OT," in Longenecker, Galatians, on Galatians 3:8.

²¹³ Silva, "Galatians," 791-795.

- The gospel is found throughout the Old Testament,²¹⁴
- The gospel is preached by God to Abraham,
- This gospel is the message which Abraham believed and was therefore counted “righteous,”²¹⁵
- The blessing God promised to Abraham includes the Gentile nations, a point which Israel’s prophets will later explain as an inheritance tied to a future messianic age.

While Paul has pulled together a number of promises from the account of Abraham in Genesis, he also alludes to Isaiah 49:1-7, one of the “servant songs,” foretelling of a Messiah yet to come.²¹⁶ According to Acts 13:6 ff, this was a text to which Paul and Barnabas appealed while in Psidion Antioch, seeing it fulfilled, in part, through the Gentile mission. Isaiah’s prophecy is worth considering here:

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.” And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him – for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Isaiah recounts YHWH’s declaration that he will bring salvation to all the nations. In Psidion Antioch, Paul and Barnabas saw that promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is YHWH’s light to the world. Paul’s missionary efforts to reach the Gentiles with the gospel was God’s purpose from the beginning. There is one gospel and one promise embraced by Abraham, so that many

²¹⁴ Moo, Galatians, 198.

²¹⁵ “The verb λογίζομαι appears in Greek writings and the NT in a variety of ways: “reckon” or “calculate”; “evaluate” or “estimate”; “think about” or “consider.” In the LXX λογίζομαι is the translation of חָשַׁב, *hāšab*, which means “think” but also “account” or “credit” (in addition to Gen 15:6, see Ps 105:31 and 1 Macc 2:52). And it is in this latter sense that the word is used here in quoting Gen 15:6 (cf. Rom 4:3, 5, 9, 10, 22; 2 Cor 5:19).” See, Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:8.

²¹⁶ See J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 383-389.

nations become his sons through faith in the messianic servant whom YHWH will send.

In claiming to defend the true faith of Israel, the Judaizers were driving a wedge between Jewish and Gentile believers, dividing those for whom Christ has died so as to join together into one body—the point made by Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22, cited previously. Paul is clear; the “gospel” which he preaches, was announced in advance to Abraham. There is only one gospel taught in the Scriptures, and although hidden in type and shadow it is the same gospel in the Old Testament as in the New. God accepts sinners by providing a means of the forgiveness of sins and by providing sinners with a righteousness which can justify them before God’s holy tribunal through the instrument of faith.

What is promised through Abraham is that all the Gentile nations of the earth will be blessed. The promise reiterated in verse 9 becomes a sort of summary of the argument in verses 7-8; “*so then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*” This indicates that all who believe as did Abraham (even the godless Gentiles who love their bacon, who do not know what Hanukkah is, and who are not circumcised), are nevertheless recipients of all of those wonderful promises which God made to Abraham. The basis for this promise is not circumcision, human works, or obedience to the law of Moses, but faith. Justification before God comes by faith, not by works. The promise given Abraham is realized through faith in Jesus, not by circumcision. And it comes to Gentiles not yet circumcised, even as it comes to circumcised Jews; “if by faith, then not by works.”

Paul is clearly responding to the Jewish legalism as OPP interpreters contend. Martin Luther’s reflections on this passage (followed by Calvin’s) are insightful. As Luther puts it,

The faithful realize from their own experience that they find happiness when they hear the word, grasp, and embrace it. They abandon this opinion of the law and their own righteousness full of faith, but in their flesh, they feel a powerful resistance against the spirit. Reason and the flesh become accomplices. They say, “You should be circumcised and keep the law.” This phrase cannot be totally uprooted from our minds. Instead, it sticks firmly to the hearts of all the faithful. That is why the faithful suffer a constant conflict between the hearing of faith and the works of the law. The conscience always murmurs and thinks this is all too easy that just by hearing the word we are promised righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. But once we face a difficult trial, tell me then if it’s easy to hear the word of faith. Indeed, the One who gives it is great. Further, He gives many great things freely and without reproach. However, your abilities harden and your faith is weak and these war against you so that you cannot receive this gift. It only takes a murmur of objection in your conscience, and a little “you should” begins to sound without ceasing in your head. But be firm and resist, until you overcome that “you should do.” That is how your faith will grow little by little, and this opinion of the righteousness of the law will also diminish. However, you cannot achieve this without great conflict.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Luther, Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect 3, on Galatians 3:2

Luther is, of course, referring to the conflict between flesh and spirit in the lives of the justified, which Paul will address in more detail in Galatians 5:16-17 and in his subsequent epistle to the Romans (7:14-25).

In his 1558 sermon on Galatians 3:7-10, John Calvin concurs.

Thereupon, Paul concludes that `they which are of faith' are the children of Abraham. Abraham is surely the father of all believers and children of God. It follows, therefore, that we must conform to the pattern he has set, otherwise the gate of heaven and the door of salvation is closed to us and we will be banished from God's kingdom. Paul shows us what we must do. Although we do not descend from Abraham according to the flesh, and are not connected to him in any way, yet, we need to become members of his family. The only way to do this is to partake of the promise which was made to him, and believe as he did. This is what it means to be `of faith': to have recognized and acknowledged that we cannot win God's favour or approval through our own works or merit, but that we need to rest entirely on his goodness. Only then will the promise apply to us and we be adopted as his children. This is Paul's main point in this passage.²¹⁸

Paul moves on from appealing to the example of Abraham's faith to discuss the role and purpose of the law of Moses. The apostle reminds the Galatians that the law was not given to them as a means of earning a right standing before God.

D. The Curse of the Law (3:10-14)

10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." 12 But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" – 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Paul makes another transition in verse 9 to verse 10 as he moves on from his prior point that the true children of Abraham are such by faith alone (whether they be Jew or Gentile), to demonstrate that all those who rely on works of the law will come under the law's curse. The Galatians must understand the different yet complimentary roles which Abraham and Moses play in redemptive history as seen in the contrast between God's covenant with Abraham, and Israel's covenant with YHWH at Sinai. There are two covenants in view prior to the Sinai covenant (the covenants of works and the covenant of grace) and how we understand and

²¹⁸ John Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 252.

interpret these covenants in relation to each other lies at the heart of the problem in Galatia.²¹⁹

Those who seek to be justified through their obedience to the commandments will find themselves measured against the law's righteous requirements, not only by their outward compliance but also according to what is in their heart. The realization that God searches our hearts can hardly be characterized as "good news." Often times, and from a misguided attempt to defend God's honor, some blithely contend that "God looks on the heart" as though our willful innocence will allow us to escape the wrath to come. But there is no distinction in terms of guilt before God between what we think and what whether we act on those thoughts (cf. Romans 7:14-25, Galatians 5:17). We might not have stolen our neighbor's spouse or new car, yet we may have desired to do so. We are every bit as guilty for having such desires as we would be for acting upon them. Granted, the consequences of sinful thoughts and sinful actions are not same, but our guilt before God is.

Properly understanding the law—including the law's place in redemptive history, the reasons why God gave it through Moses, and the role it plays in coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and then subsequently living the Christian life—is vital in understanding Paul. To correct the errors of the Judaizers, Paul will explain all of these things in the balance of Galatians 3 and then in chapter 4. We will consider in some detail how Paul understands the history, purpose, and role of the law.

Paul draws a contrast between "*those who are of faith*" (in verses 7-9) and those "*who rely on works of the law*" (in verse 10). Since all of Paul's subsequent discussion is conducted in light of this distinction, it is important that we dig in deeply. Longenecker points out what by now should be obvious.

We may assume that the premise of the Judaizers' argument was that one who faithfully observes the Mosaic law will live a full and acceptable life before God, which is what is stated as the principle of the law in v 12 quoting Lev 18:5: "The one who does these things shall live by them" Paul's premise, however, though unstated, is that no one is capable of keeping all the law.²²⁰

Paul is giving us an "either/or" choice. Either we are justified, as was Abraham, by grace alone through faith in God's promise (fulfilled by Christ) alone, or else we are under the curse of the law, the fate of all those who think their works of the law are sufficient to gain or earn a right standing before God.

²¹⁹ See, for example, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 211-218; 265-301; Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006); and the classic Reformed statement of these covenants in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 2 Vols (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Foundation, 1990). For a treatment of the historical development of Reformed covenant theology, see Geerhardus Vos, "*The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology*" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* ed., Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), 234-267.

²²⁰ Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 3:10.

To prove his point that those who rely on the law are under a curse, Paul first makes appeal to three Old Testament passages. In verse 10, he writes “*all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,’*” which includes a citation from Deuteronomy 27:26. He warns the Galatians that anyone who attempts to be justified through obedience to the law will come under God’s curse (guilt, death, and punishment) which is pronounced upon any and every infraction of law.²²¹

James 2:10 comes to mind as a parallel passage. “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.*” Should anyone attempt to be justified by works, a serious fate awaits them. To paraphrase, we must obey the law, every jot and tittle of it, or be condemned by the law. In contemporary terms familiar to every student, the final examination for eternal life is pass/fail and will not be graded on a curve.

This is contrary to N.T. Wright’s blanket assertion “that all future judgment is highlighted basically as good news” . . . because the judge is not a “hard-hearted, arrogant, or vengeful tyrant, but the Man of Sorrows.”²²² Wright’s pronouncement of good news for Christ’s own people is blessedly true. But an ominous truth remains if downplayed by Wright. Law-breakers (all of Adam’s race—Romans 5:12-19) are under God’s curse unless and until redeemed by Jesus Christ through the good news revealed in the gospel. But there is no good news for those who do not believe the gospel. They will face the wrath to come without a mediator (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

In verse 11, Paul appeals to a second Old Testament text, Habakkuk 2:4, where the prophet tells us that “*the righteous shall live by faith.*” The Rabbis of the period understood Habakkuk as they did Genesis 15:6. Faith is meritorious.²²³ But Paul contends that if the righteous live by faith, or better, if it is only through faith that one receives righteousness and will live, then no one can be justified by obedience to the law. Fung notes that, “because Scripture says that he who is righteous (that is, justified) by faith will live, it follows that no one is justified by works of the law (irrespective of one’s failure or success in keeping it).”²²⁴ Any attempt to be made right with God through works of law brings down the curse, not the reward of life.

In verse 12, Paul cites Leviticus 18:5, his third citation from the Old Testament, which reads, “*You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.*” Paul’s statement, “*the law is not of faith*” (v. 12), has huge implications for understanding the relationship between God’s covenant with Abraham (an administration of the covenant of grace) and the subsequent made with Israel at Mount Sinai (an administration of the covenant

²²¹ David Van Drunen, “*Natural Law and The Works Principle Under Adam and Moses,*” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, *The Law is Not of Faith*, 300.

²²² N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 141.

²²³ Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 3:11.

²²⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 145.

of grace, in which the demands of the original covenant of works are republished).²²⁵ Paul contends that the law of Moses is not based upon faith in the promise, but rather upon the merit of obedience (works of law), at least as far as justification is concerned. To attempt to be justified through law-keeping, one must fully obey every commandment 24/7 or else find themselves as under God's curse.

Paul's three-fold contrast between law and gospel, faith and works, the Spirit and the flesh, collectively expose the Judaizing message for what it is—"no gospel" (cf. Galatians 1:6-7). The law (which as Paul says elsewhere is holy, righteous, and good—Romans 7:12) cannot justify because no one can obey God's law perfectly. Disobey any commandment but a single time in thought, word, or deed, and we come under the law's condemnation (guilt and death). Any attempt to be justified by obedience to the commandments is to act contrary to faith, which instead, looks to God's gracious promise to save sinners in Jesus Christ.

Up to this point, Paul has spoken of the blessing of Abraham (which comes through faith) and the curse of the law (which comes from less than perfect compliance to the law's demands). The apostle now introduces the saving work of Jesus Christ as the answer to the conundrum of how it is that law-breakers can be counted righteous if no one can obey the law.²²⁶ Jesus is the one who delivers us from the law's curse and brings the blessings promised to Abraham.

In verse 13, Paul lays out what is the heart of his atonement theology which unfolds against the contrast set out in verse 10.²²⁷ *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'"* In the background of Paul's assertion that in his death, Jesus became a curse "for us," is Deuteronomy 27:26; *"cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"* Before Israel entered into the promised land, Moses reminded the people of God of the curse threatened in the Sinai covenant that YHWH will pronounce a curse upon everyone who fails to render perfect obedience to the law. This warning is significant, especially in light of the role the blessing/curse principle plays for Israel, both narrowly (exclusion from the land), and more broadly (exclusion from the people of God).²²⁸

In Deuteronomy 21:22-23, cited by Paul in verse 10, Moses declares that anyone who hangs upon a tree is accursed, a statement which is otherwise obscure and in context refers to displaying a dead criminal's body after execution. In Paul's day, many Jews understood this passage as referring to the act of execution (hanging) not the outcome of execution—that someone hanging on a pole dies under a curse because of the heinous sins they have

²²⁵ Michael Horton, "Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice," in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 315-316.

²²⁶ Wright glibly dismisses "would-be atonement theologies," and states that "Paul's own supposed construction of a so-called law-free gospel . . . are entirely beyond the point." Wright, Galatians, 197.

²²⁷ Moo, Galatians, 210.

²²⁸ Moo, Galatians, 210.

committed.²²⁹

Paul's interpretation of these three Old Testament texts (which at first glance seem to have little or no connection to each other) arises from his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the Damascus Road. Paul now reads the Old Testament through Christ-centered glasses (so to speak), seeing the whole of the Old Testament, including an otherwise obscure passage about capital punishment, in light of Christ's person and work.

In bringing these three texts together and interpreting "dying on a tree" in terms of being accursed, Paul draws a direct theological line from Jesus' death upon the cross (tree) to Jesus' suffering under the curse as though he were a law-breaker (accursed). The connection between the cross and Christ being accursed is the ground for Paul to connect the sinless Jesus to our guilt and the curse, which is the basis for his gospel. Yet for Jews, the preaching of a crucified and accursed Messiah was a scandal, "a blasphemous contradiction in terms."²³⁰

Paul's use of pronouns is also significant. Paul says Christ died under God's curse "for us," or "for our sake," affirming what we commonly speak of a "substitutionary atonement."²³¹ Such an atonement implies that Jesus' death was for "his people" as something accomplished once and for all.²³² The cross is not a means of making all people savable (i.e., a potential or hypothetical universalism), if they meet a certain condition, i.e., faith and repentance.²³³ Rather, Paul says, Jesus bore the curse for "our" sins on behalf of those for whom he is dying—"for us." Jesus, who alone is without sin, died for those who fail to obey God's commandments, yet trust in him (this faith being described elsewhere as a gift from God—Ephesians 2:8) so as justify them and deliver them from the wrath to come.

Through suffering God's curse on behalf of Jew and Gentile alike (the "us" includes both groups), Jesus redeemed²³⁴ those for whom he died from the curse (Adam's fall), paying for our sins (the guilt of imputed sin from Adam, our sinful nature—the flesh, and from our actual

²²⁹ Moo, Galatians, 214.

²³⁰ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 166.

²³¹ Leon Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 62-64; Gathercole, Defending Substitution, 55-79.

²³² This is often described in the Reformed tradition as "particular redemption," in which Christ's death is seen to actually and effectually accomplish redemption for the people of God, i.e., the elect. Michael Horton, For Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 90-98; Horton, The Christian Faith, 516-520.

²³³ This reflects the well-intended but deeply flawed appeals of the evangelists of my youth, "God has done his part, now it is up to you to do yours," or the closely related, "God has voted for you, the devil against you, your vote decides," come to mind.

²³⁴ Paul speaks of redemption as a completed act—an aorist active indicative.

sins)²³⁵ and winning for us freedom from obedience to the law as a means of justification. As Paul puts it in Romans 4:5, Christ dies for the ungodly, while in Romans 5:8, Jesus is said to die for those who were still sinners when he died for them.

Redemption language is important, so we will take a brief detour to consider Paul's use of various terms referring to the death of Jesus and what it is said to accomplish. There are a number of terms used throughout the New Testament to explain the significance of the death of Christ, and we ought to be careful not to reduce the meaning of Christ's cross to any single aspect. Paul's "atonement theology" (as it is called) is quite comprehensive.²³⁶ Consider the following terms applied to the cross:

- **Expiation:** Addresses the problem of guilt. Guilt is blotted out by the death of Jesus
- **Propitiation:** Speaks to the problem of divine wrath, which is turned aside for all those for whom Christ dies
- **Reconciliation:** Addresses the problem of alienation. God reconciles himself to us and us back to him
- **Redemption:** A term we are focusing upon here since Paul uses it in Galatians 3:13. Redemption addresses problem of bondage (to what? A matter we will discuss shortly)
- **Conquest:** Conquest terminology speaks to the problem of deliverance from Satan's tyranny

We touched upon Paul's appeal to the language of redemption earlier, but here we will take up Paul's use of various terms in more detail since it is useful as a factor in understanding Paul's discussion of the law and its curse.

It has been suggested that the biblical idea of redemption is simply that of general deliverance—the classic Old Testament examples are the Exodus and the return from the Babylonian exile. God delivered (redeemed) his people from the evil Pharaoh.²³⁷ But New Testament usage indicates that we ought to understand redemption more specifically as presupposing our bondage and effecting a release from that bondage through a commercial-like transaction involving the payment of a ransom. John Stott calls attention to the fact that

²³⁵ Fesko, Death in Adam, Life in Christ, 233-270, Horton, Justification, Vol. 2, 321-366.

²³⁶ Paul's views are discussed in the larger context of "Atonement Theology" in the following volumes: see, for example, Michael Horton, Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 159-241; Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 182-197. John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied (William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 19-78; and Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross; B. B. Warfield, "'Redeemer' and 'Redemption'" in The Person and Work of Christ, 325-348; and B. B. Warfield, "The New Testament Terminology of Redemption," in The Person and Work of Christ, 429-475.

²³⁷ Dunn, The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, 227-228..

while the language of propitiation refers to images associated with the temple courts and the ceremonial realm, when we speak of redemption the imagery shifts to a commercial transaction and the marketplace.²³⁸ We miss something vital if we do not see our redemption as very, very, costly—the purchase price being the suffering and shed blood of Jesus.

There are a number of words used throughout the New Testament with slightly different nuances which make this point.²³⁹

- αγοράζο— to buy at a price in the market, especially the slave market
- εξαγοράζο— which means to buy back or to buy up, the term Paul uses in Galatians 3:13
- λυτροῶ— to set free by paying a ransom
- λυτρον— a ransom
- λυτροσι— the act of ransoming, redemption
- απολυτροσι— redemption (broadly conceived)
- αντιλυτρον— emphasizes the substitutionary character of the ransom (αντι means “instead of” or “in the place of”)

Christ accomplishing redemption for us (including the various terms used by Paul) takes place in light of our enslavement to several things from which redemption is required, if we are not to remain under the curse of the law. First, Paul speaks of redemption from the bondage to the law, although it must be pointed out that God’s people’s relationship to the law is not a bondage in every sense. In Galatians 3:13, Paul speaks more specifically of being redeemed from the “curse of the law.” “Christ redeemed (ἐξηγόρασεν) us from the curse of the law, having become a curse on behalf of us.”²⁴⁰ It is the guilt of our sin which makes us liable to the penalty of the law (the curse), which, in turn, creates a sense of an inevitable future judgment (guilt).

In Galatians 4:4-5 (which is additional reflection and expansion upon what he says here), Paul speaks of redemption in regard to the law’s pedagogical (or teaching) function throughout the course of redemptive history. The law teaches us much about our sinfulness and need of redemption from the guilt and power of that sin. This is one of the law’s primary purposes. In

²³⁸ John Stott, The Cross of Christ (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 175.

²³⁹ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 1, s.v. “ἀγοράζω,” “ἐξαγοράζω,” “λύτρον,” “ἀντίλυτρον.”

²⁴⁰ It is common to interpret Paul as here referring to the course of redemptive history, not a contrast between two methods of salvation—faith or works. In such schemes, God redeems Israel from the curse of the law so that his blessings may be extended to the Gentiles. See Wright, Galatians, 207-208.

Galatians 4:4-5, Paul writes, *“when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order that he might redeem (ἐξαγοράση) those under the law, in order that we might receive the sonship.”* The context is somewhat different in Galatians 4:4-5 from that in 3:13.

In Galatians 4:1-5, Paul explains that the law makes all people prisoners of sin and leads them as those under age (as minors under the care of a guardian) until the coming of Christ, a point he will make in 3:22-24. Those under the law’s tutelage were the virtual equivalents of slaves, as explained in 4:1-3. This imprisoning, enslaving, pedagogical relation to the law has ceased now that Christ and “the faith” have come (3:25). The consequence is that through faith in Jesus we are all adopted as sons and daughters and are no longer slaves to sin (3:25-29), which is the basis for Paul’s subsequent discussion in Galatians 4:4-5 and in vv. 6-7 which follow. This pedagogical, redemptive-historical liberation reveals how we are freed from bondage to the law in regard to its role in teaching us what sin is and how it renders us guilty and under bondage to the law.

Paul also speaks of bondage to sin, both its guilt and its power. Through the redemptive work of Christ, believers are redeemed from the guilt of sin (justification). In Romans 3:24, Paul puts the matter this way, we *“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”* (ἀπολυτρώσεως). In context, redemption is that which produces justification, and refers to payment for those sins to which all have been given over. Note the specific reference to the forgiveness of sins in Romans 3:25. In Ephesians 1:7, Paul writes, *“in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.”*

In Titus 2:14, Paul describes God’s people as being redeemed from the power of sin (sanctification). He writes, *“Christ gave himself for us in order to redeem (λυτρώσεται) us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people for his very own, zealous for good works.”* Redemption from lawlessness stands in contrast to zealousness for good works. Once freed from sin’s guilt, sin’s power over us is broken. No longer can we claim “the devil made me do it” or “I couldn’t help myself.”

Finally, Paul speaks of redemption through the paying of a ransom, often mistakenly thought to be paid to Satan.²⁴¹ While no Pauline text specifically states that we are redeemed from Satan, in 1 Timothy 2:6, Paul does speak of Jesus, *“who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”*²⁴² The view that Jesus paid this ransom to Satan has so many problems that it was never widely accepted. Satan has no rightful claim over humanity and God never lost his sovereign rights over any part of his creation. Robert Strimple concludes that Paul’s use of ransom terminology is a commercial analogy, although he does caution that we not identify this payment with every detail of a commercial transaction, because the payment of a “ransom” serves so well to emphasize the following:

²⁴¹ A good summation of the various “theories of the atonement” can be found in Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 384-391.

²⁴² Christ is said to give ἑαυτὸν ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων.

- The bondage that sin produces
- The costliness of our salvation
- Our resulting enslavement to our “owner” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23) — “you were bought at a price.”

Strimple’s final point is especially helpful in trying to answer the question under debate, which is “to whom is this ransom paid?” The ransom price is paid by God to God, so that he might possess us no longer as his debtors but as his holy children.²⁴³ God’s desire to pay a ransom for sinners is yet another manifestation of his great love for sinners.

Not everyone agrees with this understanding of Paul’s gospel. Given his influence upon recent interpreters of Paul, it is important to consider N. T. Wright’s dismissive comments on the OPP interpretation of Galatians 3:13. According to Wright, Paul is . . .

celebrating the fact that Jesus’ reconciling death sets people free to take up their true vocation. The Messiah’s death gives to [Paul], and by extension to all who follow Jesus, the vocation to be part of the on-going divine plan, the covenant purpose for the whole world. Something similar is visible in Galatians 3:13. “The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law,” writes Paul, “by becoming a curse on our behalf.” This is not a statement of an abstract works-based atonement theology, though it is often snatched out of context and made to play that role. Many sermons have been preached about how the “curse of the law” (seen as a threatening moral code) is removed by the death of Jesus. Some have even supposed that Paul was regarding Israel’s law itself as a bad thing that had no business pronouncing this “curse” and that Jesus’s death had showed this up. But this has nothing to do with Paul’s meaning. He does not go on—as such sermons regularly have—so say “The Messiah become a course for us so that we might be freed from sin and go to heaven,” or anything like it. . . . Galatians 3 as a whole is about how God’s promises to Abraham always envisaged a worldwide family and how the gospel events brought that into reality.”²⁴⁴

Aside from the glib smugness and demolition of the proverbial “straw man,” when Wright laments that Galatians is often misunderstood, I take him to mean that he understands Paul properly when many others (especially those holding to the OPP) do not.²⁴⁵ Comments like this convince me that Wright side-steps interaction with the larger Pauline vocabulary which points in the direction that Israel’s religion and works of the law, were, in fact grounded in Jewish

²⁴³ Class lecture notes from WSC.

²⁴⁴ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 83-84.

²⁴⁵ Van Drunen says much the same. “Despite Wright’s claim to have deciphered what Paul really said, I suggest now that the apostle’s argument . . . give credence to the way that the earlier Reformed tradition accounted for these various themes.” See Van Drunen, “*Natural Law and The Works Principle Under Adam and Moses*,” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, *The Law is Not of Faith*, 310.

legalism. Redemption, Wright says, is better tied to liberation from enslaving powers with no regard to redemption from the law, sin and guilt and its oppressive power.²⁴⁶ Michael Horton replies to Wright's assertions, noting that the NPP marginalizes soteriology (the *ordo salutis*) in favor of ecclesiology (the *historia salutis*), and then completely misses the point made here by Paul. "The question of individual salvation is therefore crucial to the gospel."²⁴⁷

In verse 14, Paul continues to flesh out the reason why Christ redeemed us from the law's curse. "So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." There are two parallel clauses here, as seen by the two "so thats" (*hina*).²⁴⁸ The first clause speaks of the blessing of (or better "promised to") Abraham comes to Gentiles "through Jesus," while the second informs us we received the promised Spirit through faith.

Through Jesus' gracious act in willingly becoming a curse for us (his so-called "passive" obedience), thereby liberating us from its bondage, we (i.e, both Jew and Gentile) can be justified by faith and thereby become Abraham's children. Jesus' substitutionary death in our place ensures that we receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith not through works of law. This is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:3). This is verified in Acts 15, when the assembled church recognizes that Gentile converts received the Holy Spirit just as Jewish converts did, through faith. Although the gift of the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Genesis 15:6, in light of Jesus' Damascus Road appearance to Paul, Paul understands that to be forgiven of our sins through faith in Jesus is to be given the gift of the Holy Spirit at the same time.²⁴⁹ As Geerhardus Vos puts it, "the Apostle explicitly links the Christian possession of the Spirit to the Old Testament eschatological promise."²⁵⁰

Paul's doctrine of justification in Galatians 2:16, *if by faith, then not by works,* is expanded in Galatians 3:14. *If the promise of the Holy Spirit comes by faith, then it cannot come by works.* The conclusion is inescapable. All of the blessings of God's promise to Abraham, including the redemption from sin and guilt, the imputation of righteousness (the "right standing" before God), along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to Jew and Gentile only through the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, and received only through the means of faith. These blessings come not through doing works of law, but through hearing the gospel with faith.

²⁴⁶ N. T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 59.

²⁴⁷ Michael Horton, Covenant and Salvation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 55, 57.

²⁴⁸ Bruce, Galatians, 167.

²⁴⁹ Fung, Galatians, 151-152.

²⁵⁰ Geerhardus Vos, "Paul's Eschatological Concept of the Spirit," in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 100.

E. The Priority and Superiority of the Promise (3:15-18)

15 To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. 17 This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. 18 For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

One of the best ways to refute error is to proclaim the truth, thereby exposing error for what it truly is. If Peter, Barnabas, and the Jewish brothers were listening to the circumcision party, Paul must address their error publically (which, as we have seen, he does, in Galatians 2:11-14). Through his preaching, Paul publically placarded Jesus Christ crucified before his hearer's eyes (Galatians 3:1). The truth of Paul's gospel is not secret, it is a public proclamation. The gospel is "good news," an announcement, a public declaration, not secret esoterica or mere religious platitudes. Justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ (the "hearing with faith" as Paul calls it), not through obedience to the law of Moses, or through submission to ritual circumcision, or through keeping dietary laws. The blessings of the promise that God made to Abraham come to all of Abraham's children—whether Jew or Gentile—through faith and not by works. This is Paul's gospel.

Having made his case that justification and God's promise to Abraham, including the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to Abraham's children through faith, in verses 15-18 of Galatians 3, Paul contends that even though the promise to Abraham was given prior (chronologically, speaking) to the giving of law to Moses at Mount Sinai, this does not in any sense mean that the law nullifies or re-interprets the prior Abrahamic promise through the lens of the blessing/curse principle.

So after discussing the death of Christ in verses 12-13, Paul gives the Galatians a lesson in redemptive history explaining how Jewish Christians as well as Gentile converts ought to understand the respective ministries of Abraham and Moses, the nature of the two covenants they represent, and how the Mosaic covenant was temporary and fulfilled/superseded by Jesus Christ, giving way to a new covenant in which the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled and realized.²⁵¹

Returning to Abraham as his example, Paul again contends that his gospel is centered in the public placarding of Christ crucified for sinners, and is the very same gospel that God preached in advance to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15:6. Despite the charges of novelty coming

²⁵¹ See T. D. Gordon for a "summary of his summary" of the five differences he points out in Galatians 3:6-14, in Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14," in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 250-252.

from the Judaizers, Paul is no innovator.²⁵² It is important, yet not a surprise that Paul repeatedly supports his arguments with Old Testament illustrations.

Paul's point in what follows is really a simple one.²⁵³ The promise given to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations as recounted in Genesis 17, preceded in time God's giving of the law to Moses at Sinai. The law and the promise serve vital but different roles in redemptive history.²⁵⁴ Yet, the law (although given later) does not nullify the previous promise God made to Abraham. In Galatians 3:15, Paul puts it this way: "*To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.*" Paul is referring to the covenant (*diatheke*) which God previously established with Abraham as recounted in Genesis 15-17. The *diatheke* has the effect of functioning as a last will and testament.²⁵⁵

Although there are interpretive difficulties growing out of how the cultural context in which Jews, Greeks, and Romans understood *diatheke* as "last will and testament," Longenecker properly concludes, "the point of Paul's example in its application is clear: that God established his covenant with Abraham in an irrevocable manner, so it can never be annulled or added to."²⁵⁶ Jesus' death inaugurates the blessings of the promise made by the testator (YHWH).²⁵⁷ As Vos puts it,

The old diatheke is the system of legal administration: it issues into bondage, condemnation, and death. The new diatheke is the system of spiritual procreation and endowment prevailing through Christ: it produces liberty, righteousness, and life. The sense of contract is not only absent here: one may perhaps go so far as to say that the introduction of it would have jarred upon the single-mindedness wherewith the apostle pursues the opposite element in the conception, that of the divine sovereignty and monergism of procedure . . . Not even the testator, God, could subsequently through the giving of the law have modified the arrangement made with Abraham. It is plain, therefore, that here is a "testament" which, once made, cannot be changed.²⁵⁸

²⁵² Longenecker notes, "If Paul is to be charged with denigrating the law, his opponents are to be charged, he insists, with denigrating God's promise, the inheritance of that promise, Christ, and the Spirit—for these are matters associated with the Abrahamic covenant long before and apart from the law. Thus the law has no part in their receiving the inheritance promised to Abraham." Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:15.

²⁵³ We should note that here Paul speaks of the Galatians as "brothers," a hint that a new idea or section is to begin.

²⁵⁴ Moo, Galatians, 225.

²⁵⁵ Bruce, Galatians, 170.

²⁵⁶ Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:15.

²⁵⁷ Horton, God of Promise, 68.

²⁵⁸ Geerhardus Vos, "*Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke*," in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, 176-177.

Therefore, the prior covenant with Abraham (as an administration of the covenant of grace) cannot be set aside by a later covenant (mediated by Moses), because the covenant God made with Abraham is unconditional in the sense that it is God himself who swears the oath of ratification to Abraham to bring to pass what is promised—*“I will be your God and you and your descendants after you will be my people.”*²⁵⁹ Yet, it is conditional in the sense that the covenant promise is embraced through faith which as Paul says arises from the preached gospel (cf. Romans 10:17), and then is ratified through the sign and seal of the covenant—circumcision.

How, then, can the Judaizers argue that obedience to the law of Moses and submission to circumcision nullifies the prior covenant in which God himself swore on oath to be faithful to his promises? All the more problematic is that the YHWH’s gracious covenant was duly ratified by Abraham through the sign and seal of circumcision. How can something that has been properly ratified be set aside by a later covenant God made with Israel through the mediation of Moses? It cannot. There are no legal grounds for overturning the prior covenant. As Calvin put it, “the apostle reasons from human agreements to that solemn covenant which God made with Abraham. If human bargains are so firm that they must not be added to, how much more must this covenant remain inviolable?”²⁶⁰

The Judaizers now find themselves in the very precarious position of contending that the giving of the law of Moses somehow overturned and nullified the previous covenant that God made with Abraham. This is especially problematic when we consider that the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant which God himself not only initiates, but one in which God himself swears the covenant oath. Under the terms of the covenant, if YHWH fails to keep his promises, the covenant curses come down upon him.²⁶¹

The Judaizers must also attempt this move because they miss the point of God’s prior promise to Abraham, that God reckons sinners as righteous through faith, not through works of law. Seeing Abraham’s faith as essentially an act of obedience (not trust), the Judaizers must reinterpret Abraham’s faith in light of the blessing/curse principal associated with the Sinai covenant, in which, it should be noted, the people of God swear the oath of ratification after Moses sprinkled blood on the people and Book of the Covenant. We see the stark difference between the way in which God’s covenant with Moses (and Israel) differed from God’s prior covenant with Abraham. In Exodus 24:7–8, we read . . .

Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

²⁵⁹ YHWH’s covenant promise is reaffirmed through Scripture. E.g., Genesis 17:7–8; Exodus 29:45; Leviticus 28:45, Ezekiel 14:11, etc.

²⁶⁰ Calvin, *Galatians*, 57.

²⁶¹ Horton, *God of Promise*, 28.

In covenants based upon works, the people of God swear the oath of ratification. But in God's gracious covenant with Abraham, YHWH swears the oath of ratification. This account is found in Genesis 15:4-7 and worth considering here:

And behold, the word of the LORD came to [Abram]: "This man [Eliezer of Damascus] shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

A second account of God's gracious covenant with Abraham is found in Genesis 17:1-13, which is worth considering in its entirety.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.

YHWH's covenant with Abraham is a gracious covenant, taking the form of a royal grant, when the great king (YHWH) chooses to bless his subjects, making a covenant with them grounded in his royal oath. Abraham is summoned to believe YHWH's promise, which he does, and which he ratifies through circumcision.²⁶²

It is important to notice that YHWH's covenant with Moses, recounted in Exodus 24, is grounded in the blessing/curse principle wherein blessings are promised for obedience and curses threatened for disobedience. Furthermore the Sinai covenant takes the form of a

²⁶² Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (self published), 191-196.

Suzerainty treaty. In these types of covenants, found throughout the ancient near-east in the form of treaty documents between great kings and vassal nations (now subjects), the Great King (the Suzerain) summons his people to obey his demands.²⁶³ In Exodus 24:7, it is the people who swear the oath of obedience. *“All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.”* If they obey, the king will protect them, provide for them. But the vassal is expected to give what is required in return (soldiers, grazing rights, and paying tribute, etc.). If the Israelites fail to meet the terms of the covenant, the king will regard them as enemies (curse).²⁶⁴

We will spend much time unpacking these covenants as we go forward, but for now, it is important to keep these two covenants distinct: the Abrahamic administration of the covenant of grace, and the Sinaitic covenant between YHWH and Israel. As a national covenant, which is considered a republication and codification of the covenant of works. The Sinai covenant functions as an overlay of sorts, set on top of the Abrahamic covenant which is never nullified, Paul’s point here. Circumcision is a sign of the gracious covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 17:1-2). Therefore, God’s gracious covenant with Abraham should not be understood according to the blessing/curse principle of Sinai. The Jews of Paul’s day missed this point and the Judiazers ran with it. If you are circumcised, they contend, you are blessed because of your obedience (as with Abraham). If you are not circumcised, then you are cursed because of your disobedience (like pagan Gentiles).

In verse 16, Paul makes an to the nature of the promise made to Abraham. *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”* The plural “promises” are, in this case, the promises of a land given to Abraham, countless descendants, and to be a blessing to all the nations (as in Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:7; 17:8).²⁶⁵ “Paul doubtless understands this in a spiritual sense, although he does not pause to make this explicit.”²⁶⁶ We especially take note of Paul’s comments in Romans 4:13, where Paul extends this everlasting promise of a “land” (between the Euphrates River and the Red Sea) to extend to “the world.” Whereas Israel’s kingdom (under the Sinai covenant) was national, regional, and political, Jesus’ kingdom is universal (embracing Jew and Gentile), will extend to all the earth (as promised in Acts 1:8) and is fully realized in “the age to come” (Revelation 11:15).

When Paul contends that Christ is the promised “seed” (singular),²⁶⁷ he means that Christ himself is the true heir of the promise God made to Abraham, as well as the guarantor that the

²⁶³ Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 45-75.

²⁶⁴ Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1968), 17.

²⁶⁵ Moo, Galatians, 228.

²⁶⁶ Fung, Galatians, 155.

²⁶⁷ “Seed” in the Abrahamic promise is a generic singular that was always understood within Judaism to refer to the posterity of Abraham as an entity, excluding only the descendants of Abraham through Ishmael.” See Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:16

promise would be fulfilled. In his death (becoming a curse) our Lord ensures that the promise would be realized. The only thing that could prevent the promise from being realized is the guilt of our sins arising from our infractions of God's law. As Paul will go on to point out in verse 29, it is Jesus Christ, Israel's promised Messiah, who, by removing the curse, extends the promise to his own seed, those who trust in him (v. 26) and who are baptized into his name (v. 29).

Paul gives additional clarification in verse 17: *"This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void."* Paul is using the standard rabbinic reckoning of the years counted between Abraham and Moses.²⁶⁸ The apostle states that the covenant with Moses does not overturn the previous covenant already made, ratified, and established by God, a reference to the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham. According to Moo, "Jewish theology generally viewed the Abrahamic covenant, with the requirement of circumcision, as the first stage of a covenant relationship that was later expanded in the Mosaic covenant . . . Paul insists on severing the initial promise covenant that God made with Abraham from the later law covenant that God instituted through Moses."²⁶⁹ Since the law is not of faith, the law of Moses and the national covenant at Sinai must be interpreted in light of the covenant with Abraham, not vice-versa as the Judaizers insisted. Paul will need to show his opponents what the law was and was not intended to do, a matter he will take up in verses 21-22.

In verse 18, Paul reminds the Judaizers *"if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise."* Since Abraham was justified by faith in God's promise (v. 6), the "men of faith" are the true children of Abraham (v. 7) and will inherit Abraham's blessing (v. 9). All of this comes to pass through the means of faith and not through works of law. Calvin's comments are appropriate here,

Beyond all doubt Paul excludes works of every kind. Thus in Rom. 4:14, "if inheritance is by the law, faith is abolished and the promise made of none effect." Why so? Because salvation would depend upon the condition of satisfying the law. Therefore he immediately concludes that it is by faith, so that the promise might be sure. Let us carefully remember why, when the promise is compared with law, the establishment of the one overturns the other: because the promise has respect to faith and the law to works. Faith receives what is freely given, but to works a reward is paid.²⁷⁰

According to Calvin, this is the basis for distinguishing between the so-called "second" and "third" uses of the law.²⁷¹ According to its second use, the law is contrary to faith and should

²⁶⁸ Bruce, Galatians, 173.

²⁶⁹ Moo, Galatians, 230.

²⁷⁰ Calvin, Galatians, 60.

²⁷¹ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Library of Christian Classics, ed., John T. McNeill, trans, Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.7.6-17.

serve to drive us to despair of our own righteousness, and therefore seek Christ for forgiveness. To use the language of the Heidelberg Catechism, the law can be said to be “a teacher of sin.”²⁷² But the law is a revelation of the will of God, and according to the “third” use, Christians are to obey the law out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ.²⁷³ In this sense, the law is the rule of gratitude. It is vital to keep these two uses of the law clearly in mind so that we do not turn the gospel into law or the law into gospel. We must be careful not to foster antinomianism or libertine behavior, as well as discourage any form of legalism along the lines of the Judaizers.

T. David Gordon notes five points of difference in Paul’s argument between the Sinai covenant and the Abrahamic covenant which effectively capture the force of Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:10-18 quite well, and which therefore serve as a good summary of ground we have covered so far.²⁷⁴

- First, the Abrahamic covenant includes Gentiles, while the Sinai covenant excludes them. This reflects Paul’s point in verse 8, *“and the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”*
- Second, *“the Abrahamic covenant blesses; the Sinai covenant curses.”* This reiterates Paul’s point in verse 10, *“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’ and v. 14 “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,”* especially in light of v. 13, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’”*
- Third, the Abrahamic covenant is characterized by faith, while the Sinai covenant is characterized by works of the law. Galatians 3:6 tells us *“Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’* while in verse 11, Paul tells us, *“now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘the righteous shall live by faith.’”* This also reflects the distinction Paul makes in 2:16. *“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”*
- Fourth, the Abrahamic covenant justifies, while the Sinai covenant does not. As we have seen in the previous points, the Sinai covenant requires doing (works of law), while the Abrahamic covenant is grounded in God’s promise (which comes through faith).

²⁷² Heidelberg Catechism, Q 3-5.

²⁷³ Heidelberg Catechism, Q 113-115.

²⁷⁴ Gordon, “Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14,” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 243 ff.

- Finally, the Abrahamic covenant is referred to as “promise,” while the Sinai covenant is referred to as “law.” In Galatians 3:17, Paul specifically calls the Sinai covenant “the law,” (νόμος), which effectively refutes the NPP notion that Paul’s discussion of the law refers *only* to ethnic badges, or as Dunn puts it, “Israel’s distinctiveness from other people not chosen by God,”²⁷⁵ not the broader demands of the Mosaic law and its blessing/curse principle. How can Paul speak of the Sinai covenant as “the law”? He can do so because the law (and obeying its demands) is the dominating characteristic of the Sinai covenant, contra Wright and Dunn.

Keeping these distinctions in mind helps us respond to the propensity of NPP adherents to take a theological belt-sander to the sharp contrasts given here by Paul, grinding them down beyond recognition. Paul, on the other hand, argues that there are two covenants (the Sinai covenant and the Abrahamic covenant), he contrasts faith/works, grace/human effort, flesh/spirit, and law/gospel, all to clarify his doctrine of justification in which both Jew and Gentile are justified before God on the basis of the merits of Christ received through faith. Paul’s distinctions also expose the errors of Romanism, which affirms that Christ saves, faith is necessary, and that grace moves us toward faith, while at the same time refusing to add the thoroughly Pauline qualification, so-called the *solas* (the “alones” or “onlys”) coming from the Protestant Reformation (the OPP). These are demanded by the context of Paul’s contrast between faith and works, a point acknowledged by none other than Thomas Aquinas.²⁷⁶

Application

There is much in Galatians 3:10-18 which relates to the contemporary situation in the church today. First and foremost, when Paul speaks of his proclamation of Christ crucified throughout the region of Galatia, he is referring to “publically placarding Christ,” as if our Lord’s saving work is set forth on a billboard for all to see. Preaching Christ is not simply talking about Jesus, mentioning his name in a sermon, or focusing on his ethical teaching. We must preach a Savior who suffered in our place, bearing the curse of the law for us. Preaching the gospel is publically placarding Christ crucified for sinners.

Many of our contemporaries have lost sight of this simple point. This is likely the reason why so much of evangelical and Reformed preaching, teaching, and evangelism produces so little lasting effect upon its hearers. Much of contemporary preaching is often current event driven (especially political tribalism), fad-centered, or application overload, with the preacher doing everything in his power to show how relevant Christianity is in every area of life. This is often done even with those areas of life not addressed directly by Scripture, yet all the while failing to address the critical distinctions made by Paul, especially the distinction between the law and the gospel. The reality is that Christianity is never more irrelevant than when the gospel is replaced by practical suggestions to help us improve our lives.

²⁷⁵ Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 77.

²⁷⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Romans: The Anchor Bible, Vol 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 360-362.

The shift from Christ crucified under the curse of the law, to “Christ the manager,” “Christ our example,” “Christ the caring nurturer,” “Christ the motivator,” “Christ the healer,” turns Jesus into a new Moses who gives us easier laws to keep and principles to live by which we mistakenly call “the gospel.” When this happens, the effects are devastating to Christ’s church. The failure to preach Christ crucified actually weakens the demands of the law, which was given, in part, to condemn us, show us our sin and our desperate need of Jesus Christ. It also undermines the gospel, which now becomes “doing what Jesus would do,” “living as Jesus would want me to live,” “Jesus helping me be a better person.” Moralistic, theologically vapid preaching obscures the very essence of the gospel—the Son of God gave himself for us upon the cross, dying under God’s curse for all of those times when I didn’t do as Jesus would have me to do.

Preaching Christ is publically placarding Christ, not using Jesus as an excuse to talk about ourselves. If our Christianity is reduced to “doing what Jesus would do,” instead of “believing what God would have us believe,” modern Judaizers have taken us in and we have come under the spell of their evil eye. When this happens, we risk reducing the law to trivialities and turning the gospel into law. Christianity is only relevant to our true needs (dealing with our sin and the curse) when it is centered in the public placarding of Christ.

Paul’s rhetorical questions in the opening verses of the chapter (vv. 1-6)—“works of law? Or the hearing of faith?”—are meant to get to the heart of the matter of the gospel and the place of human obedience. Did the Galatians receive the Spirit through keeping the law, *or* through believing the gospel that Paul had preached to them? Did God work miracles in their midst through the means of faith, *or* because the Galatians performed sufficient works of law? The same is true of the promise that God made to Abraham. Does the promise come by faith *or* works? Did Abraham receive the promise because he was circumcised and because God regarded his faith as a meritorious work?

The answers are self-evident to people who have already embraced the gospel. Abraham believed God and was given a right standing before God, because Christ’s perfect law-keeping and righteousness was reckoned to him. Are Abraham’s spiritual children (Jew and Gentile) his because they were circumcised, obeyed the dietary laws, and saw their own efforts to be obedient as the ground of justification? No, they are Abraham’s children because they were “people of faith,” not “people of law.” No one becomes a Christian on the basis of good works, only through the “hearing of faith.” I am a Gentile, not a Jew. But nevertheless, I am a child of Abraham, a recipient of the Holy Spirit, an heir to the promise, all through faith in Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me. This is why the promise is greater than the law.

Let us give Luther the final word as to what it means for Jesus to become a curse for us . . .

Without any doubt, the prophets in the Spirit saw that Christ would be the greatest transgressor, assassin, adulterer, thief, rebel, and blasphemer that ever existed on earth. When He was made the sacrifice for the sins of the entire world, He is no longer innocent and without sin, He is no longer the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary but a sinner. He has and carries the sins of Paul, a blasphemer, an oppressor, and a persecutor; of Peter, who denied Christ; and of David, an adulterer and murderer (he is

to blame when the Gentiles blaspheme the name of the Lord). In brief, He is the One who has carried the sins of all human beings on His own body, although He, Himself, did not commit them, but willingly received them. We are the authors of the sins we have committed, but they were placed on His own body so that He could satisfy them with His own blood. Thus that same sentence given by Moses [“everyone”] also includes Him (although in Himself, He was innocent) because He was found among sinners and thieves. This is no different from the judge’s guilty sentence pronounced against anyone found among thieves and sinners, although such an individual did not do anything worthy of death. Now, Christ was not only found among sinners, but of His own will, and by will of the Father, He was a companion of sinners. He took on Himself the flesh and blood of sinners, thieves, and those who have fallen into all kinds of sin. Therefore, when the law found Him among thieves, it condemned and put Him to death as a thief.²⁷⁷

And, we must add, for us and in our place.

F. The purpose of the law (3:19-22)

19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. 20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. 21 Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. 22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

If, as Paul has argued, both believing Jews and Gentiles are children of Abraham through faith in God’s promise, why then the subsequent covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai? Paul asks this very question in verse 19. “If the law cannot justify, and if the promise cannot come through obedience to the law, why, then, *did* God give the law?” Paul tackles this important question head on in verses 19-22, when he takes up the true purpose of the law and its role in redemptive history. Why the law? What does it do? What is its purpose in Israel’s history? Is the law still binding in the new covenant era?

Having told us what the law cannot do (justify), Paul explains what the law can do (expose sin). Paul has made an ironclad case that Christians are justified through faith alone, and not by obedience to law. Again the bright light of Galatians 2:16 shines on all the chapters which follow—“*we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” Since the blessings of the promise are received through faith, and as Paul has just pointed out, the law does not nullify the prior promise God made to Abraham, what value or role then, does the law have for the Galatian Christians? If God’s covenant with Abraham is in some sense superior to the law of Moses, at

²⁷⁷ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lecture 20 on Galatians 3:13

some point Paul must show from redemptive history why the law was given, as well as demonstrate to his hearers what role the law still plays for in the Christian life.

In verse 19, Paul asks the critical question, “*why then the law?*” When answering his own question (in the balance of v. 19 and then further elaborating upon his answer in vv 20-22), he says “*it was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.*” Paul gives five reasons as to why God gave the law to Israel.²⁷⁸

First, Paul addresses the effect upon sinful people as a result of God’s giving the law (“*because of transgressions*”), literally “to make wrongdoing a legal offense.” Paul provides the context which tells us that in disobeying the commandments, we are consciously sinning against a known commandment revealed to us by God.²⁷⁹ The law was not given to us to help us correct our sinfulness, so that we cease from sin and do works of law. Paul is not interested in self-help techniques, spiritual technology, or principles of Christian living. Rather, Paul says, the law was given for a very specific purpose—to expose and provoke our sinfulness by making clear we are sinning against God’s law, thereby increasing our guilt and eventual punishment in the wrath to come. When we sin, we are sinning against the Holy God.

The realization of the guilt of sin resulting from disobeying God’s law is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s writings. The law exposes our sin and brings our disobedience to light as a transgression of God’s will on the one hand (Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13), while on the other, the law stimulates sin within us to even greater rebellion and increasing guilt than when law is not present. As Paul explains in Romans 7:7; “*If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’*” The law was given to show us what sin is (an act of rebellion against God), as well as to excite and exacerbate sin within us (the flesh). This is why legalism of the sort championed by the circumcision party in Galatia completely distorts the gospel. Failing to understand that the primary purpose of the law is to expose our sins distorts the message of what God has done for us in Christ, turning it into an exhortation of all the things we must do to earn sufficient righteousness to be declared “right” before God on judgment day.

Legalism (in all its forms), is ineffective in combating sin, as Paul reminds us in Colossians 2:20–23:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

²⁷⁸ Fung, Galatians, 159.

²⁷⁹ Moo, Galatians, 234.

The law which is holy, righteous, and good (cf. Romans 7:12) was given to us by God to show us how sinful we really are by provoking our sinful nature to even greater levels of sin. More emphasis upon law keeping and good works is not going to help us refrain from sin, nor will this help us make progress in our sanctification. To turn the gospel into law is like pouring flammable liquid on hot embers.

Second, Paul says, the law was added for a specific period of time, from the time of Moses *“until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made”* (v. 19). The covenant God made with Moses (including the revelation of the decalogue) has a definite beginning—Israel’s journey to Mount Sinai. The law of Moses was in effect for a specific time, until the offspring came, Jesus. The law also has a definite end (cf. Romans 10:4). The law remains in force only until Christ comes.²⁸⁰ It was also given for a specific purpose, so that the trespass might increase. But in what sense? To put it simply, the law provokes the sinfulness already hiding within us into acts of disobedience. It shows us that we must trust the promise, (the gospel) and not seek righteousness through works of law. Obviously, none of this reflects the non-gospel of the circumcision party.

Although the covenant with Israel was in force for a limited time, from Moses to Christ,²⁸¹ and for a specific purpose (to excite sin), all ten of the commandments revealed at Sinai are reaffirmed in the New Testament as binding upon the Christian.

Excursus: The Ten Commandments in the New Testament

1). **“You shall have no other gods before me.”**

- **Luke 4:8:** And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”
- **John 17:3:** And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
- **1 John 5:21:** Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

2). **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”**

²⁸⁰ Moo, Galatians, 232-33.

²⁸¹ Meredith G. Kline, “Gospel Until the Law: Rom 5:13-14 and the Old Covenant” in The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Vol 34, No. 4 (December 1991), 433 ff.

- **John 4:24:** God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”
- **Acts 17:29:** Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.
- **Colossians 1:15:** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

3). “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

- **Matthew 5:34–35, 37:** But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. . . 37 Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.
- **1 Peter 3:15:** But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,
- **James 3:10:** From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

4). “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

- **Mark 2:27–28:** And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”
- **Hebrews 4:9–10:** So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

5). “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

- **Matthew 15:4:** For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’
- **Ephesians 6:1–3:** Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”
- **Colossians 3:20:** Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

6). “You shall not murder.”

- **Matthew 5:21–22:** “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

- **Romans 12:20:** To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”

7). **“You shall not commit adultery.”**

- **Matthew 5:27–28:** “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- **Galatians 5:16:** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.
- **1 Corinthians 6:9–10:** Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

8). **“You shall not steal.”**

- **Matthew 15:19–20:** For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”
- **Ephesians 4:28:** 28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

9). **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”**

- **Matthew 12:34–37:** How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”
- **Ephesians 4:15:** Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
- **Ephesians 4:25:** Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

10). **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”**

- **Luke 12:15:** And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”
 - **Romans 7:7:** What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”
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It is worth stressing that we must understand the law (specifically the Ten Commandments) as a republication (or better “a codification”) of the original terms of the covenant of works when God created Adam as the biological and federal head of the human race.²⁸² Paul can speak of the commandments as written upon the heart by virtue of Adam and his descendants being created as divine imagers. If these commandments were not in some sense part of the original covenant of works, then they were revealed at Sinai for the first time *de novo*.²⁸³

Yet, Paul informs the Romans that these commandments have been known by all since creation (Romans 2:12-16). And all ten of the commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament as binding, even though the law has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ through his perfect obedience (see the excursus above). The Mosaic covenant may no longer be in force, but the covenant of works remains in effect, after the Sinai covenant was superceded by the coming of Jesus. This is why the law (which was given for a limited period of redemptive history) still functions under the new covenant as both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude (as expressed in the *Heidelberg Catechism*).

Third, Paul says, the law “*was put in place through angels by an intermediary*” (v. 19c). There are two “inferior” parties mentioned, the angels and a mediator, the latter a reference to Moses. According to one commentator, “the role of angels as God’s assistants in the promulgation of the law is employed in Jewish and early Christian tradition to enhance the glory of the law (Dt. 33:2, LXX; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). Here in Galatians, however . . . it is used to show the inferiority of the law as that which was given not directly by God but only through angelic mediation.”²⁸⁴ Paul is setting up the contrast he will make in verse 20. Whatever role angels played in the giving of the law, their mention demonstrates the inferiority of the law to the promise which was given directly by God.²⁸⁵

As far as the mediator goes (the “intermediary”), Paul certainly has Moses in mind, especially in light of the comments made about Moses’ role as mediator for the people of God throughout the book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 5:5, 23-27, as well as Exodus 20:19).²⁸⁶ In the context of refuting the specific arguments of the Judaizers, Paul is pointing out that the law was given

²⁸² Horton, “*Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice*,” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, *The Law is Not of Faith*, 315.

²⁸³ S. M. Baugh, “*Galatians 5:1-6 and Personal Obligation*” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, *The Law is Not of Faith*, 279-280. Also see Lee Irons, “*Refining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology*,” in *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline*, eds., Howard Griffith and John R. Muether (Greenville SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 265-267.

²⁸⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 161.

²⁸⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 177. Longenecker adds, “Such a mediatorial role for angels in the giving of the law seems to have been part of the widespread attempt in early Judaism to assign a role for angels in all the major revelatory and redemptive events of Scripture. In rabbinic Judaism, however, there was a rather strong reaction to seeing angels intervening at the critical moments in Israel’s history, with many rabbis arguing that it was God alone who acted for the nation at these times.” Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 3:19.

²⁸⁶ Moo, *Galatians*, 235.

to the people through indirect, intermediary means, rather than directly from God, as in the case of the promise made to Abraham in which YHWH swore the covenant oath. In this sense, Paul says, the law is inferior to the promise, under-cutting a possible claim being made by the Judaizers regarding the significance of the role played by angels.

The fourth reason Paul gives in verse 20, is that “*an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one,*” which is variously and problematically interpreted. Given the obvious reference to the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4), Paul is likely correcting the erroneous notion that the idea of mediation implies that there are two equal parties who participate in the transaction, as when the people of God swear the oath in response to the giving of the law. Rather, in the Abrahamic covenant, God sovereignly imposes the terms and swears the oath himself, therefore the promise is superior to the law.²⁸⁷

The fifth reason Paul gives comes in verse 21. “*Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.*” As is his custom, Paul asks a rhetorical question, the answer to which is self-evident and exposes the folly of the hypothetical question implied in the legalism of the Judaizers. Is the law opposed to the promises of God? If the law is inferior to the promise, does that mean that law somehow contradicts the promise to Abraham or even nullifies it? This question peels back the serious error underlying the Judaizer’s understanding of the role of the law in terms of its relationship to God’s covenant with Abraham. Paul’s answer to this is the emphatic “absolutely not” (μη γένοιτο). In Paul’s argument here, as elsewhere in Galatians, the law has both a positive and a negative function.

Negatively, the law cannot impart life, because the law is contrary to faith and brings the full weight of God’s curse down upon every violation of any one of its stipulations. But we can say the law is not contrary to the promise when we recognize that the true purpose of the law is not to bring life but condemnation. The problem in the Galatian church is that Judaizers were misrepresenting the law’s true purpose. They were arguing that keeping the law does bring life which was never the reason why God gave the law!

The irony is that the defenders of the law do not understand why God gave the law in the first place, nor do they understand the law’s true purpose. Any case one makes will suffer to the degree they do not understand the fundamental issue underlying the matter. The Judaizers obviously do not “get it.” The Judaizers truly thought works of law (obedience to God’s commandments) was the means of justification and the basis for obtaining the promise was the case with Abraham in their scheme.

As the agitators saw it, the covenant with Moses (which came after the covenant with Abraham) reinterpreted Abraham’s faith as essentially obedience to the commandments, when, in fact, the opposite was true. Abraham was justified by faith because he believed the promise. So, when the Judaizers affirm the priority and superiority of the law, ironically, they not only end up denying the promise (which comes through faith), but they end up denying the true purpose of the law (which is to expose sin).

²⁸⁷ Moo, Galatians, 237.

The positive purpose for the law is spelled out in verse 22. *“But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”* In this case, the law serves to imprison the world under sin—i.e., making clear to all image bearers what God demands of his creatures. God, who speaks through the Scriptures,²⁸⁸ “locks up all men under the condemnation of sin, providing them with no possibility of escape.”²⁸⁹ God gave his law to show that all men and women are the biological and federal children of Adam (i.e., fallen), who constantly and consistently, whether in thought, word, or deed, willfully violate the revealed will of God, thereby becoming captives to the bondage of sin. This is what the law does, it renders all of us “prisoners” of sin in desperate need of redemption from its curse.

Paul connects this function of the law with the reception of the promise through faith. Since the whole world is held captive to the guilt of sin, the contrast with the promise is evident. The law, which brings a curse, points us to the promise, which is only received through faith. What was promised to Abraham is received through faith in Christ Jesus, or as Paul phrases it, “might be given to those who believe.” The fulfillment of the promise comes through the gracious covenant God made with Abraham, not through the covenant made with Moses, which while an administration of the covenant of grace, nevertheless largely operates according to the blessing/curse principle associated with the law.²⁹⁰

The law is therefore inferior to the promise, and brings a curse, not blessing, upon the whole world. When we sin, we break the law and come under its curse.²⁹¹ The “Judaizers were wrong . . . to impose new conditions for salvation (“add a codicil”) upon the original covenant of promise, which cannot be rendered null and void (“set . . . aside”) in this way.”²⁹² The agitators clearly misunderstood the covenant with Abraham, but they also failed to understand the purpose of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. They are blind guides, preaching a different gospel.

G. Liberation from the law (3:23-25)

²⁸⁸ Scripture is the “*graphe*,” i.e. the Old Testament is God’s speech. See B. B. Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 299-348.

²⁸⁹ Fung, Galatians, 164.

²⁹⁰ Baugh, “*Galatians 5:1-6 and Personal Obligation*” in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 260.

²⁹¹ Longenecker contends, “here in v 21, we can say that Paul saw the law functioning in a negative fashion vis-à-vis God’s promise: it brought about a knowledge of sin, perhaps even an intensified knowledge by actually increasing sin, and it brought condemnation by bringing all humanity under its curse. In effect, it was, as Lutheran theologians often call it, ‘God’s strange work’ was instituted in order to bring us to ‘God’s proper work.’ It was not opposed to God’s promises, for it operated in the economy of God on a different level or plane than did God’s promises.” Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:21).

²⁹² Fung, Galatians, 166.

23 Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. 24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,

Paul spells out five reasons why God gave the law, all of which are framed in light of the coming of Christ. Continuing to answer the question “why the law?”, he addresses the way God’s purposes regarding the law are seen in and through the course of redemptive history. His point is to show that his gospel is not novel—as his opponents claimed—but reflects the prior course of redemptive history as pointing to and now fulfilled in Christ. Having fulfilled its purpose, the law is no longer our guardian.

But in verses 23-25, Paul considers the role of the law in big picture terms. In verse 23, he writes “*now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.*” Paul builds upon his argument set out in the previous verses (especially v. 22) when he spoke of the whole world as a prisoner to sin. The law held us captive (as prisoners) until the coming of Christ. It was for this purpose that God gave the law to Israel—to prepare for the coming of faith. As Wright notes, Torah [law] points out Israel’s sin but also the more specific fact that the Deuteronomic curses had fallen heavenly upon the people in the extended exile with foreigners ruling over them, just as Deuteronomy 28 and 32 had warned.”²⁹³

The power of the law of God to reveal sin and expose our guilt reinforces the idea that the law shows us our need of a Savior who can redeem us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, bearing the penalty for our every infraction of the law (cf. Romans 7:7-12 ff). “The coming of faith is therefore, identical with the coming of Christ, who is the object of faith; it is the coming of Christ, making possible the coming of faith.”²⁹⁴ God is working out in human history his ultimate purpose of redeeming his elect and glorifying his name.

In verse 24, Paul introduces the oft-discussed notion that the law is a schoolmaster. “*So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*” The term *paidagogos* (a guardian) has an interesting background. The *paidagogos* was a trusted slave who ensured that the sons of upper class Greeks and Romans went to and from school (their tutors), behaved themselves, and completed their lessons. They also ensured the boy did his chores. The *paidagogos* carried the young man’s satchel, and sat in a vestibule outside, or even in the classroom where he could observe his charge’s conduct.²⁹⁵ He also carried a “switch” (a tree branch) to give the boy a swat on the behind. Some *paidagogoi* had the reputation of being exceedingly harsh. The *paidagogos* functions as the boy’s guardian as the chosen trustee of the

²⁹³ Wright, Galatians, 237.

²⁹⁴ Fung, Galatians, 168.

²⁹⁵ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 182.

boy's father.²⁹⁶ Paul understands the law to exercise a similar function. In the light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the "hearing of faith," we can now look back to see that the law functioned as that stern guardian on behalf of the Father ensuring that we come to Christ for our justification.²⁹⁷

In this "second" or theological use of the law, the purpose of the law is to serve as a harsh schoolmaster, which gives us no rest or confidence in our self-righteousness and obedience to the commandments, until we seek the grace of God in Christ. The law which functions in different ways in different covenants is,²⁹⁸ according to the second use a stern tutor which guides us and regulates us, exposing our sin, until the coming of Christ, so that the superiority of faith and the promise can be seen. Luther describes the purpose of the law this way,

The true use of the law is to teach me that I am a sinner until I, myself, will admit it and be humbled by it so that I may come to Christ and be justified by faith. But faith is not any kind of law or work at all but a firm confidence that takes hold of Christ, who "is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4). In what way? It's not that He has abolished the old law in order to give us a new law or that He is a judge that must now be appeased by works, as the Papists have taught. Instead, He is the end of the law unto righteousness for all those who believe — that is, everyone who believes in Him is righteous; the law will never have any reason to make any accusation against him. The law then is good, holy, beneficial, and necessary if we use it properly. But those who abuse the law, in the first place are the hypocrites who grant it the power to justify. Second, those who despair and will not understand that the law is a schoolmaster to lead them to Christ, the law humbles them, not to destroy them but to lead them to their salvation, for the fact is that God wounds in order to heal and kills in order to give life.²⁹⁹

But in verse 25, Paul points out that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there has been a significant change in the course of redemptive history, seen in the fact that "*now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*" Since "faith" has come,³⁰⁰ Paul indicates that a new era in redemptive history associated with the fulfillment of God's promise in the person of Jesus Christ has dawned (i.e., "the age to come"). Christians are no longer under the stern tutelage of the *paidagogos*.³⁰¹ The law has accomplished its purpose, fulfilled in the testament (*diatheke*) ratified in the shed blood of Jesus. The law has prepared the way for the coming of Jesus and

²⁹⁶ Moo, Galatians, 243.

²⁹⁷ Fung, Galatians, 169-170.

²⁹⁸ Horton, Covenant and Salvation, 149.

²⁹⁹ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect. 25, on Galatians 3:24.

³⁰⁰ Paul uses πίστις with the definite article ("the").

³⁰¹ "Paul means not faith generically, but the particular faith referred to in v 22b that has to do with 'the faithfulness of Jesus Christ' and humanity's response of faith." See, Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:25.

the exercise of faith by showing us that we were enslaved to sin and in desperate need of forgiveness. The law is not opposed to the promise and does not nullify it. Calvin points out,

Under the reign of Christ there is no longer a childhood that needs to be ruled by a schoolmaster, and so the law has finished its task. However, it has not been abolished. In so far as it is a rule of life, it is a bridle that keeps us in the fear of the Lord, a spur to correct the weakness of the flesh. In so far as it is profitable for teaching, correcting, reproving and instructing believers in every good work, it is as much in force as it ever was and remains intact. It is abolished only in the sense that it remits nothing and pardons nothing but calls us to reckoning. It does not openly exhibit Christ and his grace but points to him in the distance, enclosed in ceremonies as in wrappings. It is this quality of the law that has been abolished, so that in so far as the office of Moses differs from the covenant of grace, it has come to an end.³⁰²

In light of Paul's exposing of the Judaizer's faulty understanding of redemptive history, the apostle returns to the fundamental question, "*why the law?*" No doubt, the law serves a very important purpose, but we must be very clear as to what that purpose is. In Galatians 3, especially verses 15-25, Paul explains that the primary purpose of the law is to show us that we are sinners who need a Savior. According to the second use, the law functions as a stern tutor of a guardian of a minor. The law holds us prisoner to sin until we are released from its tutorial function when we embrace Jesus Christ through faith. The law accomplishes its purpose when it exposes how sinful we truly are. Once we have come to faith in Jesus, the law is no longer a guardian for us, like that needed by small children.

When we consider the law from this perspective—the so-called "second" or "theological" use of the law— a number of things should be noted. For one thing, it should be absolutely clear that there will be no one who obtains the promise because they obeyed the law, or earned God's favor through their good works, or through their obedience to God's commandments. Paul is both emphatic and clear. The law was not given to bring life. It was given to inflict the curse and death.

When we die and stand before God on the day of judgment, God will not compare us to others. He will not inquire about our sincerity. Nor will he cut us any slack if we tried our hardest to be good people. God will measure us against the standard found in his law. He will demand perfect obedience to every command. In this sense, the law is like a ten-link chain. Break but a single link and the whole chain is useless, the point made in James 2:10 which we cited previously: "*Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.*"

When someone encounters God's law and thinks to themselves, "well then, who can gain eternal life?" the law has done its work. In the words of one preacher, we must see the law like a mirror. We look in the mirror and we see we are dirty. The mirror shows us our true condition, driving us to the soap and water. We don't take the mirror down off the wall and attempt to clean ourselves with the mirror! So it is with the law. The law shows us that we

³⁰² Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, on Galatians 3:25.

need Christ. This, then is the answer to the question, “*why the law?*” The law has taken all of us “prisoners of sin.” But now that Christ has come, the one to whom the law pointed, and then suffers its curse, Jesus put an end to the law’s role as our stern guardian. Jesus, Paul says, loved us, redeeming us by becoming a curse so that God can forgive our sins and grant us the inheritance (Galatians 2:20).

To argue as the Judaizers were doing, that we must add our obedience to the death and righteousness of Christ is to deny that the death and righteousness of Christ is sufficient to save. The *Belgic Confession* puts it this way: “to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it would then follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior” (*Article 22*). It is to say that God must accept us, in part, on the basis of our own righteousness. The Judaizing “gospel” undermines the covenant promises that God made to Abraham (which demands the “hearing with faith”), and distorts the meaning of the covenant God made with Moses in the giving of the law, which does not nullify, or redefine the prior covenant made with Abraham. In different ways, both of these covenants point us to Jesus Christ, his obedience, and curse bearing, not to our own merit earned by our own obedience.

What God promises to give his people through faith in Jesus—redemption from the curse of the law, the forgiveness of the guilt of sin, a righteousness which justifies, and the gift of the Holy Spirit—are freely given to those who trust in Jesus. He is that seed to whom the promise pointed. Through him, we might receive all the blessings of the promise made to Abraham’s children. The person who trusts in Jesus Christ alone for their justification is regarded by God as though they themselves had perfectly obeyed the law and as though they had never sinned. This is why the law does not nullify the promise. This, then, is Paul’s answer to the question, “why the law?” For what God demands under the law (perfect obedience) he has freely given us in Christ! And that righteousness of Jesus Christ becomes ours only through faith in him.

H. Gentiles and Jews one in Christ (3:26-29)

26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

One important point still remains for Paul to make. Having addressed God’s covenant promise to Abraham and then explained the purpose of the law, in verses 26-29, Paul moves on to discuss baptism, the sign and seal of God’s gracious covenant. Baptism replaces circumcision in the new covenant as a reflection of the redemptive historical shift just described, the end of the tutorial age of law and the coming of Jesus Christ.

Paul is speaking of all true children of Abraham (Jew and Gentile) when he states in verse 26, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith,” re-stating the point he made in verse 25, just considered, “but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the law].” By

speaking of both groups (Jew and Gentile) as “sons” of God, Paul reminds the Galatians that sons, even adopted sons, are legally entitled to receive their inheritance from their father. Both believing Jew and Gentile are sons of God through faith in Christ, so both groups therefore are heirs to the promise, because both are the legitimate children of Abraham. Much to the Judaizer’s chagrin, this includes uncircumcised Gentiles who believe the promise revealed in the gospel.

In verse 27, Paul introduces baptism as the new covenant replacement of circumcision as the sign and seal of God’s gracious covenant. Paul connects baptism directly to union with Christ. *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* Some scholars have thought that in this verse and in verse 28 which follows, Paul is citing from a baptismal liturgy of the apostolic church, with his words therefore already familiar to the Galatians.³⁰³ For Paul, baptism is “the rite of initiation into Christ, that is, into union with Christ.”³⁰⁴ As the sign of the new covenant, baptism marks entrance of believers and their children into the new covenant community which is Christ’s church. Baptism is the visible (or outward) sign and seal of an invisible spiritual reality, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Christ.³⁰⁵

While baptism is not the cause of regeneration—since this is unseen the work of the Holy Spirit applying to us the saving benefits of Jesus Christ—baptism is, however, the visible sign and seal of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins.³⁰⁶ Through faith in the promise God makes to his people (starting with Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ), the baptized party is regarded as regenerate and as though their sins have been forgiven unless and until they demonstrate otherwise. While rejecting the idea of baptismal regeneration,³⁰⁷ Reformed Christians do believe that where the sign is present (water), those things signified by the water of baptism (regeneration, cleansing from the stain of sin, forgiveness and the ratification of God’s covenant promise) are present.³⁰⁸ Baptism is much more than our testimony to the fact that we have believed. Rather, it is our ratification of God’s covenant promise, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”³⁰⁹

Paul speaks of baptism not as mere ritual performed in obedience, but in the sense of being

³⁰³ Betz, Galatians, 181-185.

³⁰⁴ Fung, Galatians, 172

³⁰⁵ Horton, The Christian Faith, 788-792.

³⁰⁶ Michael Horton, People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology (Louisville: Westminster John Know, 2008), 99-123.

³⁰⁷ Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 477.

³⁰⁸ J. V. Fesko, Word, Water, Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Book, 2010), 129-155.

³⁰⁹ Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), 90-102.

“baptized into” Christ, or being baptized so as to become a member of Christ. For Paul, baptism is the “putting on of Christ” as one puts on new, clean clothes. As Calvin once put it, “Jesus Christ is our garment, as it were, and he covers up all that would cause the Father to reject us.”³¹⁰ Baptism confirms the baptized person’s new spiritual identity—we are new people by virtue of our union with Christ, the reason why from the earliest days, Christians wore white robes when they presented themselves for baptism.

The metaphor of a change of clothing associated with regeneration and the forgiveness of sin comes directly from the Old Testament. One thinks of Isaiah 61:10 (*“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels”*), or Zechariah 3:3, (*“Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments”*).³¹¹ When one is baptized into Christ, they are said to “put on Christ” and are clothed in his spotless robe of righteousness. They no longer stand before God in the filthy rags of their own sinfulness and pitiful attempts at good works. The baptized’s identity has changed from estranged sinner to united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

Paul makes four important points in connection to baptism. First, there is no such thing as an “unbaptized Christian,” in the New Testament. The thief on the cross is the single exception rather than the rule. The crucified but repentant thief will be in paradise with our Lord even though he was not baptized (Luke 23:43). Often attributed to Saint Augustine, it is correctly said that “it is not the absence of baptism which damns, but the despising of baptism.” Baptism is not optional, nor unimportant. Jesus commands it (Matthew 28:20), and we see adult converts and their families baptized in a number of New Testament texts. More on that momentarily.

Second, according to Paul, baptism is regarded as both the *sign* and *seal* of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:9-12). In Colossians 2:9-12, Paul points out why baptism replaces circumcision when the redemptive historical fulfillment of the original sign takes place in Christ’s work of redemption. A knife-cutting ritual, in which blood was shed (circumcision) is replaced by a water-ordeal (baptism) which was anticipated by Noah’s deliverance from judgment in the form of the waters of the flood by the Ark (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-21). We see this too when the Israelites passed safely through the waters of the Red Sea in the Exodus (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4). It appears again when Israel passed safely through the waters of the Jordan as they entered the land of promise (Joshua 3:13). All members of Israel passed through the water, men, women, and children who composed the entire clan (family). This pre-figures the household baptisms of the New Testament.

That baptism was applied to children of believers is clear from texts such as 1 Cor. 7:14 (*“For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy”*), as well as from

³¹⁰ Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 344.

³¹¹ See Fung, *Galatians*, 172.

the numerous household baptisms which occur throughout the New Testament (cf. Acts 16:14-15, 31-34; Acts 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:16). The faith which unites us to Christ (of which baptism is a sign and seal) indicates that the one who is baptized is said to be clothed in Christ (verse 27). "Paul mentions baptism here because he is about to emphasize the oneness of those who are in Christ (v. 28, where the `all' of v. 26 recurs): the visible sign of this oneness is not faith but baptism; the oneness with Christ that is symbolized in baptism is the basis for the oneness in Christ."³¹²

Third, Paul is speaking of baptism with water. There is no need to pit "water baptism" against "Spirit baptism," as the one (baptism in water) is a sign and seal of the other (baptism in the Holy Spirit). Paul puts these two things side by side in Titus 3:5; "*He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*" This fits with Paul's declaration in Ephesians 4:5, "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*" Baptism is a once for all sacrament of entrance into union with Christ. It is not to be repeated.

Finally, baptism is closely connected to faith, ruling out the Roman Catholic notion of baptism being efficacious simply by virtue of the act itself—i.e., *ex opere operato*.³¹³ Faith is mentioned fifteen times in Galatians and baptism but once, no small point. As one commentator notes, "from the standpoint of the practice of baptism in apostolic times, faith and baptism were not necessarily two distinct experiences separated by a period of time but two inseparable, almost co-incident parts of the one single experience of transition from the old to the new."³¹⁴ Faith in Jesus Christ, and the sign and seal of faith, baptism, are inseparable in the New Testament. One who exercises faith in Christ must be baptized as the sign and seal of the benefits of Christ and as the means of entrance into Christ's church.

Should that person be the head of a household (presumably with children present unless not possible, as in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch), the teaching of the New Testament is clear that children are presented for baptism upon the profession of faith of the head of the household—Lydia and the Philippian jailer come to mind (Acts 16)—and not when the child reaches a fictional "age of accountability" and decides to follow Jesus.

In verse 28, Paul moves from discussing baptism to continuing his earlier point about Christ's saving work serving to bring Jew and Gentile together into one body, Christ's. "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" Paul places three of the most diverse and problematic groups together to make his point. In Paul's time, it was customary for a pious and God-fearing Jew to give daily thanks to

³¹² Fung, *Galatians*, 174-75.

³¹³ "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church, and made sharers in her mission. `Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.'" See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995) sec. 1213.

³¹⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 174.

God that he was not a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.³¹⁵ But once “in Christ,” there is no difference in status between Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free. In Christ, we are all one, members of his body and united through faith and baptism. The social and racial distinctions of the old covenant and the Greco-Roman world are removed in the new covenant when God creates a new society of his people redeemed by Jesus.

A number of writers have attempted to use the apostle’s list to justify androgynous sexuality in which there is no essential gender difference between male and female (i.e., the ancient gnostics) or to support the ordination of women to the office of minister of word and sacrament, or to the office of elder, as those in churches advocating women’s ordination attempt to do.³¹⁶ Paul does not say that the roles assigned to male and female elsewhere no longer apply because of what he says here. All we need to do is look to Paul’s exhortations to women in 1 Timothy 2:12 (“*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet*”), or the exclusively male qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon (as in 1 Timothy 3:1-12). Galatians 3:28 does clearly affirm that men and women are on equal footing before God, as are both Jew and Gentile, slave and free man. As Longenecker puts it “when early Christians spoke of being ‘baptized into Christ’ they also spoke of the old divisions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female having come to an end.”³¹⁷ Racial, sexual, and socio-economic factors are not to divide us since Christ has died to bring all of us together into one body. But dividing the Galatian churches along racial lines was the every thing the Judaizers were doing.

In verse 29, Paul summarizes several of his earlier points. “*And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*” Those who are united to Christ through faith alone, belong to Christ. Since Christ is the true seed of Abraham, all who are Christ’s are also Abraham’s true seed and, therefore, heirs to all the blessings of the promise. In the new covenant, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign and seal of covenant membership (cf. Colossians 2:11-12). By insisting upon undergoing circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses as a means of justification, the Judaizers based the promise on obedience to law, and denied any attachment of “sola” (only) to faith. These agitators were driving a wedge between Jew and Gentile, and this when Christ’s sacrificial death for sinners was, in part, designed to unite these two groups into one body (Ephesians 2:11-22). It is Christ who unites diverse ethnic and cultural groups into one body. It is heresy and sin which divides us.

I. From slavery to sonship (4:1-7)

1 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his

³¹⁵ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 187; Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:28.

³¹⁶ See, for example, Clarence Boomsma, Male and Female, One in Christ (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 31-41.

³¹⁷ Longenecker, Galatians, on 3:28.

father. 3 In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

N. T. Wright describes this section of Galatians as a high point in a letter filled with high points, as Paul tells a short story to illustrate his theological arguments so far.³¹⁸ Through faith in Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles are both justified before God, both groups are heirs to YHWH’s promise, and both are recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once baptized into Christ, Paul says, believers “put on Christ” as though one were putting on new clean garments.

In the opening verses of chapter 4, Paul discusses in more detail the benefits of being adopted into the family of God. In verses 1-2 of chapter 4, he speaks of the marvel of slaves to sin becoming children of God: *“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.”* Paul uses the legal terms “heir” and “child” to describe the believer’s relationship to God. In verse 29, the heir stands in relationship to Abraham. But in Galatians 4:1, the heir is now seen in relationship to God. The heir is a child, literally an “infant.”³¹⁹ To be a child of Abraham through faith is equivalent to being a child of God and an heir to the full inheritance. If Gentiles can become legitimate children of Abraham, then they too are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, not because of circumcision.

Until the child grows up and reaches maturity (the legal age), the child does not receive any benefits from the family estate. The heir, while still under age, is really no better off than a slave (in Paul’s story), although in reality the heir will receive much. The heir, in this case, is not yet in possession of his inheritance since his father does not yet feel that it is time for him to come into full possession of it. But that time will come. Meanwhile, the child (Israel) is under a guardian (the law), but the child will grow up, reach maturity and finally gain the inheritance.³²⁰

In verse 3, Paul applies the legal analogy of heir and an estate to the situation at hand. No doubt, Israel’s history is in Paul’s mind when making this analogy. He’s thinking of Israel’s

³¹⁸ Wright, Galatians, 248-249.

³¹⁹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 192.

³²⁰ According to Longenecker, “in the three earlier passages where the first person plural occurs, it either (1) specifically refers to those who are Jewish (so 2:15–16, “we who are Jews by birth,” and 3:23–25, ‘we ... under the law’), or (2) can be read as a portion stemming from early Jewish Christianity, either in whole or in part (so 3:13–14). Likewise here, we believe, the first person plural of 4:3, as well as that of 4:5, ought to be understood as referring primarily to Jewish believers: in v 3 as Paul’s application of his illustration of the Jewish experience under the custodianship of the law and in vv 4–5 as Paul’s quotation of an early Jewish Christian confessional portion, with vv 6–7, then, applying the thrust of the confession cited in vv 4–5 to his Gentile converts’ situation and therefore reverting back to his usual second person plural ‘you.’” See Longenecker, Galatians, on Galatians 4:2.

liberation from their bondage in Egypt under cruel task masters.³²¹ *"In the same way we also, when we were children, [we] were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world."* The Greek term translated "elementary principles" is *stoicheia*, which refers to the "rudimentary principles of morality and religion, more specifically the requirements of legalism by which people lived before Christ."³²² When we were children, we were enslaved to the basic "principles of the world."

A number of commentators contend the term refers to "angelic powers" or cosmic forces—spiritual and occult forces.³²³ As one writer points out, however, the connection of the *stoicheia* with immaturity, as well as the fact that the law is an instrument of bondage, supports the argument that the reference is more likely referring to, "elementary imperfect teaching To accept the Jewish law or some equivalent system is to come under slavery to some imperfect doctrine. But if *stoicheia* denotes elemental spirits, then it has to be explained how submitting to the regulations of the Jewish law is tantamount to being enslaved by these spirits."³²⁴

In Galatia the basic principles of the world (perhaps a synonym for "this present evil age"—cf. Galatians 1:4) refers to the notion that it is indeed possible to be declared righteous before God based upon human merit or rewards earned through obedience to the law. This is contrary to Paul's assertion that works of law do not justify.³²⁵ If associated with American civil religion, the *stoicheia* would be something along the lines of "good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell." Or, "God looks on the heart" and rewards those who are sincere and try their hardest. Since Americans believe that people are basically good, many assume that everyone goes to heaven when they die, notorious evil doers excepted, something akin to Paul's "basic principles." Paul, on the contrary, teaches that all people are sinful and under God's condemnation. Only those in Christ are given eternal life and receive the forgiveness of sins.

Paul's thought is thoroughly eschatological—looking ahead to final things. His stress upon the age to come breaking in on the present is evident in verses 4 and 5. *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."* Paul speaks of two significant time markers in verse 4. The "fullness of time," and followed by "God sent his son." Some consider this to be a citation in use throughout the apostolic church and therefore already known to the Galatians,

³²¹ Moo, Galatians, 259.

³²² Fung, Galatians, 174-75.

³²³ See the helpful discussion in Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 193-194; and Moo, Galatians, 260-63.

³²⁴ Fung, Galatians, 190.

³²⁵ Longenecker adds, "when talking about the Jewish experience, it was the Mosaic law in its condemnatory and supervisory functions that comprised the Jews' "basic principles" of religion. Later in v 9 when talking about the Gentile experience, it was paganism with its veneration of nature and cultic rituals that made up the Gentiles' "basic principles" of religion." See Longenecker, Galatians, on 4:3

which Paul cites here in support of his position on the law and the inheritance (sonship).³²⁶

The fullness (*pleroma*) of time is a widely used phrase among the first Christians³²⁷ and is assuredly a reference to the arrival of Jesus whose birth ushers in the age to come in all its fullness.³²⁸ The Son is the eternal Son, Jesus,³²⁹ who was born of woman, identifying with those whom he has come to redeem. When the fullness of time came (the arrival of the age to come), our freedom from slavery came about in the person of Jesus Christ, who became flesh for the express purpose of “redeeming those under the law.”

Paul returns to his previous point, that Jesus’ death is said to purchase our freedom (cf. Galatians 3:13-14). The result of Jesus’ saving mission (redemption) was that all those in Christ (whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female) receive the full “rights of sons” through adoption. All of those in Christ receive the full inheritance to which they are entitled—that which Israel’s prophets described as a time of Israel’s restoration and inclusion of the Gentiles. When the right time comes, our Father deems us to be of age (mature) and thereby ready to receive the estate we already own by virtue of election, but to which we have not yet been granted title because of our immaturity.

The key, however, is that the reception of the inheritance is directly tied to the coming of Jesus Christ. This recalls Paul’s statement in Galatians 1:4, we are “rescued from this present evil age.” With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new age of redemption—including freedom from the curse of the law—has arrived. Grounded in Paul’s two-age eschatology, the new age of redemption has dawned, while the present evil age, with its basic principles of works righteousness is passing away—a point made in chapters 8-10 of the Book of Hebrews. Christians have been delivered from the evils of this age (sin, guilt, condemnation, death), having provisionally entered the age to come and the new creation through the indwelling Holy Spirit who applies to us all the saving merits of Jesus Christ. We are redeemed from sin by a redeemer, Jesus Christ. We cannot overcome sin by our own good works. In the case of the Judaizers, this means circumcision, keeping a kosher diet, and seeking righteousness through works of law. But the true children of Abraham to whom Paul is referring are justified through faith.

Paul reminds the Galatians of some of the basic facts of the gospel which he no doubt had

³²⁶ Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:4-5.

³²⁷ Longenecker notes that “‘when the fullness of time came’—i.e., that the coming of Christ was fixed in the purpose of God—was common in early Jewish Christianity. It was part of Jesus’ consciousness (cf. Mark 1:15; Luke 1:21), appears in the Church’s early preaching (cf. Acts 2:16ff.; 3:18), and is particularly prominent in the Gospels of Matthew (cf., e.g., the evangelist’s use of πληρόω, ‘fulfill,’ at 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9, ten of these being his distinctive introductory ‘fulfillment formulae’) and John (cf., e.g., the evangelist’s seven editorial quotations: 2:17; 12:15, 38, 40; 19:24, 36, 37). Paul shares in this understanding (cf. Acts 13:27; Rom 3:26; 5:6; Eph 1:10), though his usual way of expressing fulfillment to a Gentile audience is simpler, more direct, and without the word πληρόω.” See Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:4-5.

³²⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 184, Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 26.

³²⁹ Gathercole, *The Pre-Existent Son* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 28-29.

taught them during his time with them in Galatia. Jesus was “born of a woman.” “He was “born under the law.” These facts are the foundation of Paul’s point about the dawn of the age to come. It is worth noting that it is much better to speak of Christ’s virginal conception than his virgin birth. Jesus’ birth was normal. His supernatural conception was the act of God the Holy Spirit, not the birth. Since our Lord knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), when Paul says he is born of a woman, he is referring to the fact that Jesus had a true human nature which he took from the DNA of his mother, Mary.³³⁰ Although he is the eternal Son of God and second person of the Holy Trinity, in his incarnation, Jesus Christ takes to himself a true human nature.³³¹ We can say of Jesus that he is every bit as human as are we.³³²

Paul also says, Jesus was born “under the law.” Although the author of these very commandments, our Lord Jesus was subject to the law which he would subsequently fulfill in its entirety, obeying its every demand in thought, word, and deed. Jesus was born under the law, requiring perfect obedience to its obligations. Yet, his death is said to remove the curse of the law, which is why the apostle speaks of Jesus Christ as the redeemer, that one who came to die for the guilt of all of our lawbreaking (sin), and the one who fulfills the requirements of the law through his life of obedience.³³³

In the Reformed tradition, we often speak of Jesus fulfilling the demands of the law through his active obedience, while in his passive obedience he willingly dies upon the cross, bearing in his own body the curse of the law due us because of our sins.³³⁴ As Paul makes clear throughout the Book of Galatians, the merits of Christ’s life and death become ours through faith alone, not through faith *plus* works of the law, or through faith *plus* circumcision. While NPP folk such as N.T. Wright belittle what he describes as the fundamentalist notion of “getting saved and going to heaven,” it is virtually self-evident in Galatians that Christ’s cross is fundamental to Paul’s understanding of how the guilt of our sin is removed. Christ’s life and death “redeem” those under the law (i.e., under its condemnation). All saving merit is his, not ours.

Since we are the fallen children of Adam, we only become children of God through adoption,

³³⁰ According the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 35, Q. What does it mean that he “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary”? A. That the eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took to himself, through the working of the Holy Spirit, from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, a true human nature so that he might also become David’s true descendant, like his brothers in all things except for sin.

³³¹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 468-482.

³³² For a defense of the historicity of the virgin birth and its necessity to orthodox Christology see J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), and B. B. Warfield, *Christology and Criticism*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 447-458.

³³³ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 196.

³³⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3.377-386

which is one of the fruits of justification by faith alone.³³⁵ If Jesus is eternally son and we are born as sinful rebels, we must become sons and daughters through his redemptive work on our behalf. As Paul spoke previously, Christ loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20). We enter into union with Christ through faith alone and once we are clothed in his perfect righteousness and united to him by the Holy Spirit, all of which are signed and sealed to us in our baptism (Galatians 3:27), we are said to be sons and daughters and the legitimate heirs to all of the covenant promises of God which constitute our inheritance. Paul is drawing from the Greco-Roman conception of adoption then enshrined in Roman law.³³⁶ A properly adopted child becomes a legitimate heir to the family inheritance.

But there are loud Old Testament echoes here too, as in Exodus 4:22 (*“Israel is my firstborn son”*) and especially Hosea 11:1, when the prophet speaks of Israel as a “child” and a “son.” In Romans 9:4, Paul likely thinking of the passages just mentioned says of Israel, *“they are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.”* As members of the New Israel (Christ’s church), all those in Christ are now sons and daughters of God and heirs to everything he has promised to Abraham.³³⁷

In verse 6, Paul makes a direct connection between the inheritance, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. *“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”* There is a similar connection between Christ’s incarnation, the means through which we are redeemed from the curse of the law, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the messenger (herald) of the age to come.³³⁸ The way in which Paul speaks here, “because you are sons . . . God sent his Spirit into your hearts,” at first glance implies that sonship and justification precedes the gift of the Spirit. Given the close association in time and experience between these events we ought be careful not to read this as though we are aware that we are justified *first*, and only then receive the Holy Spirit later. These things occur simultaneously or in close proximity. Vos draws the big picture ramification as follows. *“If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus dwells in you, then God will make the indwelling Spirit accomplish for you what He did for Jesus in the latter’s resurrection.”*³³⁹ To possess the Spirit is to receive the inheritance promised to all God’s sons and daughters.

Once justified through faith alone, all Christians are adopted as sons and daughters. We are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who as Paul says is sent “into our hearts.” It is God who sends

³³⁵ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 642-646; Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 197-204.

³³⁶ Moo, *Galatians*, 267-268.

³³⁷ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 197-198.

³³⁸ Moo draws out the similarities here with Romans 8:1-17. See Moo, *Galatians*, 264.

³³⁹ See Gerhardus Vos, “*The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit*,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed., Richard Gaffin (Phillipsburg P & R, 1980), 102.

both his Son and his Spirit to accomplish our salvation and unite us to Jesus.³⁴⁰ So much for Jesus standing at the door of our hearts waiting for us to open the latch and let him in. The term “heart” [*kardia*] is much more than the organ which pumps blood. In the ancient world, the “heart” was understood to be the organ of thought as well as the seat of the emotions,³⁴¹ enabling Christians to cry out “Abba, Father,” an intimate family expression drawn from Aramaic.³⁴² As Jesus, the true and eternal son, can cry out “Abba, Father,” so too we as adopted children indwelt by the Holy Spirit can now approach God in the same intimate manner. Jesus intercedes for us at the Father’s right hand. It is he who sends the blessed Holy Spirit into our hearts.

This text (and others like it—i.e., John 14:26, 16:7, 20:22), point to the Western reading of the *filioque* clause in the Creed—the Father and the Son *send* the Holy Spirit.³⁴³ On a practical level, this reminds God’s people (especially Gentiles) that we who were once far off and estranged from God, have been brought near (Ephesians 2:12-13) because God sent his Son and his Spirit.

In Galatians 4:7, Paul sums up his main point; namely that the Galatians are no longer children, they have grown up, or at least should have. “*So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*” As one commentator notes, “With Christ’s coming, ‘no longer’ are believers in Jesus under slavery to whatever was preparatory in their religious lives, whether to the Mosaic law as Jews (so 3:23–25) or to pagan ideas and practices as Gentiles (anticipating 4:8–9).”³⁴⁴ Every believer in Jesus Christ is no longer a slave to sin, nor to the elementary principles of works righteousness which are passing away. Instead, with the coming of Christ, a new eschatological age has dawned in which we are redeemed from the curse of the law, given a new and right standing before God through faith alone, adopted as sons and daughters (justification), made heirs to all the blessings of the promise, and given the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Professor Bruce aptly puts it, “believers are now full-grown sons and daughters of God; they have been given their freedom and the power to use it responsibly.”³⁴⁵

How then, could the Judaizers offer anything remotely this comforting and assuring? Their non-gospel, if true, marks a return to the days of slavery when Israel was in bondage in Egypt

³⁴⁰ So, says Longenecker, “The appearance of the expression ‘into our hearts’ shows that the verb ἐξαπέστειλεν (“he sent”) here is not to be understood as a historical aorist (as in v 4, ‘God sent his Son’), and so seen as God’s historical act of sending the Spirit at Pentecost, but as stating in punctiliar fashion what God did in the Galatians’ experience when they responded to the gospel by faith and so became ‘sons of God.’” Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:6.

³⁴¹ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, s.v. “καρδία.”

³⁴² Bruce, *Galatians*, 189-199.

³⁴³ See the discussion in, Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 303-306.

³⁴⁴ Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:7.

³⁴⁵ Bruce, *Galatians*, 200.

or taken into captivity in Babylon. If they had their way, the Judaizers would take the Galatians back out into the desert of Sinai and return them to types and shadows, ignoring Jesus as the Pillar of Fire and the provider of heavenly manna who even now is leading his people to the heavenly city along the narrow road. No wonder Paul is utterly amazed that the Galatians were so quickly and easily seduced by such a hopeless message.

Application

After demonstrating that believing Gentiles are as much the children of Abraham as are believing Jews, Paul explained the purpose of the law—to excite and expose sin, to ensure that we understand our sin in terms of our personal rebellion against God and his revealed will. In verses 27-29 of chapter three, as well as in the opening seven verses of chapter four, Paul introduces two important points, baptism and adoption. Before we move on, it is worth briefly summarizing their importance to the Christian life.

Those of us who come from evangelical and fundamentalist backgrounds tend to get a bit nervous when the discussion of baptism heads in the direction that Paul takes us here. For Paul, baptism is the initiatory rite marking our entrance into Christ. To be baptized, Paul says, is to “put on Christ,” as we would put on clean clothes. In this case, the garment we put on is the robe of Jesus Christ’s perfect righteousness. Baptism is not incidental to the Christian life, it marks the beginning of the Christian life. Baptism is our public identification with Christ, not coming forward during an altar call.

Paul would be shocked, I think, that many so-called “evangelical churches” act as though baptism was not required, or that baptism was incidental to church membership and the Christian life. Paul certainly sees baptism as very much more than our personal testimony to regeneration. Baptism replaces circumcision as the “sign and seal” of membership in God’s gracious covenant first promised to Adam (Genesis 3:15) and subsequently made (ratified) with Abraham. Once Christ has come and undergone the circumcision of God on the cross (Colossians 2:11-12) a blood-shedding sign is no longer valid, which is why the sign and seal changes to a water ordeal (from circumcision to baptism). But what is signified (membership in God’s gracious covenant) does not change. The Judaizers have missed the obvious—with the coming of Jesus, the sign they so eagerly champion (circumcision), belongs to “this present evil age” and is a token of the elementary principles of the world. But in the age to come baptism is the sign and seal of membership in the people of God. As Horton puts it, “baptism is the pledge of our participation in the age to come, not the cause of regeneration.”³⁴⁶

As for the contemporary situation, even though many react negatively against the Reformed doctrine on this point because it supposedly smells of Romanism, we need to put our prejudices against Rome aside for a moment and take a look at what Paul actually says. Paul does not teach that the water of baptism regenerates, as Rome erroneously contends.³⁴⁷ But he does teach that baptism is a sign and seal of a real but invisible spiritual reality, regeneration by the

³⁴⁶ Horton, *People and Place*, 119.

³⁴⁷ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995) sec. 683

Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus (cf. Romans 4:11). We cannot see that the blood of Christ has washed away our sins. We cannot see the Holy Spirit give us the new birth. But we can see the water of baptism. As surely as we have the water applied to us—by faith—we believe that the blood of Christ has also washed away the guilt of our sins and that the Holy Spirit has given us the new birth. When the sign is present, so too, by faith, we believe the thing signified is present (Titus 3:5). If baptism is sign and seal of a gracious covenant, God's grace is made clear in the baptism of believers and their children since the covenant children can do nothing but receive.

As the baptized people of God, we are heirs to all of the promises that God has made to Abraham, namely, justification, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and adoption as the sons and daughters of God. When we have doubts, are struggling with sin, or with assurance of our salvation, let us learn to look to our baptism, where the promises of God are visibly displayed for us to see each and every time someone is baptized. In the water of baptism we are signed and sealed with God's gracious promise to redeem his people. Baptism is a sign of assurance of salvation.

This is closely related to a second point that Paul raises here—we are the adopted children of God. We who are by nature children of wrath and under God's curse (Ephesians 2:1-10), can now draw near to God in intimate fellowship as his beloved children who are signed and sealed with the water of covenant ratification. As Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father," so can we (Romans 8:15-17). When we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, God cannot turn us away even as he cannot turn away his own dear Son. Through faith in Jesus Christ, signed and sealed through baptism, all of the riches of heaven and the blessings of eternal life are ours. God has sealed that promise to us in baptism! He has clothed us in the robe of the faultless righteousness of Jesus Christ!

J. No turning back! (4:8-11)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years! 11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Whenever legalism like that taught by the Judaizers rears its ugly head, re-enslavement to the basic principles of the world is not far behind. Jesus died to redeem his people, yet some sought to return to the things which had enslaved them and from which he had set his people free. The practical consequence of such a move is to willingly give up freedom for slavery. Once re-enslaved to the basic principles of the world, the blessedness of knowing that Jesus died for the forgiveness of all our sins, and that our Lord fulfilled the requirements of the law for us so that we can be justified, will also disappear. Ask a slave if there is joy in bondage. Ask a freeman if he wishes to return to slavery. Yet, this is the very thing the Judaizers were imploring the Galatians to do—turn back to the things which once enslaved them, and this after Jesus came to set them free.

This section of Galatians takes a much more personal tone than we have seen previously. It is likely that word of personal attacks being made upon him in his absence had gotten back to Paul. Paul recounts to the Galatians what had transpired when he had been with them previously, and how their attitude toward him has changed. Making an impassioned personal appeal, Paul reminds them that previously he exchanged his own rigid adherence to the law for faith in Christ, in effect, becoming a Gentile sinner as the Galatians were (cf. Galatians 2:15). Paul will plead with the Galatians to live as he is living, free from bondage to the basic principles and the law (Galatians 5:1), enjoying the liberty purchased for him by Christ.

In verses 8-11 of Galatians 4, Paul describes the on-going efforts of the Judaizers to infiltrate the Galatian churches with the goal of returning them to the legalistic principles of Judaism as a return to slavery. *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!”*

What happens when full-grown and mature sons and daughters of God, mentioned in vv 1-7 of chapter 4, return to the basic principles of the world (the *stoicheia*) as the means of receiving their inheritance from their Father? Clinging to the error of seeking to establish their own righteousness (because of their failure to understand that Jesus has fulfilled the obedience required in the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai), the Judaizers insisted that the promised inheritance comes through human merit and the performance of religious ceremonies instead of through faith in the saving work of Jesus. This raised a number of questions for Christians in the churches of Galatia, now tempted to give the agitators a hearing. “What happens when professing Christians turn back the clock of redemptive history?” “Should we go looking for our inheritance in the endless wilderness of the Sinai?” “Should we seek good things from the slave-masters who ruled over God’s people during their bondage in Egypt?” “Should we seek good things from those who once held us captive in Babylon?”

Paul exhorts the Galatians to recall their own situation before their collective conversion to Christ. His points here are aimed primarily at Gentiles—who knew not Abraham, Moses, or the Torah before their conversion. What spiritual condition were they in before the gospel came to Galatia? The Galatians did not know God and were enslaved to what Paul calls “beings” which are by nature not “gods” at all.³⁴⁸ Enslavement to pagan religion and idols appears in Paul’s first Corinthian letter (8:5), when Paul states *“for although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords.”* The same thing applies in Galatia. The so-called Greco-Roman “gods” are nothing.

Before following Jesus, the Gentiles among the Galatians served what they thought were “gods,” but which were in reality nothing but idols—lifeless statues, and images which were the mere figment of sinful human imagination (cf. Romans 1:18-25). When they previously embraced these basic principles, the Gentiles among the Galatians were rejecting the light of natural revelation and were, as Paul says in Romans 1, guilty of suppressing the truth in

³⁴⁸ N. T. Wright cannot restrain from interjecting his own political views when he notes that if Paul’s reference is to ancient “forces,” in today’s world the *stoicheia* would refer to “economic pressures” or the “market.” Wright, *Galatians*, 274.

unrighteousness. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and were serving created things rather than the creator. God would be perfectly just if he gave them over to their own depravity.

But God did not “give them over” to the rightly deserved consequences of their sin. Instead God sent Paul to preach Christ to them. And now they want to go back to these same pagan principles? Paul’s question, “*how can you turn back again?*” contains a loud echo from Numbers 14 and the account of Israel’s rebellion against Moses, complete with the demand to return to Egypt.³⁴⁹ Israel was spared from YHWH’s judgment by Moses’ pleas, just as Paul pleads with the Galatians not to follow Israel’s terrible example and go back to what they were before they embraced the gospel.

Since the gospel of Jesus Christ had *been* preached to them—Paul publically placarded Jesus Christ before their eyes—the situation has changed radically from the days of paganism. Now the Galatians *do* know God, or rather are known *by* God. The idea of being known by God is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s letters, and implies election unto Christ through effectual calling, wherein God calls elect sinners to faith in Christ when they had been formerly dead in sins and transgressions (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:1-10).³⁵⁰

Paul repeatedly makes the point throughout Galatians that God initiates redemption, since “God sends.” In Galatians 1:6, Paul speaks of God as the “one who called you.” In Galatians 1:15 Paul speaks of how God had called Paul from “before his birth.” In Galatians 5:8, Paul again speaks of “the one who calls you.” And later in Galatians 5:13, Paul will point out that “we were called [for the purpose of being] free.” The gracious and sovereign God calls the Galatians to faith in Jesus through the gospel of Christ crucified when Paul had proclaimed it to them. But the Judaizers were now attempting to lure these Gentile converts away from Christ by turning them back to the basic principles” which had formerly enslaved them. The Judaizers are trying to convince freed slaves that slavery was really better than the freedom they now enjoyed! They are attempting to “undo” a sovereign act of God.

Why would those who know the true God as the creator and sustainer of all things, who have been called by God through the proclamation of the gospel to faith in Jesus, change course and suddenly desire to turn back to the *stoicheia*, which Paul calls the weak and worthless principles of works-righteousness? If any among the Galatians return to the *stoicheia*, they will find themselves re-enslaved by sin and the law all over again. Why would a freed slave desire to become a slave again? The only possible answer is through deception. Apparently, the situation in Galatia has grown so serious that Paul will later speak of the tragic situation in which those taken in by these false teachers actually risk “falling from grace,” a point Paul which will make in Galatians 5:4.

That the basic principles of the world is a reference to works-righteousness (not to occult or

³⁴⁹ Thielman, *Paul and the Law*, 286, n. 46. Thielman mentions Numbers 14 in the context of Paul’s Philippians letter, but I think his point applies here as well.

³⁵⁰ Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters*, 511-515.

demonic powers), is seen in the fact that once the Galatians had returned to the “basic principles,” legalism immediately rears its ugly head. These false teachers were demanding that their converts observe special feast days and dietary laws in addition to submitting to circumcision as a means of obtaining or perhaps maintaining a justified standing before God. The Judaizers continued to devote themselves to the Jewish religious calendar and were insisting that Gentiles do the same. As Bruce notes, it is “likely that Paul is referring to news which he has just received, to the effect that the Galatians were actually adopting the Jewish calendar.”³⁵¹ The apostle’s references to “years,” “months,” and “days,” in verse 10 bears this out. These particular time references clearly point to Sabbath observance, religious feasts and festivals, and keeping sabbatical or jubilee years in accordance to Jewish custom. These amount to a form of *stoicheia* when seen in light of the coming of faith (Jesus Christ and his person and work).³⁵²

The fact that the Galatians adopted such legalistic practices were the ominous signs of a return to slavery which produces Paul’s great concern for their eternal well-being, a point expressed in verse 11, “*I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*” Paul knows many of these people quite well. He cares for them deeply. His plea is personal. He has preached the gospel to them face to face. Many of them came to faith in Christ under his ministry. The apostle fears for the state of their souls and worries about their eternal destinies. His warning is direct and to the point.

K. Paul’s personal appeal (4:12-20)

12 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. 13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, 14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. 15 What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. 18 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, 19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! 20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

In verse 12, Paul makes his heartfelt appeal. “*Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.*” Previously, the Galatians welcomed him into their midst. Now things are different. There are several hints in the letter, but there really is no telling what the Judaizers were saying about Paul to the Gentile converts to their movement. The easiest way to undermine Paul’s gospel was to attack Paul personally. Sadly, those so zealous for the law that they hate the gospel, ignore what the law says about bearing false witness.

³⁵¹ Bruce, Galatians, 205.

³⁵² Fung, Galatians, 193.

In verses 13-14, Paul reminds his readers of the circumstances (an illness) which brought Paul and the gospel to the Galatians. *“You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.”* It is implied that Paul was on his way somewhere else when he took ill and was forced to stop in Galatia to recover. While recuperating, Paul used the opportunity provided by his illness to preach the gospel to his hosts. When Paul speaks of being received as though he were an angel of the Lord, he may have in mind an earlier incident in Lystra while on his first missionary journey when he had been mistaken for Zeus (Acts 14:14-18). This time, the Galatians treated him as if he were an angel since he served as a messenger of YHWH (the primary function of angels) to bring them the gospel.³⁵³ From our perspective, what appears to be a calamity—a serious illness—God, in his providence, uses to further his eternal purposes. Because of Paul’s illness, the gospel was preached to a group who were formerly in darkness. Through this gospel the Galatians had been set free from their bondage to sin.

There is a long history of debate among Paul’s interpreters about the exact nature of his illness.³⁵⁴ The illness was, apparently, quite severe since Paul refers to the illness as a *“trial to you,”* that is, a trial for the Galatians who took care of him while he was sick. Paul may be referring to the fact that his illness was of the sort which might lead to scorn since many in that age associated certain illnesses with demon possession or as the affliction of evil spirits.³⁵⁵

Showing great kindness to him, the Galatians did not treat Paul with scorn but nursed him back to health. The seriousness of Paul’s illness likely had some effect upon his eyesight since Paul says in verse 15 that *“for I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me,”* implying that Paul was having difficulty with his vision. In fact, at the end of the letter, (Galatians 6:11) Paul makes the comment, *“see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”* It may have been the case that Paul’s eyesight was still an issue when he wrote this epistle some months after leaving the region.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7 ff. Paul describes how *“to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”* On three occasions, Paul says he pled with the Lord to remove it. But God’s response was *“my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Whether this is connected to the illnesses which caused Paul to stay with the Galatians is not known.

In verses 15 and 16, Paul asks the Galatians why their attitude toward him has changed since he had been with them. *“What then has become of your blessedness? Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?”* When Paul had been among them, the Galatians, apparently, experienced the joy (“blessedness”) of the knowledge that their sins had been forgiven by the

³⁵³ Moo, Galatians, 285.

³⁵⁴ See Bruce, Galatians, 208-209.

³⁵⁵ Moo, Galatians, 284.

death of Christ, and that God regarded them as righteous, because Christ's righteousness was reckoned to them through faith. But once the Judaizers wormed their way into the Galatian churches, the joy of the forgiveness of sin gave way to the contentiousness of legalism. Those enslaved to the basic principles (legalism) do not know the joy of a right-standing before God since one never knows where they stand. But one's own obedience to the law of God is never perfect or enough. The blessedness the Galatians once knew is gone. So too is their joy.

What had happened since he left the area? Paul asks, *"have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"* Paul taught them the gospel of Christ crucified but soon they allowed themselves to be bewitched by the Judaizers. They embraced both the false gospel and those who taught it. In contrast to the way they received the gospel from Paul when he first preached it to them, the Galatians became uncomfortable with the truth. The consequences are great. If they accept Paul's gospel they will be forced to remove the Judaizers from among their midst. If they continue to listen to them, they will fall from grace. Apparently, some who were formerly close to Paul, now regarded him as an enemy. Learning of this recent development is heart-breaking to Paul.

In verse 17, Paul exposes the Judaizers's true agenda. *"They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them."* Paul echoes the same sentiment in Galatians 6:12, when he mentions that the Galatians were afraid of standing up for the truth because they were afraid of being persecuted because of the gospel. The gospel is a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek. But the basic principles of the world are already accepted by the Judaizers and those following them—a point which will come up later when Paul mentions that the Judaizer's great boast was the large number of converts they had made.

Unable to refute Paul's gospel, the Judaizers attempt to drive a wedge between Paul and their fellow Galatians by attacking Paul's credibility. Paul describes the zeal of the Judaizers and how they want those whom they have bewitched to be equally zealous for their cause. He tells them in verse 18, *"it is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you."* But what was the purpose of the Judaizers? Their purpose was to overturn the gospel Paul preached to them. That deception was involved is clear when Paul introduces the subject of hypocrisy. The Galatians acted one way when Paul was with them and another when he was away. Paul has no patience with hypocrisy, evident in his face to face rebuke of Peter recounted in chapter 2:11-15.

Even though Paul is angry with the Judaizers and the Galatians for tolerating deception, hypocrisy, and personal attacks upon him, he still expresses strong affection for them, speaking of them as in verses 19-20, as *"my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone."* Paul was, after all, the one who had first preached the gospel to them. In a real sense he is their spiritual father. He describes his pain and his anguish over the Galatians in terms of the pain of childbirth as *"Christ is formed in them."* The language here is a bit difficult and we should flesh it out a bit.

The very thought that the Galatians were defecting from the true gospel causes Paul great

anguish. He describes his perplexity (v. 20b), his fear (v. 11), his anger (1:6; 5:12) as sharp pains—spiritual birth pains. When Christ is finally formed in them, then his anguish will be over. Paul uses a verb (*morphousthai*) which refers to the development of a fetus.³⁵⁶ This idea of “forming Christ” in them as a fetus is formed in a mother’s womb is similar to Paul’s statement in Colossians 3:10, where he writes that “*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator,*” or Ephesians 4:24 where he writes, “*and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*” When Paul is speaking of Christ being formed in them, he is likely speaking in terms of sanctification and the “new man” as the Galatian believers are slowly being “morphed” into Christ (as a fetus develops), while they are freed from obedience to the law as the basis for their right standing before God, and from slavery to the basic principles as a way of life.

As a faithful shepherd, Paul tells his spiritual children, “*for I am perplexed about you!*” How could the Galatians so quickly exchange their inheritance in Christ to return slavery to law and bondage to the basic principles, which they supposedly rejected when they came to faith? Paul wishes that he could be with the Galatians and change his tone³⁵⁷—his angry rebuke—so that together they could share the joy they experienced when Paul first preached the gospel to them and they accepted it in faith. We get a glimpse at the pastoral heart of Paul and his uncompromising yet tender concern for his flock. He reminds them of what they stand to lose if they return to the basic principles of the world. To turn back now, is to take up the shackles of guilt which Jesus had removed. Why do this?

Application

Let us not think for a moment that a similar occurrence cannot happen in the church today. If the Judaizers could worm their way into a church that had been personally founded by the apostle Paul just months earlier, then the spiritual descendants of the Judaizers can worm their way in anywhere. We must always be on our guard for any form of the “basic principles” of legalism. We must, like Paul, evaluate everything taught in the church by the word of God. Even if an angel from heaven, a Reformed theologian, or even your own pastor teaches any gospel other than the one Paul teaches, they must be rebuked from the Scriptures. The best defense against the false gospel is to know the true gospel.

There is much to learn about today’s Judaizers from the ancient Judaizers of Galatia. Today’s Judaizers also attack by arguing that the gospel of free grace leads to license. They contend that *if* we teach that salvation is a free gift and that we are saved by the merits of Christ received by faith alone apart from works, then there is no role for humanity to play in salvation. In a world of self-referential experience, the idea that someone else must save us is a tough sell.

³⁵⁶ Fung, *Galatians*, 202-203. Longenecker adds, “Yet while the imagery here is that of Paul as a pregnant mother, it is also that of the Galatians themselves bearing Christ as a fetus in their wombs and needing a further gestation period for that fetus to be fully formed. It, too, is rather unusual imagery, for rather than speaking of “Christ being formed in you.” See Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:20.

³⁵⁷ “Letters in antiquity served as substitutes for one’s personal presence, just as they do today. Paul, however, was unable for whatever reason to be with his Galatian converts at the time. So he sends this letter. But he sends it with the wish “to be with you now and exchange my voice [for this letter].” Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:20.

Judaizers also contend that any abuse of freedom is proof that the gospel of free grace is dangerous. Freedom can be frightening for those who are used to being slaves. Modern Judaizers often advance their agenda not by leaps and bounds but by millimeters. Upon finding any abuse of freedom, the Judaizer argues that “we need a new law or a rule” to stop that particular behavior. This sounds like a good thing to do. Then, once the new rule is in place, the Judaizer says, “the truly converted would never do that,” i.e., “break the new rule.” They find another abuse, establish another rule using the same rationale, and soon after measure people by it.

It all sounds so reasonable and it happens so slowly that we may never notice. The rules might even be good rules and they might even stop the errant behavior—for a time. But before long we have been boiled alive like the proverbial frog in the beaker of water who does not squirm when the water temperature is brought up to fatal levels at such a slow pace that the poor frog never even notices. Before long, we are not looking to the cross and merits of Christ, we are looking to our own efforts at rule-keeping as well as concerning ourselves with the progress of others.

There will be some who lose the assurance of salvation because they cannot keep the rules, and think to themselves that God has abandoned them. Others will be quite good at keeping the rules and think that they are morally superior to those who are not as good at keeping them. Some will debate the rules and turn the church—which is to be a haven and a hospital for justified sinners—into a modern Sanhedrin, where we miss the weightier matters because we were too busy fighting over trivialities. The first things to go are freedom in Christ and the joy of our salvation. Some may take this so far that they, like certain of the Galatians, risk falling from grace.

It is no accident that when Paul speaks of slavery he connects it to the loss of the Galatian’s blessedness (or, “joy,” in some translations). “What happened?” asks Paul. Joy is that confidence of knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we have been granted a right status before God. Joy is not the same thing as happiness and is not directly connected to the ups and downs and material well-being of daily life as is the latter. In the Scriptures, joy is the emotional response by the people of God to God’s redemptive acts, produced by the knowledge that God is no longer angry at us since Christ has died for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Joy, in the biblical sense, arises as a response to the gospel and the declaration that we have “peace with God” through the blood of Christ.

But the false gospel of the Judaizers robs God’s people of the assurance of salvation, taking from us our only comfort in life and in death—our confidence in Christ. There is no joy in free men and women taking up again the shackles of slavery. In Psalm 51, David pleads with God to restore to him the “joy of his salvation,” which had been lost to him when he felt God’s anger towards his sin. David longs to once again hear “joy and gladness,” since he knows that the wickedness of his own heart has manifested itself in sin. Likewise, Paul’s gospel of Christ crucified had created joy among the Galatians, as they too came to know that Christ had died for their sins and they were forgiven.

It is the Judaizer who tells free men and women to put back on the chains of salvation by works

of law. It is the Judaizer who tells us to get up from the feast of word and sacrament that God has prepared for those who love him, and instead seek our inheritance in the desert wilderness of the Sinai. It is the Judaizer who tells us to forsake Christ and instead seek the slavery in Egypt, or a return to exile in Babylon. It is the Judaizer who says, "we cannot be justified by the merits of Christ alone, but must add to Christ's merit our own." It is no wonder Paul asks the Galatians, "what has happened to your joy?" Legalism is what happened

Paul tells us that we are heirs to the inheritance and all the promises God made to Abraham through faith in Christ. Paul says to us that through faith alone, we have been justified and given the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is where we find blessedness—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has never promised us happiness, but he does promise us joy! Yet, this is the message that the Judaizers attack and this is why we must always oppose them. They will do their best to steal from us whatever joy we do have. This is why we must shout the gospel from the rooftops, for the darkness of error is dispelled in the light of the truth! This is why we must hear the gospel over again as often as possible. This is why Paul's question has so much punch: "How can you turn back?" when it is only in the saving work of Jesus Christ—not in our own obedience—that we find the joy of our salvation!

L. A lesson in the history of the covenants (4:21-31)

21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. 23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. 24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." 31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Although we know him as the apostle Paul, Saul of Tarsus was once the standout student of the famed Rabbi Gamaliel. But when Jesus confronted Saul while he was on the road to Damascus intending to hunt down and arrest Christians, the Risen Lord transformed Saul into Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Once the scales dropped from his eyes, Paul now understood Israel's history as recounted in the Old Testament much differently than he did when still a student of Gamaliel. In Saul turned Paul, the Judaizers find themselves dealing with a master of demonstrating how Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of the Old Testament messianic expectations of Israel. In Galatians 4:21-31, Gamaliel's prized student, now claimed by Jesus, reinterprets the course of redemptive history through the lens of the person and work of Israel's Messiah. Paul proceeds to explain the relationship between the covenants YHWH made with

Abraham and Moses in a way that Gamaliel could never envision.

Now reading the entirety of the Old Testament through “Christ-centered” glasses, Paul explains the overall course of redemptive history and the Old Testament Scriptures (the box-top to the puzzle, so to speak) to illustrate the way in which the Judaizers have distorted the proper understanding of God’s saving purposes in his covenants with Abraham and Moses. In this concise lesson in redemptive history, Paul teaches us how we ought to read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament as Jesus taught us to do in John 5:39 (“*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me*”) and Luke 24:27 (“*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself*”).

Yet to the Judaizers it seemed as though Paul invented a new and bizarre way to read the Old Testament. How could such an up and coming young Rabbi get the Old Testament so fundamentally wrong? Paul was preaching a message vastly different from what their own Rabbis had taught them. Based upon Paul’s handling of the critical passages dealing with Abraham and Moses, it sounded as though the apostle missed Sabbath school when the rabbis were studying Genesis 16 (the story of Sarah and Hagar). How did Paul not know that Sarah was the mother of Isaac (i.e., the Jews), or that Hagar was the mother of Ishamel? Did he not know that the Sinai covenant was the charter of Jewish identity? How could Paul be so confused?³⁵⁸

What the Judaizers missed when it came to Paul was that he had not made up a message to attract a following among Gentiles. Rather, this is what Israel’s own Messiah, Jesus, had personally revealed to Paul. After Jesus’ appearance to Paul, it became clear to him that membership in the Abrahamic covenant did not come through the law keeping (the Sinai covenant). It is also clear that Paul is preaching the same gospel as the other apostles. Therefore, the Judaizer’s efforts to “go over” Paul’s head so as to pit the other apostles against him was not going to work.³⁵⁹

After making his personal appeal earlier in chapter 4 (vv. 8-20), Paul changes focus by discussing the way in which the Judaizers were misreading the Old Testament, seen in his new-found understanding of Old Testament history, the theme of verses 21-31 of chapter four. This section of Galatians also gives us additional instances of one of Paul’s favorite rhetorical devices—the refutation of the arguments of the Judaizers by using their own biblical proof-texts against them. By using this method, Paul demonstrates his mastery of the biblical text, while exposing the flaws in the Judaizing narrative. Since Paul has done this earlier in the letter, it would be helpful to briefly survey these prior instances. The defenders of Jewish legalism, no doubt, find themselves repeatedly confounded.

In Galatians 3:6, Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6 in order to demonstrate that Abraham, the great patriarch of Israel, was justified by faith alone and not by works. This point by itself is fatal to

³⁵⁸ Horton, God of Promise, 37.

³⁵⁹ Wright, Galatians, 291.

the Judaizers' message. Paul employs the same rhetorical technique in Galatians 3:10, when he quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26—"Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." When we consider what the law truly requires of us—the point Paul presses here—we realize that God demands perfect obedience to his commandments in thought, word, and action, *if* we are to be justified on the basis of works of law. For those listening to the Judaizers, Paul is warning "do not miss this, because if you do not maintain perfect obedience you will come under God's curse."

In Galatians 3:16, Paul's argument hinges upon a singular noun, not a plural; "*now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ.*" The Judaizers were obviously misreading the Old Testament, proven by Paul's appeal to the promise that God made to Abraham and to his seed (Jesus Christ). The twin promises of a coming Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit come to both Jew and Gentile alike, realized through faith, not through works.

By demonstrating that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ in all of these ways, Paul is able to prove that his gospel is not an innovation. The gospel he preaches is the same gospel that Abraham believed. It is the same gospel proclaimed throughout the Old Testament, although revealed through types and shadows. It is the gospel revealed to Paul by Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all Old Testament messianic prophecies. Even though the Judaizers claim to have embraced Christ as the Messiah, their argument that justification is based upon faith in Christ *plus* human merit demonstrates that while the Judaizers may have been right about the person of Christ (as Israel's Messiah), they were dead wrong about how to understand the work of Christ. As a consequence they do not properly understand either the Old Testament in general, or the law of Moses in particular. Although zealous for the law, Paul has shown they do not understand the law.

This faulty understanding of Torah is why Paul issues the agitators a direct challenge in verse 21. "*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*" In effect, Paul is pushing them into the shoals of the "law of unintended consequences." Those who insist that we are justified by works of law, must reckon with the conundrum of just how many good works are required in order to be justified. At what point in their law-keeping do the Judaizers expect that sufficient righteousness has been earned? If they seek to be justified in this manner, Paul informs them, they re-enslave themselves to the law and come back under its curse. Paul is pressing the Galatians to answer the critical question; "do you really want to go back under the law?" "If you do, there are real and serious consequences." His challenge is inescapable; "if you want to be justified by means of obedience to the law, then carefully consider what the law actually says!" To paraphrase, "if you want law, I will give you law!"

Yet, as Longenecker points out, Paul might be warning of consequences which have not yet come to pass for many in Galatia still on the fence.

In speaking of his addressees as "those who want to be under the law," Paul implies that his converts had not yet fully adopted the Judaizers' nomistic principles and practices (cf. 1:7; 4:17), though they were beginning to observe the fasts and festivals of the Jewish calendar (cf. 4:10) and were at the point of going further in observing the

Jewish law (cf. 1:6; 3:3; 4:11). The Galatians were not yet ὑπὸ νόμον (“under the law”) but ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι (“who want to be under the law”).³⁶⁰

The take away is that if the Galatians return to the law for justification *after* embracing the gospel, then they must embrace the whole of the law. Even worse, Christ’s death will be of no value to them (Galatians 5:2).

Based upon Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4:22-31, it is possible to reconstruct some of what the Judaizers were likely teaching the Galatians in this regard.³⁶¹ Paul may have learned a similar theology from Gamaliel as well. The Judaizing argument runs something like this: The Jews are the true people of God, who had their beginning with Abraham, centered in God’s promise to him and to his descendants. But God’s covenant with Abraham was clarified (re-defined) by the subsequent Sinai covenant which God made with Israel through the mediation of Moses. The Abrahamic covenant was to be read through the lens of the blessing/curse principle of the national covenant YHWH made with Israel at Sinai. The circumcised are blessed. The uncircumcised are cursed.

In light of his re-reading of the Genesis account through the lens of Jesus’ person and work, any attempt to re-interpret the account of God’s covenant with Abraham through the lens of Moses (as the Judaizers were doing) inevitably distorts the meaning and purpose of the Abrahamic covenant. This is a hot button issue between Paul and the Judaizers and the need to get this right is why Paul spends so much time in this letter explaining the proper interpretation of God’s gracious covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17.

The consequence of the Judaizer’s basing the fulfillment of the promise upon personal obedience to the law of Moses is apparent. “God’s promise was given to Abraham and his offspring . . . the obligations of the offspring were clearly revealed in the law; hence, to receive the spiritual blessing, it was necessary to fulfill the demands of the law.”³⁶² To put it yet another way, according to the Judaizers, the promise does not come to God’s people through faith alone. Rather, God’s people receive the promise through personal obedience to the Ten Commandments (“works of law”). This jibes with their understanding of Abraham’s faith as essentially obedience.

Since Paul refers to the two women associated with Abraham—Hagar and Sarah, as recounted in Genesis 16—it is very likely that the Judaizers were appealing to “the story of Abraham and the two women: the Sarah-Isaac-Moses-Law-Jerusalem line alone represented the true offspring of Abraham, and if the Gentiles were to have a part in it, they had to be incorporated through circumcision into Abraham’s family and acknowledge the sovereignty of Jerusalem.”³⁶³ The

³⁶⁰ Longenecker, Galatians, on 4:21.

³⁶¹ Bruce, Galatians, 218, Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 96; Moo, Galatians, 293.

³⁶² Fung, Galatians, 220.

³⁶³ Fung, Galatians, 220.

two covenants God made with Abraham and then with Moses are to be read consecutively so that the Sinai covenant (Moses), supposedly reinterprets God's prior covenant with Abraham. The two distinct covenants are not understood as running parallel to each other throughout the course of Israel's history,³⁶⁴ from the time of the giving of the law at Sinai, to the beginning of our Lord's messianic mission, with the law covenant at Sinai now fulfilled by Jesus.³⁶⁵

If the Judaizers were correct in their understanding about this, then the reception of the promise given to Abraham must be contingent upon human obedience to law. This also means that what was central under the old covenant (circumcision, obedience to the law of Moses, keeping dietary laws, following the Jewish calendar, revering the temple, and placing the earthly Jerusalem at the center of the religious life of God's people), remains central for God's people even after the coming of Christ. Gentiles must see themselves as entering Israel's history with no regard to the fact that this present age has been superceded by the age to come with the promise fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. The Judaizing theology amounts to confusing the types and shadows of redemptive history with the reality, all the while side-stepping the person and work of Christ and ignoring the in-breaking of the age to come. Misreading the biblical account of Abraham inevitably leads to a return to the bondage of slavery, and the denial that the redemptive work of Christ is sufficient to save. Paul can do nothing else but identify the Judaizing message as "another gospel."

Here's the rub. Paul has been called by Jesus Christ to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. No longer known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul now reads the Old Testament through the eyes of faith in the Son of God. This requires reinterpreting the account of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, in light of the coming of Jesus Christ, and embracing a new story line which appears to be quite different than the one in the historical accounts of these figures in Genesis. It is the apostle Paul who, as he says, allegorizes the story in the light of the coming of Christ, thereby flipping the Jewish way of interpreting the Abraham-Moses relationship on its head. Paul's "allegory" is not fiction, but typology, in which the New Testament interprets the old covenant.³⁶⁶

Remarkably, Paul puts the Jews and Judaizers in the line of Hagar, who represents the law and slavery (Mount Sinai). The apostle also understands the physical children of Sarah (the Jews) to be the spiritual children of Hagar (the slave woman), while the physical descendants of Hagar (the Gentiles) have become the true spiritual children of Sarah (citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem). In verse 26, Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1 to prove his point that God's redemptive purposes now extend to the Gentiles. Christ is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham; the desolate woman (Sarah) will have more spiritual children than Hagar.³⁶⁷ But the Judaizers miss this point entirely. Paul's re-interpretation of the role of Abraham and his descendants

³⁶⁴ Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14," in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 250-252.

³⁶⁵ See the discussion in Horton, God of Promise, 35 ff.

³⁶⁶ Bruce, Galatians, 217; Moo, Galatians, 295-296.

³⁶⁷ Fung, Galatians, 220.

play in redemptive history—especially in the covenant of grace—turns the tables on those who see themselves as defenders of the religion of Israel. Paul places them in the same category as the descendants of Ishmael! The Judaizers know exactly what Paul is doing. He is pushing them to see that they are not heirs to the promise and, in reality, they are apostates from the true faith of Israel.

With the big picture before us, we are now in position to work through the specific points of Paul's redemptive-historical argument. Paul opens by recounting the facts of the Genesis account in verses 22-23. *"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."* Paul says "it is written"³⁶⁸ that Abraham had two sons through two different women, Ishmael, and his younger brother by 14 years, Isaac. According to Genesis 16:1-16, Hagar was a slave and the mother of Ishmael. According to Genesis 21:2-5, Sarah gave birth to Isaac and was a free woman. The son born to the slave woman was born *"in the ordinary way,"* i.e., by natural procreation. But the son born to Sarah was born according to the promise, meaning *not* in the ordinary way. As Genesis 17:17 indicates, natural procreation and the fulfilment of the promise seemed impossible since Abraham was at least one hundred and Sarah at least ninety. Sarah's pregnancy amounts to nothing less than a foreshadowing of a new creation.³⁶⁹ The birth of Isaac, while the product of natural procreation, nevertheless, came about by supernatural means, namely the restoration of Sarah and Abraham's ability to bear children.

In contrast to the Judaizers, Paul interprets the historical events of Genesis allegorically in light of the coming of Christ. He no longer reads the Abraham story through the lens of Moses and the Sinai covenant as the Rabbis had likely taught him. In verses 24-26, Paul makes his case that the Judaizers understand the proper relationship of the two women in a sort of reverse perspective. *"Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother."* Paul uses one set of realities (the historical events of Genesis) to speak of other things (the new covenant properly understood). This reflects Paul's use of contrast as a teaching tool.³⁷⁰

The use of allegory does not in any sense mean that Paul understands the Genesis account to be fictional or non-historical. But Paul's use of allegory has raised questions among commentators as to whether this rules out historical reference. This sort of allegory was utilized in the

³⁶⁸ Paul uses the verb, "γράφεται" ('it is written' which is a standard Pauline formula that usually introduces biblical quotations . . . Here, however, what follows is not a direct quotation from the OT, but rather a statement summarizing the stories about Abraham as found in several chapters of Genesis." Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 4:22.

³⁶⁹ Barclay, John M. G., "Paul, Judaism, and the Jewish People," in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, ed., Stephen Westerholm (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 196.

³⁷⁰ Moo, *Galatians*, 300.

writings of Philo and the Stoics.³⁷¹ There is no hint in any of his epistles that Paul understands the events mentioned in the opening chapters of Genesis as events later embellished for the purpose of illustration. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of Adam and Eve as historical individuals (Romans 5:12-19; 2 Timothy 2:12 ff.). In verse 25, Paul says that Hagar “corresponds to” Jerusalem, which means Paul is referring to two historical realities—a servant woman named Hagar and the brick and mortar the city of Jerusalem, even if the two are placed in different roles than one might expect.

As mentioned, Paul uses “allegorical” in the sense of typology; the two realities point beyond to the original context to something else once a better interpretive vantage point has been obtained, namely—the coming of Jesus.³⁷² In other words, Paul is clarifying the Abraham story—misunderstood by Judaizers—to correct their error. As Martin Luther explains,

In theology, allegories do not carry a great deal of persuasive power. However, they are used as paintings; they beautify and help in the presentation of the topic. If Paul had not previously confirmed the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of works utilizing strong and conclusive arguments, this allegory would have hardly served any purpose at all. But since he had already strengthened his cause previously with invincible arguments, taken from experience, from Abraham’s example, from the testimony of Scripture, and from similar matters, now at the end of his debate, he adds an allegory but only when a good foundation has been laid and the matter proven to great depths, for as a painting is an ornament to decorate and beautify a home already built so an allegory is a light that shines on the topic that already has been proven and confirmed.³⁷³

The use of allegory indicates that Paul reinterprets the received historical understanding of a particular event to make an important theological point which becomes apparently only after the coming of Christ, something which was certainly not evident to Moses at the time Genesis was written. It is this ability to find Christ in the Old Testament that is in view, at least in part, when we speak of Spirit-given prophecy in the apostolic church.³⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit enables Paul (and his readers) to see the reality of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament type and shadow. It is in this sense that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament.

Using one of the passages to which the Judaizers were most likely appealing as a proof-text for their argument that obedience to law fulfills the Abrahamic promise, Paul asserts that both women, Hagar and Sarah, are illustrative of two respective covenants. On the one hand, Hagar stands for the law and the covenant given on Mt. Sinai, a covenant in which the people of God swore the oath of ratification and promised obedience to the demands of the law. The Sinai

³⁷¹ See the discussion in Longenecker, Galatians, on 4:24.

³⁷² Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 808.

³⁷³ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect. 31, on Galatians 4:24.

³⁷⁴ Horton, Rediscovering the Holy Spirit (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 165, ff.

covenant takes the form of a suzerainty treaty, wherein the king and his vassals (subjects) have conditional obligations according to the blessing/curse principle.³⁷⁵ Hagar's children were, therefore, born in bondage, because they were born "under law." The children produced by the union of a master and one of his slaves are not destined to be free, but are born into slavery. In this case, these are the natural children, children born in the "ordinary way." Such was the case of the spiritual children of Hagar who, according to Paul's re-interpretation, are the Jews, born in slavery to the law, since the law was given, in part, to excite and exacerbate human sinfulness, not to provide a means of justification.

Sarah, on the other hand, is the free woman who is the spiritual mother of those who are united to Christ through faith (believing Jews and Gentiles). Sarah represents the covenant of grace made with Abraham, in which God himself swears an unconditional oath to be God to his people and which includes children of promise who are not born in the natural way. Hagar's children, however, are the natural children (those enslaved to law) who are the citizens of the earthly Jerusalem (v. 25). Just as Hagar was in physical bondage as a slave, so too, the spiritual children of Hagar (the Jews) are themselves enslaved to the law, and that which Paul identified as the *stoichiea*, or the "elementary principles of the world" (4:9). It is this bondage to the law and basic principles that enslaved both the historical children of Hagar, the physical descendants of Ishmael, as well as the spiritual children of Hagar, the Jews, the citizens of the earthly Jerusalem. Paul's exegesis flips the Judaizer's argument on its head. Hagar is a slave woman and she (as we will see) is the spiritual mother of all of those born into slavery of the law.

A key point in his argument is the identity of the city he describes as "Jerusalem above," (v. 26), a city whose inhabitants are not in bondage, but free. There is some interesting word play in the original language.³⁷⁶ This image is drawn from two Old Testament songs which speak of the city as the mother of the faithful (Psalm 87), and as a city bringing forth a son Isaiah (66:7-11). This is yet another instance of Paul's eschatological frame of reference. As Hagner puts it, the *New Testament depends on the movement from one age to a new penultimate one.*³⁷⁷ The "age to come" is the age of redemption, ushered in by the coming of Jesus Christ. It is an age of things eternal. It stands in sharp contrast to "this evil age" which refers to things temporal which are passing away. This can be described as the difference between time and eternity. The earthly Jerusalem (tied to this age) stands in opposition to the Jerusalem above (the heavenly Jerusalem). Paul's teacher, Gamaliel, might accuse Paul of confusing the future Jerusalem (the eschatological city yet to come) which stands against the present earthly city as in the Old Testament prophets (i.e., Zechariah 8:1-8), and the heavenly Jerusalem which already exists (as in Isaiah 62). But Paul combines the two images to make his point.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Baugh, "Galatians 5:1-6 and Personal Obligation," in Estelle, Fesko, and Van Drunen, The Law is Not of Faith, 266-267.

³⁷⁶ Moo, Galatians, 302-305.

³⁷⁷ Hagner, How New Is the New Testament?, 11.

³⁷⁸ Longenecker, Galatians, on 4:27.

As the prophets revealed, the Jerusalem yet to come has *already arrived* in the form of the heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:4).³⁷⁹ The heavenly Jerusalem represents the age to come which stands over and against the earthly city of Jerusalem which is dominated by *stoicheia* and legalism. Christians belong to this heavenly Jerusalem, not the earthly Jerusalem—the city of the Jews. The heavenly city is our spiritual mother, not the earthly city.³⁸⁰ We are free, not slaves. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3:20, “*our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

“The Jerusalem that is above,” is the city which represents “the age to come,” and our redemption in Christ. According to Revelation 21:2, the heavenly Jerusalem is even now coming down out of heaven. This city is the spiritual Mt. Zion, to which the author of Hebrews refers in Hebrews 12:22—the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God to which we as Christians now freely approach as citizens of heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem is also the eschatological home of those in the covenant of grace through faith in Jesus. The Jerusalem from above stands in contrast to the earthly Jerusalem, the city of the law, where citizenship is based upon the principle of human obedience and the covenant of works, things characteristic of the present day city of Jerusalem (of Paul’s day) with its temple and Torah.

Paul’s analogy shows him to be an eschatological thinker who sees the current period in human history as a time of overlap of the two great ages of redemption, “this age” (temporal) and the “age to come” (eternal). As Christians, we are already citizens of the heavenly city which is above even though we still live in “this age” anticipating “the age to come” in all of its fullness and glory. This dual citizenship ends with the return of Christ when this age finally passes away when the “age to come” dawns in its fullness as a present, visible, and final reality. Paul can speak of us as children of promise who live in the present in light of Christ’s life and death, yet at the same time eagerly anticipating full citizenship and the inheritance still to come.

As a further proof of his point, in Galatians 4:27 Paul raises an additional theme from the Genesis account, by quoting Isaiah 54:1, which characterizes Zion as a barren woman. “*For it is written, ‘Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.’*” Sarah was barren with no children (Genesis 11:30). But we are told in Genesis that she shouted with joy at the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:6 ff). Her children through Isaac were more numerous than those of Hagar’s through Ishmael. The church, as the spiritual descendants of Sarah and children of the promise are far more numerous than those of Hagar, since Hagar’s children were enslaved to law and were separate from the people of God. Since Sarah’s children included both believing Jews and Gentiles, Paul sees this as a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and Isaac that their descendants would become a great nation and be more numerous than the stars in the heavens.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Moo, Galatians, 305.

³⁸⁰ Fung, Galatians, 210.

³⁸¹ Fung, Galatians, 211.

In verse 28, Paul applies the allegory he has just set forth to the contemporary situation in the Galatian church. *“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”* Those who are trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ through faith alone, and do not base their hope in the elementary principles of works-righteousness, are the true children of Isaac and the children of promise. The children of promise are children born by supernatural means, not in “the ordinary way.” They are heirs to the entire inheritance. The Galatians owe their very existence to the unconditional promise that God made under the terms of the covenant of grace, not to their own obedience to the law of Moses. *“The Church is the fruit of God’s regenerating grace, not human effort.”*³⁸² This is most clearly seen in the promise that God would justify the Gentiles, just as he did Abraham, by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

In verses 29-30, Paul makes two more points from the Genesis account. *“But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.”* At that time, the natural-born son, Ishmael, (literally *“born according to the flesh”*) as reported in Genesis 21:9, actually mocked the son who was born according to the promise (*“according to the Spirit”* in Paul’s words). In verse 30, Paul concludes that the current situation in Galatia was, *“just as at that time.”* In abandoning the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the Judaizers mock the gospel and those who have trusted in it. It is the Judaizers who seek to reverse the course of redemptive history. It is the Judaizers who seek to divide what Christ has joined together into one body (Jew and Gentile). It is the Judaizers who seek for themselves what belongs to the true heirs to the inheritance. It is the Judaizers who seek to return to slavery. It is the Judaizers who are spiritual children of Hagar. It is the Judaizers, who, by believing and teaching these things, mock God.

But there is another point made in verse 30, when Paul reminds us that according to the Genesis account (Genesis 21:10-12) the slave woman and her son are to be cast out! The religion of promise, the religion of the covenant of grace, the religion of justification by faith alone, cannot co-exist with the religion of law, the religion of works righteousness, the religion of basic principles.³⁸³ The *stoichiea* belong to this age and will pass away. This is why those who preach, teach, or believe another gospel are anathematized (Galatians 1:6-10). They are under God’s curse because they renounce Christ and his saving merits. Since the Judaizers are the children of Hagar, like Ishmael they mock the true heir, so they too must be expelled.

Application

We have come to another good place to summarize. Throughout Galatians, Paul makes a number of contrasts when making his case against the Judaizers and their flawed understanding of redemptive history.

- Righteousness through law-keeping (works of law) is contrasted with righteousness through faith alone

³⁸² Ridderbos, The Epistles of Paul to the Churches of Galatia, 180.

³⁸³ Bruce, Galatians, 225; Longenecker, Galatians, on 4:30.

- Slavery to the law and the “basic principles” are contrasted with freedom in Christ
- The works principle of the Sinai covenant (Moses) is contrasted with the covenant of grace and the “hearing of faith” (Abraham)
- Mt. Sinai is contrasted with Mt. Zion (actually Mt. Calvary)
- The law is contrasted with the gospel
- This age is set in opposition to the age to come
- The children of Hagar (the slave woman) are contrasted with the children of Sarah (the free woman)
- Ishmael (born according to the flesh) is contrasted with Isaac (born according to the promise-the Holy Spirit)
- The enslaved citizens of the earthly Jerusalem (legalism-Judaizers) are contrasted with the free citizens of the Jerusalem above (Christians)

Paul reminds the Galatians in verse 31 of what has become so very clear: *“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”* The question this raises is transparently obvious. Why would free people, children of the free woman, want to return to the cruel master (bondage to sin), then put back on the shackles of slavery (the law), renounce their inheritance (the promise to Abraham), and then embrace Hagar who is the spiritual mother of slavery to the law and the basic principles of this world? Yet, through the spell of their evil eye, the Judaizers have convinced many in Galatia to do exactly that.

In light of the fact that there are two covenants in view (one of works, one of grace), why would a free people reject their citizenship in the “Jerusalem above,” preferring instead to reside in the earthly Jerusalem, in which the light of the gospel has been extinguished by the darkness of the law, the temple, and type and shadow? The Judaizers have turned back the course of biblical history, and in doing so, have turned their backs upon the one called the “light of the world” – Jesus Christ – Israel’s final prophet, great high priest, and all-conquering king.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are Sarah’s spiritual children just as we are Abraham’s. We are the children of promise, children not born in the “ordinary way.” We have been called to faith in Christ through the preached word, which is the public placarding of Christ. We have been born in a supernatural way, through the sovereign electing grace of God, not by means of natural procreation. In Jesus Christ we are justified, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, become heirs to the promise, adopted into God’s family, clothed with Christ through baptism, and can cry out “Abba, father.” We are children of the promise. We are free. We are even now citizens of the Jerusalem above. Why would anyone want to go back to Egypt and live under the Pharaoh? Why would anyone want to go back to Jerusalem and live in the days of the

Pharisees? No one.

As children of the promise and heirs to the inheritance, let us do as the author of Hebrews (12:22 ff.) exhorts us to do, draw near “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” There are two covenant representatives (Moses and Abraham). We belong to the new and better covenant in which everything God promised to Abraham has been fulfilled in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. There are two women (Sarah or Hagar), two mountains (Zion or Sinai), two covenants (Abraham or Moses), and two cities (the Jerusalem above and the earthly city of Jerusalem). Which one of each of these pairs will it be?

V. Christian Freedom (5:1-12)

A. The law demands Obedience (5:1-6)

1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

If anything is worth defending it is Christian freedom. In the face of the threat to such liberty posed by the Judaizers, Paul issues a stern warning to the Galatians. Anyone who seeks to be justified by obedience to the law of Moses, through receiving circumcision, through the keeping of Jewish dietary laws, or in observing the Jewish religious calendar, will fall from grace and come under God’s curse (Galatians 5:4).³⁸⁴ Those who seek to be justified on the basis of works of law (Galatians 2:16), or place their confidence in what Paul identifies as the basic principles of the world (*stoicheia*) will find themselves in eternal danger. In Galatians 5:1-12, Paul contrasts the Judaizing campaign of enslavement to the law with Christian liberty in Christ. This is yet another important plank in his case against the Judaizers.

In the first four chapters of Galatians, Paul issues several responses to Judaizing legalism. In chapter 5, we move into what some identify as the “practical section” of Paul’s Galatian letter, when the apostle takes up the practice of Christian liberty and exhorts the Galatians to defend it.³⁸⁵ While Paul does change focus a bit from those redemptive historical events which

³⁸⁴ Wright claims this approach characterizes “the old perspective” which sees Paul as combating Jewish legalism. The OPP view, says Wright, is “shallow and hopeless” when it comes to properly understanding Paul. See Wright, *Galatians*, 310-311.

³⁸⁵ Betz, *Galatians*, 253; Ridderbos, *The Epistles of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, 186.

culminate in the death of Jesus and justification through faith, here he describes the Christian life in light of the gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ.³⁸⁶ The apostle continues to set out sharp contrasts between opposing positions. Readers of Galatians are now well aware that Paul is fond of antithesis (contrast) as a rhetorical critique and he uses it repeatedly.

Following up his analogy between Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-4:31, when Paul turned the Jewish understanding of redemptive history on its head, in Galatians 5:1-12, he contrasts faith and works yet again, proving that they are diametrically opposed to the other when it comes to the justification of sinners. To seek to be justified by works of law or through observing of dietary laws, feast days, or circumcision, is to return to slavery to sin and bondage to the basic principles which characterize this present evil age. This is a very serious misstep since Jesus Christ came for the purpose of setting us free from bondage to sin and the law. The gravity of this misstep is identified in verse 1 of chapter 5, when Paul challenges the Galatians with the uncompromising declaration, “*for freedom Christ has set us free.*” This is where the Christian life begins for the Galatians and the readers of this epistle—with freedom from the guilt of sin and its enslaving power. Christian freedom is a central concept in terms of our standing before God, as well as a major theme in the Galatian letter.³⁸⁷ The agitators in Antioch and Galatia deplore Paul’s stress on Christian freedom and see it as the chief sign of a low bar of entrance for Gentiles and an affront to the traditions of their fathers.

If obeying the law of Moses as the means of seeking justification is “bondage,” because doing so places one under the law’s demand for perfect obedience thereby making the person subject to the law’s curse upon violation of any of its commands, then, it is justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone that Paul has in mind when he speaks of freedom. To be justified (given a “right” standing before God) is to be free from the curse of the law because Christ became a “curse” for us (Galatians 3:13). We are also freed from the yoke of slavery to which law-keeping subjects us. Jesus came to set us free, not enslave us to the law. All of the Protestant Reformers agreed upon this point and spoke of its importance. This is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.³⁸⁸ If Christian liberty is not the defining characteristic of the Christian life, then the doctrine of justification is not properly understood.

The Judaizers were insisting Gentile converts take upon themselves the “yoke” of the law of Moses as a means of demonstrating their full commitment to the religion of Israel. It is likely that Paul is throwing their own words back at them when he describes obedience to law as a means of justification. In the second half of verse 1, Paul commands the Galatians, “*stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” The Rabbinic description of the law as a yoke which the children of Abraham must take upon themselves may also be behind the meaning of our Lord’s words of comfort in Matthew 11:30, “*my yoke is easy and my burden is*

³⁸⁶ Moo characterizes this shift as a change in vocabulary from freedom/slavery to law/faith/Spirit/justification. See Moo, *Galatians*, 318.

³⁸⁷ Betz, *Galatians*, 255.

³⁸⁸ See J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008); and Horton, *Justification*, 2 Vols.

light." The freedom of which Paul is speaking is "the freedom belonging to the heir, the natural son, the child of the free woman."³⁸⁹ Paul made this point in the preceding analogy when he took the proof-texts the Judaizers were using regarding the Abraham story, and showed these same texts actually support Paul's doctrine of justification. He is doing the same here.

What, then, *is* Christian freedom? John Calvin contends that Christian liberty is an appendage to justification by faith.³⁹⁰ The one (justification) necessarily entails the other (Christian freedom). Calvin describes Christian liberty as consisting of three things. First, our consciences are clean before God because we are exonerated from the guilt of all of our sins. The blood of Jesus Christ has washed our sin and guilt away. Second, since we are not bound to the law as a means of justification, we are, for the first time, free to obey the law since it no longer condemns us. Third, since we are free from slavery and now free to obey the law, this means that we are also free from things "indifferent," or the so-called *adiaphora*. As Calvin puts it, "we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using [things indifferent] and other times not using them, indifferently."³⁹¹

Essentially then, Christian freedom is freedom from works of law as a means of justification. This entails realization of freedom from the law's curse and the yoke of slavery brought about by human attempts to earn God's favor through obedience to God's commandments. If we are free in Christ, then anyone who attempts to bind our consciences to the law as a means of justification, or to the rules of men as a means or proof of our justification, are echoing the ancient Judaizers. All who do so risk coming under God's curse which Paul pronounced upon the Judaizers in the opening verses of the letter.

Christian freedom as defined above is a reality only because our consciences are clean before God. Christ died to remove the guilt we have accrued for all of our infractions of God's law. Furthermore, Christian freedom includes the new desire and ability to obey God's law as the fruit of gratitude (the so-called "third use" of the law), knowing that God accepts our flawed efforts at obedience as good works, since we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Since we are free from law as a means of justification, we are now free to obey the law out of gratitude since we know this pleases God, and that these efforts are the *effect* of our justification, not the *basis* for it.³⁹² This guilt, grace, gratitude, is the genius of the *Heidelberg Catechism* reflecting the categories given us here by Paul.

In verse 1, Paul uses both an indicative mood (a statement of fact), "*for freedom Christ has set us free*" and an imperative (a command), "*stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of*

³⁸⁹ Fung, *Galatians*, 216.

³⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.1.

³⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.1-7.

³⁹² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4.541-460.

slavery." This indicative-imperative framework is essential for understanding Paul's letters.³⁹³ Paul's command for Christians to act in a particular manner always follows a prior declaration about who the Christian is in Jesus Christ. Christians are to strive to obey God's commands not to become Christians or to remain Christians, but because we are Christians. "The indicative states that Christ has set believers free with the gift of freedom that is proffered in the gospel; the imperative imposes upon them the task of preserving that freedom or rather of continuing in that freedom."³⁹⁴

It is a simple fact (the indicative) that we are free in Christ in all three senses just described. We are free from guilt, free from law as a means of justification, and free from those who attempt to enslave our consciences to the basic principles, such as "do not taste, do not touch, and do not handle" (cf. Colossians 2:20-23). "*For freedom Christ has set us free.*" In light of Paul's imperative, our response to this is to defend our liberty against all efforts to return to slavery. "*Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" It is also our Christian duty to love our weaker brothers and sisters and give up our freedom when necessary in their presence, as Paul describes in Romans 14:1-23.

But as Paul commands us here it is also our duty as Christians to fight legalism (the Judaizing error) with everything in us, rather than surrender our liberty to those who seek to re-enslave us. But the person who takes Paul to mean, "now that I am in Christ, I am free to do what I want and sin with impunity since Jesus died for me," misses his point entirely. Such a person is a walking self-contradiction. It is easy to see why the Judaizers would spy on the Galatian's freedom in Christ to find such people (if any actually exist) and use them as prima-facie evidence to point out the supposed dangers of Paul's gospel.

The importance of Christian liberty for Paul is seen in verse 2, when Paul uses the terse imperative, "*Look: I, Paul, say to you,*" emphasizing Paul's authority as apostle to the Gentiles to issue commands to the churches. Paul makes three strong assertions in the following verses (2-4).

The first assertion is found in the second half of verse 2: "*if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.*" Paul is issuing a solemn warning to any Gentile Galatians who may be sitting on the fence, considering whether or not to submit to circumcision as urged by the Judaizers. His warning can be simply summarized: "do not do it!"

Paul says in no uncertain terms, "if you listen to the Judaizers and are circumcised in order to become justified before God, the death of Christ will be of no value to you." Christ's gracious act of becoming a "curse" for us upon the cross will not avail. Anyone who returns to works of law for justification will personally bear the curse for their infractions of the law. While hinted at in Galatians 2:3 when Paul mentions that Titus refused to be circumcised for this very reason,

³⁹³ Moo, *Galatians*, 320. Longenecker adds, "It seems best, therefore, to take the indicative statement of 5:1a as the summary of all that Paul has argued and exhorted regarding the judaizing threat from 1:6 through 4:31, with then 5:1b-12 being his concluding exhortations vis-à-vis that threat in which he urges his converts to hold fast to the freedom they have in Christ." Longenecker, *Galatians* on 5:1.

³⁹⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 217.

this is the first actual statement in the epistle informing us that circumcision was the real issue dividing the Galatian church. Paul's warning also echoes Old Testament warnings such as Jeremiah 9:25-26, when YHWH warned Israel of the consequences of allowing circumcision to become a mere religious ritual, done apart from faith in God's covenant promises. "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh – Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.*"

As Paul made clear in Galatians 3:1-5, Christ's saving benefits are received through faith alone. Yet, one continues in Christ through faith alone as well, the point Paul makes here. We begin the Christian life in the Spirit through the hearing of faith, and then we continue in Christ through faith and the power of the Spirit. To attempt to be right before God through submission to ritual circumcision (specifically) or through law keeping (generally) is to deny that we are under God's curse because of our disobedience. It is also to deny that Christ's death alone is efficacious to remove the curse that we receive for our own violations of the law. To argue that we are justified by faith *and* works as the Judaizers were doing, is to depreciate the grace of God as demonstrated in the death of Christ for sinners. The popular slogan surely rings true, "*he who has a weak view of sin, has a weak view of the Savior.*" If you do not realize that the law brings a curse and that its demands must be fulfilled, perfectly, you will not embrace Christ's death and imputed righteousness as the only God-given solution to the human predicament.

Paul's second assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 3. "*I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*" Paul is not condemning everyone who has already been circumcised (i.e., Jewish converts to Christianity). Rather he is warning those who seek to be circumcised *in order to be justified*, to think very carefully about the consequences of such an act. All Jewish men were already circumcised. Paul is not condemning them, nor any Gentile who may do so for other reasons (such as cleanliness). But he is warning Gentile converts that to be circumcised with the thought that doing so is meritorious before God is a dangerous thing to do.³⁹⁵

Paul's logic is precise—either you are saved by the death of Christ, or you are not saved at all. If anyone in the Galatian churches argues that they are saved by Christ *plus* something they do (in this case, circumcision, keeping the dietary laws, and following the Jewish religious calendar), they are placing themselves back under law which, in turn, requires perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed.³⁹⁶ If we do not have Christ's perfect righteousness reckoned to our account (received through faith alone) we cannot possibly stand before God in the judgment and expect anything other than a "guilty" verdict. The bottom line is if someone seeks to be justified through their own efforts, they must have absolutely no sin and a perfect record of obedience.

³⁹⁵ Fung, *Galatians*, 222.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Article 24 of the *Belgic Confession*: "Therefore, to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior."

The third assertion about the importance of Christian liberty is found in verse 4 and has two parts. For those of “*you who would be justified by the law*” two things will happen. First, “*you are severed from Christ.*” Second, “*you have fallen away from grace.*” This verse is often cited in support of the view that a true Christian believer can be severed from Christ and lose their present salvation, a very important and hotly debated point.³⁹⁷ Who is it that Paul has in view here as the one who can be cut-off from Christ and fall from grace? Is this a purely hypothetical situation, or if not, who actually falls away?

A number have argued that this is a reference to someone who is truly a Christian, and who then falls away—a denial of what has come to be known as the perseverance of the saints. The Roman Catholic position as set forth in the Council of Trent is that to assume that someone who is presently a Christian cannot fall away in the future destroys all incentive to perform good works. According to Rome, no one can know that they are presently saved unless God grants knowledge of this by special revelation. Rome also contends that certain mortal sins can sever us from Christ and that assurance of salvation is a false and sinful presumption.³⁹⁸ We are restored through penance (a sacrament according to Rome), called a second plank after the shipwreck of lost grace. This means that we can be in the covenant, and then out, and then back in again—an idea foreign to the New Testament. Hebrews 6:1-6, the biblical text most often cited in this debate, speaks of apostasy as total and final.

The Lutheran tradition locates apostasy in the failure of the sinner to continue in faith, the reasons and final outcome for which are often mysterious but are solely the fault of the sinner, not the failure of divine grace.³⁹⁹ Arminians (semi-Pelagians) put the matter a bit differently, focusing not upon particular sins which can sever us from Christ, but upon the use of our “free will” to sever ourselves from Christ. Since, as they contend, we believe in Christ as an act of the will, we can decide to cease believing by an act of will and subsequently sever ourselves from Christ and fall away. According to a leading Arminian theologian,

. . . faith is conditional to the keeping [our being kept in salvation by God]; and as it involves a free personal agency there is no doctrine of absolute perseverance A righteous man may turn to sin, and die therein. The branch may perish from the living vine. Judas, one of those given to the Son, was lost. St. Paul, even with his full assurance of a state of salvation apprehended the possibility of his own apostasy, and strenuously wrought against it (citing 1 Corinthians 9:27, “*I might be disqualified for the prize*”).⁴⁰⁰

Is the person spoken of by Paul in Galatians 5, and who may be severed from Christ a genuine

³⁹⁷ See Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation, 266-270, Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 545-548, Horton, The Christian Faith, 680-686.

³⁹⁸ The Catholic Encyclopedia, “*Presumption in Canon Law*,” 403.

³⁹⁹ John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 436-440.

⁴⁰⁰ John Miley, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, 268-69.

Christian who has committed a so-called “mortal sin” (not a likely scenario given Paul’s doctrine of justification grounded in the righteousness of Christ) or a professing Christian, who, through the exercise of their free will (much more likely in the context) turns from Christ alone back to the elementary principles, and who has, therefore, apostatized?

To begin with, there is no doubt that Paul is very serious about apostasy. This is not merely a hypothetical situation, nor a thinly-veiled warning. “Falling from grace” is a real possibility. There are apparently people in the Galatian church who have already fallen, while there are others who are considering circumcision, and are about to fall. But are these people who turn from Christ genuine Christian believers? Based upon what Paul says here and elsewhere, the answer is “no.” Instead, Paul is referring to baptized members of the visible covenant community (the church), but who do not trust in Jesus Christ for justification, and secretly trust that their own righteousness is sufficient even though they profess faith in Christ alone with their mouths.

Such people are members of the visible church (the covenant community) through baptism and their external profession of faith. But they never truly exercise saving faith, they do not persevere until the end, and will eventually fall away. They are, therefore, not among the elect.⁴⁰¹ As Horton puts it, “these warning passages themselves target those who are visible members of the covenant community, in some sense benefitting from the Spirit’s ministry, who have nevertheless failed to embrace the gift of salvation.”⁴⁰² Professing Christians can and do fall away from the church (the covenant community). This is sin of apostasy. Believing Christians numbered among God’s elect cannot and will not fall away.

This can be argued on three grounds: First, the historical situation within the Galatian church, and second, the analogy of Scripture wherein we look at other Pauline texts, and third, Paul’s treatment of national Israel and true Israel in Romans 9-11. First, in the Galatian context, Paul has already spoken of those who have deserted Christ and the gospel (Galatians 1:6: “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ*”). Some have already fallen away. Paul is writing to warn Christians not to follow them. But who heeds Paul’s warning? Those whom God has called to faith in Christ persevere in faith. Galatians 3:7 (“*know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham*”) is Paul’s answer to the questions posed in Galatians 3:1-6.

This leads to a second point, the consideration of other Pauline passages which speak to the question of apostasy. Since it is God who effectually calls sinners to faith in Christ, how can he “uncall” them, or let them “uncall” themselves. In Romans 11:29, the apostle is confident that God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable. In verse 10 of this chapter, Paul speaks of his confidence in God, that his hearers will not accept a false gospel. He is confident that God will prevent his “brothers” from falling into such a fatal error. The warning is certainly real, but the question is, who heeds the warning? Those called (the elect) heed the warning, those who by faith are

⁴⁰¹ See the discussion in Berkhof on this dual aspect of the covenant: internal–true believers, and external–those in the covenant who are not believers and who can and do fall away. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 287-289.

⁴⁰² Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 684.

children of Abraham.

We know from numerous texts that Paul did not believe that a Christian could lose present justification and final salvation in a future judgment. Romans 8:28-30, Paul speaks of an unbreakable chain of God's acts; those whom God has chosen he calls, those whom he calls he also justifies, those whom he justifies, he also glorifies. In fact, the rest of the eighth chapter of Romans is devoted to God's faithfulness, in that those whom God has justified he will not condemn. Paul asks, "who can separate us from his love?" The obvious answer is "no one." In Philippians 1, Paul states that the one who begins a good work in us will see it through to completion (1:6), and in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul speaks of those whom God has predestined coming to faith in Christ and being sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption.⁴⁰³ In Ephesians 2:6, Paul speaks of the believer as already "raised with Christ" and already "seated in the heavenlies." How is it that God can see us already in the heavenlies when we may not persevere? How can we become "unsealed?" Or "unseated?"

As to the third point, in Romans 9-11, Paul distinguishes between national (or ethnic) Israel, the visible covenant people of God and "true Israel" (Romans 9:6). Neither Israel as a nation, nor the Jews as a people obtained the promises, but the elect within the nation of Israel did (Romans 11:7). The nation of Israel had both elect and reprobate within. The elect received the promise. The non-elect did not. So it is with the Galatian church. The elect whom God has called, will receive the promise that God gave to Abraham through faith. Those who are not elect, who do not trust in Jesus Christ, though they profess to do so, can and do fall away from grace.

Therefore, Paul's warning about apostasy must be heeded. Those who return to law-keeping will fall from grace. The elect will weigh these warnings, reject such false teaching, and as children of Abraham will continue to believe in Jesus until the very end of their lives—although there are prodigals among us who do appear to fall away for a time only to return. The elect will persevere to the end and be saved. We think here of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:13, "*the one who endures to the end will be saved.*" The elect persevere because Jesus ensures that they persevere (cf. 1 John 1:5-2:1). Paul places assurance and perseverance in the realm of Jesus Christ completing his saving work begun in us and never relenting in the process. Paul asks, "*who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies*" (Romans 8:33).

In light of the three points just mentioned, we can say that Rome's insistence that we can sin our way out of Christ ends up denying that Christ's cross and saving merits are sufficient to save sinners. We can also affirm the Arminian position to be false. When it is argued that *if* we can use our free-will to get ourselves in, we can use it to get ourselves out, we must also reject the notion of total inability,⁴⁰⁴ since God "got us in" as an act of pure grace (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3).

⁴⁰³ Ephesians 1:3-14 is the basis for the popular Reformed formula, "redemption decreed, redemption accomplished, and redemption applied."

⁴⁰⁴ Total inability means that those dead in sin (the entire human race fallen in Adam) cannot exercise faith in Jesus Christ until called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. See Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 225 ff.

This also denies God's preservation of his elect in ensuring that those called to faith continue to believe. God does not let us get away. The parable of the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:1-7), reminds us of God's faithfulness to those whom he has called to faith . . .

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Paul makes several additional points in Galatians 5:5, which support his rather stark contrast in verses 2-4. "*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*" Paul broaches the eschatological (future) hope of righteousness, when he states that "through the Spirit by faith," we await "the hope of righteousness." As Vos points out, Paul is speaking of "the realization of the hoped for things pertaining to the state of righteousness conferred in justification."⁴⁰⁵

This raises the question as to whether or not justification is present or in some sense a strictly future event.⁴⁰⁶ This is not wishful thinking because such hope is grounded in the finished work of Christ.⁴⁰⁷ The phrase translated "the hope of righteousness," refers to the realization of all the blessings promised by God to those presently justified. By faith and through the power of the Holy Spirit, those who presently believe the promise will receive all that is promised to the children of Abraham, i.e., life, salvation, and glory.⁴⁰⁸

But obedience to the law can never make this hope a reality in the Christian life.⁴⁰⁹ We can never know when we have been obedient enough to rest in the promises of Christ. How many "works of law" are required for justification? Paul's emphasis is *not* solely upon a righteousness which we *will* receive but do not yet have. Throughout Galatians, Paul has spoken of justification as something Christians *already* possess (Galatians 3:1-9). Those justified can and ought to possess the present hope that they will be delivered from God's future judgement, as well as counting upon receiving all those good things promised to them in the gospel, since they are truly children of Abraham.

⁴⁰⁵ Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 30.

⁴⁰⁶ See the discussion in Fung, Galatians, 224-227.

⁴⁰⁷ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 302.

⁴⁰⁸ Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 226.

⁴⁰⁹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 231-232.

In Galatians 5:1-12, Paul likely has the comments he made in Galatians 3:1-9 in mind, when he speaks of this hope being “through the Spirit,” perhaps as a contrast with “the flesh.” Since we receive the promise through faith alone (in contrast to “works”) he is telling us (by implication) that the hope of the righteous is markedly different from those who can only hope in the righteousness of circumcision and ceremony, which, in effect, leaves them with no hope. They trust in the flesh and in works. They can only look forward to the punishment they earn for themselves (the curse) under of the law.

A second point made by Paul in this part of the chapter comes in verse 6, when Paul explains why it is through the Spirit by faith that the justified have such hope. “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*” Paul says much the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7:19, “*for neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.*” Circumcision and/or obedience to law have no place in our justification, but Paul expands the reference to include uncircumcision as well. Circumcision does not justify, and the lack of circumcision provides no advantage to the Gentile. What matters is faith, which links us to Christ, whose death removes the curse since he bore it for us in his own body, and whose personal obedience to the commandments is imputed to us through that same faith.⁴¹⁰ What counts then, is faith working through love, a hotly disputed phrase. What does Paul mean by this?

True faith (which justifies) reveals itself in love for others. Are we justified by our love for others? No. But once we are justified by trusting in God’s promises, Paul’s point seems to be that we will begin to truly love our neighbor. Rome’s contention that faith is manifest in a perfect love which leads to justification which is to be improved through good works is incorrect.⁴¹¹ Faith is not equated with love, but that faith which looks to Christ will be evident in love for others. Paul is “not to be understood in a synergistic sense, as though faith through its expression cooperates in producing salvation.”⁴¹² Rather, in agreement with James (cf. James 2:22-24), Paul is saying that the faith which justifies is of such a nature that it expresses itself through love of neighbor. The same act of faith which justifies also marks the beginning of the process of sanctification. In fact, Paul’s use of new creation language to clarify that circumcision is “of no value” in Galatians 6:15, is at the very least implied here.⁴¹³ When we are justified through faith alone, we receive the Holy Spirit who begins to transform us, we participate in the new creation and are thereby enabled to love others, not to be justified, but because we are justified.

⁴¹⁰ In Q & A 21, the *Heidelberg Catechism* defines faith as follows, “true faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit works in me by the gospel, that God has freely granted, not only to others but to me also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. These gifts are purely of grace, only because of Christ’s merit.

⁴¹¹ “*The Increase of Justification Received*” in The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Chapter X.

⁴¹² See Fung, Galatians, 229-230. Fung is citing (in part) from Gunther Bornkamm, Paul (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 153.

⁴¹³ Moo, Galatians, 330.

The Roman church argues that this passage refutes *sola fide* since Paul supposedly teaches that faith is actually a kind of “working in love,” and not mere “trust.”⁴¹⁴ The Roman error amounts to believing that our justification depends upon an inner transformation seen in “faith working in and through love.” Instead, the faith which justifies and unites us to Christ will also issue forth in good works. In other words the faith which justifies manifests itself in love. In saying this we must be clear that Paul is not talking about an act of faith on our part which God sees in the heart and then “justifies us.” Faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9), not a good work which God rewards. Nor are we speaking of a faith which produces sufficient love and works of charity to earn justification. We are speaking of a faith which looks to Jesus Christ and receives his saving merits as with the open hands of a beggar who knows he needs a righteousness not their own.

Ironically, the position of Tridentine Roman Catholicism is virtually identical to that of the Judaizers, then terrorizing the consciences of the Galatian Christians. How many works of law must one produce before they can be confident of justification? Contrary to NPP advocates, both Luther and Calvin were absolutely justified (pun intended) in drawing a direct connection between justification by faith manifesting itself in a lifelong effort to love and serve our neighbor. At the Council of Trent, the Roman church anathematized Paul’s gospel and from that point on, the Reformed believe, Rome ceased to be a true and visible church.⁴¹⁵

If Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life is the application of his doctrine to particular situations, then, the implications regarding Christian liberty are obvious for the people of God. “*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” If anyone spies on our liberty in Christ, or informs us that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone is an invention of Luther and Calvin, we must challenge them—rebuking them from the Scriptures and reminding them of Paul’s words in Galatians 2:16, “*yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” It is for freedom, not slavery to Popes, Cardinals, and canon law, that Christ set us free! We are to stand firm and never again become subject to the Roman yoke of slavery.

When so-called brothers and sisters spy on our liberty in Christ and inform us that because of insufficient works of law we can fall away from Christ and be lost, or that we get in the covenant by grace but stay in the covenant through good works, or that we can only find the assurance of our salvation through our good works, we ought reply, “*Christ loved me and gave himself for me!*” (2:20). Jesus Christ became a curse for us so that even though once we were prisoner to sins, now we are set free! Jesus’ death is sufficient to remove the guilt of our sins. Our only hope of heaven is not to be found in the work of our hands, but in his cross and sinless life. It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm! Do not give in to those who teach such things, even

⁴¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, “*on Charity*,” 1822-1832.

⁴¹⁵ “If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema.” The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Canon XI.

for a minute!

When Paul asks “why did Christ die?” his answer is a resounding “for freedom!” If the son of man sets you free, you will be free indeed! This is why we stand firm and never again take back upon ourselves the yoke of slavery.

B. Warnings for those who oppose Paul’s gospel (5:7-12)

7 You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? 8 This persuasion is not from him who calls you. 9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump. 10 I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. 11 But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

In verse 7, Paul abruptly warns the Galatians, “*you were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?*” Calling his readers back to the mind-set they had when he first preached the gospel to them, Paul recounts how “*you were running well,*” until someone cut in on them; literally someone “*blocked the way,*” (ESV–“hindered”). In an athletic contest, the word was used of someone cutting in on a runner, obstructing their progress.⁴¹⁶ Paul will speak in his first Thessalonian letter (2:16) of Satan as the hinderer, preventing Paul from visiting the Thessalonians.⁴¹⁷ Those blocking the way kept the Galatians from “*obeying the truth.*” Previously (Galatians 2:14) Paul spoke of the gospel as “the truth.” Here, he very likely means that by “hinder[ing]” the Galatians, the Judaizers attempted to prevent people from believing the gospel and obeying the central message of that gospel, that they trust in Jesus Christ alone in order to be justified and not listen to the agitators who tell them otherwise.

Paul tells them in verse 8, “*this persuasion is not from him who calls you.*” The source of this deception is certainly not Paul. Nor does their befuddlement come from God who called them to faith in Christ through the gospel Jesus revealed to Paul. The source of this hindrance must be found elsewhere. In the most obvious sense this deception comes directly from the same Judaizers who risk being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Elsewhere Paul states that there are more sinister origins to such deceptive teaching. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-5a, Paul says “*even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.*”

⁴¹⁶ Bruce, Galatians, 234

⁴¹⁷ Moo, Galatians, 333.

The three great enemies facing the Christian are the world, the flesh, and the devil.⁴¹⁸ The world (not the planet earth, but the spirit of the age) is understood to be those material enticements which draw us away from Christ and his kingdom (as in Ephesians 2:2-3a). This includes things such as a desire for fame, fortune, or what Francis Schaeffer identifies as, “personal peace and affluence.”⁴¹⁹ Paul identifies this “persuasion” with this present evil age which is passing away and from which Christ came to rescue us (Galatians 1:4).⁴²⁰ Following the way of the world would be akin to having no interest in thinking like a Christian about the issues of life, and intellectually identifying with the world in its philosophical and ethical opposition to Christianity. The religions of the world proclaim that good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell, and the determining factor as to where one spends eternity lies not in the grace and will of God, but in the will, effort, and goodness of the individual. Yet this is the very thing Paul identifies as basic principles of the world which stands in opposition to the gospel revealed to him by Jesus.

The flesh (*sarx*) is the sinful nature which wages a constant and determined guerrilla war against us from within.⁴²¹ The flesh (our sinful orientation) produces in us those sinful and self-centered acts which condemn us when we are measured by the standard of God’s law which demands perfect obedience in our thinking, our speech, or in our actions. Paul teaches us that the flesh is progressively subdued by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace (word and sacrament) over the course of our lives. We will wage war against the sinful nature until we die, or Christ comes back, whichever comes first.

The third foe of the Christian, the devil, is primarily concerned with disrupting the spread of the gospel and distorting the truth whenever possible. It is our Lord who spoke of Satan as the “father of lies.” The truth is not in him. Deceit and obfuscation of the truth is his native language (John 8:44-45). It is a sign of undue self-importance that many act like the devil’s primary goal is to disrupt our every move. In many circles, anything that goes wrong is blamed on Satan. This is what happens when we neglect the doctrine of God’s providence. We think to ourselves, the devil caused my internet connection to crash, or he gave me a flat tire so I will be

⁴¹⁸ The origin of the phrase is unknown and variously attributed to Aquinas, Abelard, and John of the Cross. It is cited by the sixth session of the Council of Trent sixth session, in its decree on justification as a warning to those who embrace justification *sola fide*: “Nevertheless, let those who think themselves to stand, take heed lest they fall, and, with fear and trembling work out their salvation, in labours, in watchings, in alms, deeds, in prayers and oblations, in fasts and chastity: for, knowing that they are born again unto a hope of glory, but not as yet unto glory, they ought to fear for the combat which yet remains with the flesh, with the world, with the devil, wherein they cannot be victorious, unless they be with God's grace, obedient to the Apostle, who says; We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh; for if you live according to the flesh, you shall die; but if by the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live.”

⁴¹⁹ Francis Schaeffer, “How Should We Then Live,” Volume Five, A Christian View of the West in the Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer, (Westchester IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 5.213-215

⁴²⁰ “The term *πεισμονή* is a rare word that appears only here in the NT and for the first time in any Greek writing. It can mean ‘persuasion’ as an activity, ‘conviction’ as an accomplished fact, or ‘obedience.’ . . . Epiphanius later associates it with ‘empty rhetoric’ (*Adv. Haer.* 30.21.2) and Chrysostom with ‘flattery.’” See Longenecker, Galatians, on 5:8

⁴²¹ “Flesh” can refer to a number of aspects of human existence, including our bodies, our human existence, and to our sinful existence and nature, the way in which I am using the term here.

late to church. Our age is every bit as superstitious an age as was the first century world of Galatia. This is why Paul repeatedly warns us of the evils of false doctrine. My guess is that Satan could care less about the condition of your smart phone, but he hates the gospel of free grace and Christian liberty and will make every effort to distort it.

In verse 9, Paul quotes a popular proverb, “*a little leaven leavens the whole lump.*” A very small amount of something as potent as yeast can spread throughout a large mass quite quickly with dramatic consequences. The false teachings of the Judaizers spread throughout the whole Galatian congregation in short order. The term “leaven” was very familiar to first century folk, who largely existed on baked bread. But from the days of Moses, leaven was an acknowledged symbol of evil, and was therefore excluded from the Passover bread (Exodus 12:14-20). It is with this particular symbolism in mind that Paul tells the Corinthians to remove the old leaven of malice and evil from the congregation since it has no place in the household of God’s people (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7).⁴²²

Leaven does have a varied use in the New Testament. In Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21, our Lord used the term in reference to the kingdom of God in the parable of the leaven. But Paul may have our Lord’s words recorded in Luke 12:1 in mind here, where Jesus spoke of the “leaven” of the Pharisees as their “hypocrisy.” In Matthew 16:5-12, Jesus also speaks of the teaching of the Sadducees and Pharisees as leaven, and this is probably what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the Judaizers and their false gospel as “leaven” spreading throughout the Galatian churches.⁴²³

In the case of his immediate hearers, Paul remains confident that they will not follow the Judaizers to the point of being severed from Christ and falling from grace. Paul’s confidence is grounded in God’s faithfulness, that he will preserve all of those in Christ ensuring that they will believe to the end and be saved. In verse 10, Paul tells the Galatians, “*I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view,*” i.e., they will take no other view than the fact that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, and that they will indeed stand firm as Paul has exhorted them.

Yet, the same apostle who had pointed out that saving faith will inevitably work in love as the fruit of the prior verdict of justification, stresses that “*love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres*” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Paul’s confidence is in Christ, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, who gives them eternal life, and who does not allow a single one of his own to be snatched from his hand (cf. John 10:1-31). Paul’s warnings to the Galatians about falling away are real, but the apostle’s confidence is to be found in God’s gracious work in sustaining faith in those who currently trust the Savior.

In the latter part of verse 10, Paul seems to imply that the Judaizers were led by an unnamed individual: “*and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.*” Paul is certain that the one doing this will receive God’s judgment. The phrase, “*whoever he is,*” does not

⁴²² Bruce, Galatians, 235.

⁴²³ Moo, Galatians, 334.

necessarily mean that this person's identity is unknown to Paul, but more likely means that whoever it is teaching such things will receive judgment despite "a possible high standing in the church."⁴²⁴ Paul expresses a similar sentiment in 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, where he warns of false apostles and deceitful workers within the church who masquerade as angels of light. Paul warns of the inevitable fact that false teachers will come. We must be constantly on guard for them because they will not arrive in our midst and say, "Hi!" "I am a heretic here to deceive you!" False teachers will get what their actions deserve, says Paul. No matter how deceptive they are, God knows those who are his. He protects his own through the light of his word which exposes error.

In verse 11, Paul responds to charges being made against him by this unnamed accuser. *"But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed."* Despite his anger, Paul still refers to his readers as "brothers." As is his custom, Paul begins his argument with an indicative (a statement of fact) which forcefully distinguishes genuine believers from the Judaizers and those influenced by them. The reason why God called the Galatian Christians to faith in Jesus Christ was to set them free from bondage to sin and from the yoke of the law. Christ died in order to liberate his people from basic principles.

Although Paul would not permit Titus to be circumcised because the gospel was at stake, Paul did not condemn Jews who were circumcised. Apparently, the individual attacking Paul in Galatia was accusing Paul of duplicity, i.e., Paul preached the importance of circumcision to Jews, but did not preach this to Gentiles.⁴²⁵ While Paul was willing to grant circumcision to the Jews, thereby allowing him to concentrate on the message of the cross, Paul asks the Galatians another question designed to expose their motives. If he was preaching two different gospels, one for Jews and one for Gentiles, the obvious question raised is if I, Paul, am telling people what they want to hear, *"why am I still being persecuted?"* Paul is being persecuted because the cross of Jesus Christ was an offence to those self-righteous Judaizers seeking to bury the gospel under law in the Galatian churches.

Paul preached the same gospel to all. While allowing Jews to continue with the custom of circumcision, Paul never preached that Jews were justified one way and Gentiles another. If he had been preaching circumcision, why on earth was he being attacked so viciously in Galatia? Ear-ticklers tell their audiences what they want to hear so as to avoid persecution like that directed at Paul. The cross is as offensive to Judaizers as it is to their followers. Preachers who preach a false gospel of works-righteousness, or what the Reformers decried as "priestcraft and popery," or those among our contemporaries who tell us that we must preach to the current interests of our congregations, may indeed attract huge crowds and numerous disciples. They can accomplish these ends only by abolishing the offence of the cross.

The cross of Christ is always an offence to the self-righteous and those who seek to stand before God, boasting in their own good works. Since Paul had been preaching the cross through his

⁴²⁴ Betz, *Galatians*, 267-268; Fung, *Galatians*, 238.

⁴²⁵ Moo, *Galatians*, 336.

public placarding of Christ crucified, it is only natural that opposition directed toward him would arise. The fact that the Judaizers were attacking his character refuted the argument that Paul was “*still preaching circumcision.*” In Galatians 5:12, Paul again demonstrates his indignation toward the false teachers falsely accusing him of hypocrisy. He minces no words with them. “*I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!*” These are strong words of invective. How do we respond to them?

First, this verse is a clear indication that the inspiration of Scripture does not entail any form of mechanical dictation, but instead ought to be seen as a divine-human confluence.⁴²⁶ While the inspiration of Scripture extends to the very words of Scripture, not just to the thoughts or ideas in Scripture, Paul’s genuine anger and unique personality comes through in Galatians. The God-breathed Scripture (the work of the Holy Spirit) does not negate its equally human attributes any more that Christ’s having a divine nature negates the fact that he was also truly human. Paul’s anger is evident.

Second, there is a loud Old Testament echo here which is easy to miss. In Deuteronomy 23:1, Moses wrote, “*no one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.*”⁴²⁷ The historical background to Paul’s challenge is important. During the time of Moses there was a widespread Near-Eastern practice of eunuchs serving as priests leading worship of the various pagan deities. There were also well-known pagan rituals involving self-mutilation in the Greco-Roman religions of Paul’s day.⁴²⁸ Many of the servants of the royal courts of the surrounding pagan empires were castrated to prevent them from getting any ideas about the females who also appeared at court. Jumping ahead to first century Galatia and the case of those who circumcised themselves in order to be justified, Paul’s warning is impossible to miss. If you start with circumcision, then go the whole way and emasculate yourself! According to Moses, you thereby bar yourself from the assembly of God’s people.

Yet again, as if to shout at his readers with his quill so they do not miss his point, Paul warns the Galatians that if they seek to return to law as a means of justification, they should take the time to read what the law actually says. If they circumcise themselves in order to be justified, they will come under God’s curse, and cannot enter into the assembly of God’s people, which is Christ’s church. While important and useful if seen correctly as a sign and seal of covenant membership, circumcision can become positively dangerous when someone is circumcised in an attempt to earn righteousness because, ironically, they are severed from Christ, undergoing the very covenant curse demonstrated in the sign of circumcision—being “cut-off.”

In Galatians 5:1, Paul made an emphatic assertion; the purpose of the death of Jesus was to set believers free from the elementary principles of the world. Christ’s merits provide us with what we need to be declared “right” before God (“justified”). To seek to add the merit of human

⁴²⁶ The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture as entailing a divine and human confluence is spelled out in some detail in, Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, 169-266.

⁴²⁷ Moo, Galatians, 338;

⁴²⁸ Wright, Galatians, 327.

works or the basic principles of the world to the merit earned for us by Christ is an affront to God. Our liberty in Christ is the basis for the Christian life because, as Christians, we have clean consciences before God because the guilt of our sin has been washed away by the blood of Christ. Since we are now in Christ, we are not bound by the law as a means of earning a right standing with God. Once justified, we are free to obey the law of God since we are no longer slaves to sin. This freedom is the basis for the Christian life.

Christian liberty also ensures that we are not bound by things indifferent, those things which are not expressly prohibited in Holy Scripture, summed up in the prohibitions, “do not taste,” “do not handle,” “do not touch” (cf. Colossians 2:20-23). All those who have a right standing before God through faith in Christ are free from the elemental things which once enslaved us. Unless we are clear about this, we will not be clear about how to live the Christian life. We will not see the Christian life flowing from our justified status, but will instead see our actions as the ground of our justification. The Judaizers in Galatia were having much success because they caused great confusion about the gospel, deceiving people in order to motivate them to willingly return to slavery.

Given the fact that Christ died to set Christians free from the very things to which the Judaizers were trying to re-enslave them, Paul exhorts the Galatians, both at the beginning and end of this section, to stand firm against these false teachers, and not allow themselves to again bear the “yoke of slavery,” understood by Jews as the obligation to obey the law and likely a motivational expression used by the Judaizers.⁴²⁹ If anyone does return to law-keeping as a means of earning favor with God, Paul says, they will fall from grace and be severed from Christ (Galatians 5:4). This is no intermural debate. Paul tells us that justification produces freedom in Christ. Yet, the false gospel proclaimed by the Judaizers brings about slavery and bondage to the very things for which Christ died to free us. If we do not resist them we’ll end up re-enslaved to basic principles.

But Paul is no libertine as the Judaizers were falsely contending. You can just hear them telling the Galatians in Paul’s absence, “if Paul teaches that we are justified by faith alone and not by works, what place does that leave for good works?” “If people really believe Paul, they will live lives characterized by sin and self-indulgence, not good works.” You can just imagine the Judaizers pointing out to everyone who will listen those immature individuals who use the gospel as an excuse to sin as supposed proof that Paul’s gospel is dangerous. Paul does not take the bait. Instead, he preaches the gospel of free grace, justification by faith alone, and Christian liberty louder and longer. This epistle is proof. It is for freedom that Christ died. Stand firm!

Properly understood, the gospel does not lead to license. But those who live in such a libertine manner do not understand, or (in certain cases) truly do not believe the gospel. The faith which justifies is also a faith which works in love, not so that we can be justified, but because we are already justified. One who trusts in the merits of Christ is set free to strive to obey the law of God. But the religion of the Judaizers, on the other hand, is a religion of fear, doubt, and slavery.

⁴²⁹ Fung, *Galatians*, 216-217.

Martin Luther understood this full-well.

From this freedom follows another in which Christ has freed us from the law, sin, death, the power of the devil, hell, and more. Just as God's wrath can no longer distress us for Christ has delivered us from it, so also the law, sin, and the like cannot accuse and condemn us. Although the law may accuse us and sin perturbs us, they cannot plunge us into desperation, for faith, which overcomes the world, appears immediately and says, "These things no longer belong to me, for Christ has freed and delivered me from them all. Death, the most powerful and fearful foe in all the world, has been defeated and cast out from the conscience by the Spirit's freedom." Thus the majesty of this Christian liberty needs to be held in high esteem and carefully considered . . ."⁴³⁰

VI. Flesh and Spirit (5:13-26)

A. The way of the Spirit is love (5:13-15)

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

The indicative (statement of fact) which opens verse 13 essentially repeats the indicative/imperative of Galatians 5:1. In typically Pauline fashion, the indicative opens the verse—*"for you were called to freedom, brothers"*—and is immediately followed by an imperative (command); *"only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."*

As if anyone hearing this epistle read aloud in the churches of Galatia fails to understand that Christian freedom is the necessary outcome of Paul's gospel, the apostle repeats his point shortly after making it the first time. Only this time, Paul re-frames his imperative in response to the accusation coming from the Judaizers in Galatia to the effect that Christian liberty is dangerous, because it supposedly circumvents and requirement of obedience to the law.

Given the attack upon him and his gospel, Paul must be clear that freedom from the condemnation of the law provides no rationale for indulging the flesh. The term *sarx* ("flesh") has a variety of meanings in Paul's day and plays a very important role in Paul's understanding of sin and grace. *Sarx* can refer to bodily tissue (especially in the case of circumcision), or to the human body as a whole. Jesus came in the flesh (i.e., Romans 1:3), yet flesh empowered by the Spirit (Romans 1:4) because of intrinsic human weakness. Since human flesh implies limits, Paul can use the term here as referring to the human condition due to sin which stands in diametrical opposition to the Spirit.⁴³¹ The term has been translated in certain instances in Paul's letters as

⁴³⁰ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect. 33, on Galatians 5:1

⁴³¹ Moo, Galatians, 345.

“sinful nature” as in older editions of the NIV.

In Galatians 5:13, *sarx* is best understood as a reference to fallen sinners, struggling in their sinfulness and depravity, seen apart from Christ’s redemptive work, while at the same time actively striving against the Holy Spirit. Longenecker’s qualification is helpful in clarifying what exactly is meant. “Paul speaks of ‘the flesh’ not as itself the culprit, but as a captive of sin,” acting on behalf of its captor.⁴³² Although its power has been broken through faith in Christ and through the gift of the Spirit, the sinful habits of the flesh remain, even within Christians (see 5:17 below).

Here, Paul personifies the Spirit and the flesh as though these are two opposing powers duking it out within the human psyche—the flesh against the Spirit. *Sarx* depicts the universal condition of humanity after the Fall of Adam. It refers to our sinful human nature, especially the sinful desires of the mind and body which produce those works of the flesh which Paul will enumerate in verses 19-21 of this chapter. In light of these two opposing forces (flesh and Spirit) operating within the Christian, Paul is very careful to emphasize that while Christian liberty is a necessary adjunct of the gospel, and cannot be separated from it, he is equally careful to point out that Christian liberty cannot be used as an excuse to justify sinful behavior, i.e., to satisfy the desires of the flesh.⁴³³

There is both a negative and positive element in Paul’s imperative. The negative element is that we are not to use our freedom in Christ as a pretense for sinning. The positive element is that we are free “*through love [to] serve one another.*” This is an elaboration of the apostle’s previous comments about true faith leading to works done in love (Galatians 5:6b). Christians, who are now set free from the guilt and power of sin, are also free to serve one another as Christ has served us (cf. John 13:2-12). Since love fulfills the law, Christian freedom must not become an excuse for the exercise of sin’s passions and lust.⁴³⁴

Some have noticed the paradoxical nature of Paul’s comments, which indicates that while we are free in Christ, we are at the same time slaves to one another. In his famous tract on *Christian Liberty*, Luther picked up on this paradox, writing that “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all.”⁴³⁵ Christians are free from the curse of the Law, and free from any requirement to earn justification through works. As Luther put it elsewhere, “Paul warns against the danger of using freedom for selfish purposes. The freedom of the Christian is a slavery to love.”⁴³⁶ So, once justified, we are not free to do as we please and indulge the sinful flesh. Rather, we are free to obey the commandments of God since

⁴³² Longenecker, Galatians, on 5:13.

⁴³³ Fung, Galatians, 244.

⁴³⁴ Ridderbos, The Epistles of Paul to the Churches of Galatia, 200.

⁴³⁵ Martin Luther, trans., W. A. Lambert, A Treatise on Christian Liberty (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 7.

⁴³⁶ Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, on Galatians 5:13.

we have been delivered from the realm and power of the flesh in its opposition to God. We have been set free from bondage to the flesh to serve Christ and our neighbor in the Spirit. As Paul will demonstrate later in the chapter, works of law give way to the fruit of the Spirit.

Since Christ won this freedom for us on Calvary and through his life of obedience we now possess a freedom to serve God and neighbor. Since we do not perform our good works to be justified, but because we are presently justified, believers are freed from guilt and condemnation to serve one another in love because love fulfills the law.⁴³⁷ Since the flesh remains, although greatly weakened, this is never easy. Our neighbor may not be any more lovable than we are. Because Christ has loved us and gave himself for us, we can now love one another out of a sense of gratitude for what Christ's life and death has accomplished for us as well as for our neighbor who still remains unlovable in themselves. The love that we are to have each for the other is a fruit of Christian liberty and justification. Slaves cannot love their masters, and cruel masters make it difficult for their slaves to love anyone. But Christ is now our master, we are his bond-servants. Since he is love incarnate, we, as his people, are free to love one another as demonstrated through serving other divine image bearers.⁴³⁸ Since our standing before God is not grounded in our merit, but in Christ, we are given reason why we ought to regard the needs of others as of equal importance as our own.

In verse 14, Paul tells us that *"the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"* This is a kind of theological short-hand wherein Paul is citing Leviticus 19:18b, and is, in effect, condensing the whole second table of the law (commandments 5-10) into one short command- "love your neighbor." If we should ask, "who is our neighbor?" John Calvin answers, "the word *neighbor* covers every living person. We are joined by a common nature. . . . The image of God ought to be an especially sacred bond of union. No distinction is made between friend and foe, for the wickedness of people cannot annul the right of nature."⁴³⁹

Since, as Paul contends, all believers in Jesus are free from works of law as a means of justification, the Galatian Christians are to live as free men and women and enjoy the Christian liberty secured for them by Christ. The Galatians are to fulfill the law by loving one another, an ability which Paul will go on to explain later in the chapter is the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁴⁴⁰

According to the second use of the law (the role of the law in identifying and exposing sin),⁴⁴¹ our inability to love our neighbor as we ought, condemns us and should drive us to the cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Not one of us has ever loved his neighbor as himself, not even for a

⁴³⁷ Moo, Galatians, 345.

⁴³⁸ See Horton's discussion of the divine image, in The Christian Faith, 387 ff.

⁴³⁹ Calvin, Galatians, 101.

⁴⁴⁰ Fung, Galatians, 247.

⁴⁴¹ Calvin, Institutes, 2.7.6.

millisecond. For the justified Christian, however, the law (according to its third use) is fulfilled since as free men and women we serve one another in love, not to be justified, but because we are presently justified. No matter how flawed, and regardless of impure motives, all of our works are acceptable to God, because they are covered with Christ's own faultless righteousness (cf. Ephesians 2:10). His good works cover our sinful efforts. These good works are described by Paul as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who inevitably brings forth this fruit in the lives of those who are justified (a point Paul will make in Galatians 5:22). Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is at the top of the list of the Spirit's fruit.

The same act of faith through which we are justified is a living faith through which the Holy Spirit produces good works over the course of our lives as faith's fruit. We are free in Christ and released from bondage to the flesh and now indwelt by the Holy Spirit. According to Ephesians 1:13, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the down payment on our participation in the age to come. The result is that our freedom in Christ will manifest itself in love for other justified sinners and our neighbors, whether Christians or not. We have been set free from the tyranny of sin and death, so as to serve one another in love, not because we are worth loving, but because Christ loved us first (1 John 4:10), who gave himself for us and now indwells us by his Holy Spirit.

The controversy in Galatia was generated by the false teaching of the Judaizers and provoked Paul's exhortation to serve one another in love and not indulge the flesh. As a result of their actions, division and dissension set in and some among the Galatians were devouring one another, as wild animals would do. As Paul warns in verse 15, "*but if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*" People were behaving like animals, the very epitome of acting according to the flesh. Paul can speak of the "leaven of the Judaizers" (v. 9), because their departure from the gospel has spread throughout the churches, producing division and quarreling, and wreaking havoc. Again, the nasty irony resurfaces; those most zealous for the law (the Judaizers) are often the ones who are most indifferent when it comes to obeying it!

So too, anyone siding with Paul will likewise become an object of the legalist's ire. The cross is a scandal, a shameful symbol of defeat, finality, shame, and embarrassment for all associated with it.⁴⁴² The cross calls us to come and die to ourselves, not boast in our good works. Christ's cross is an offence to legalists everywhere who contend that the preaching of Christ crucified must be abolished. Why? The cross warns the self-righteous that all attempts at good works do not save but only condemn. In the cross of Christ the wrath and righteousness of God are revealed (Romans 1:17-18). It is here that God's holy wrath against sin and his unfathomable love for sinners is most clearly put on display. The cross represents the narrow way. The cross bids us to come and die to self-righteousness and to seek the forgiveness and righteousness of another (Jesus).

Yet, legalists do not want to die to self. With no remedy or release from sin's bondage, the guilt within them stirred up all sorts of derision and anger toward others seen in Paul's lament at how quickly the Judaizing leaven spread throughout the churches. Paul's description is vivid.

⁴⁴² See, for example, "The σκάνδαλον of the Gospel," in Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol VII, s.v. "σκάνδαλον."

People were biting and devouring one another as wild animals would do. There was now division where there had been peace. There was quarreling between Jews and Gentiles over food of all things! The self-righteous even stooped to spying on the Christian liberty of others to see who ate what, who kept Jewish feast days, and who observed all the Jewish religious rituals. Some were viciously slandering the apostle Paul, who was Christ's chosen messenger. They were doing the same to those who sided with Paul. When the offence of the cross is removed, what is gained? More converts through a more acceptable message which is no gospel? Perhaps.

But what do we lose? We lose the precious freedoms which Jesus Christ died to secure for us. We lose any peace for our troubled consciences which Christ died to comfort. We no longer place our confidence in the power of the gospel to convert non-Christians as our misplaced confidence is now in the flesh and in the works of the law which cannot justify. We lose the Spirit-given ability through love to serve one another. We become mean-spirited and judgmental, more concerned with the sanctification of others, than with our own struggle to love our neighbors. We become Christian cannibals, devouring each other.

B. Walking by the Spirit (5:16-18)

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

In face of attacks made upon the gospel by the Judaizers, several times in this chapter, Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom won for them by Jesus Christ (5:1, 13). No small thing since such freedom is a necessary appendage to the gospel. Paul tells his hearers that although they are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, the faith through which they are justified is also a faith that works in love. Paul also specifies that the law-obedience to which cannot justify—is fulfilled through our obedience to the command to love our neighbor. But the power to fulfill the law is not our own. It must be given to us through the indwelling Holy Spirit, which is why we are exhorted to “walk by the Spirit,” so as not to gratify the desires of the flesh. What, exactly, does it mean to “walk in the Spirit”?

In verses 16-18 of Galatians 5, Paul contrasts the work of the Holy Spirit in producing the “fruit of the Spirit” (which is characteristic of the Christian), with the works brought forth from the flesh, specifically our opposition to Christ and his Spirit. Paul describes the Christian's intense struggle with sin as a war between who we were in Adam (dominated by the flesh) and who we are in Christ (walking in the Spirit). Paul tells the Galatians they were called by God to be free, yet cautions them that they were not to use this freedom as an excuse to indulge the flesh through their sinful opposition to God. Instead, they were to use their freedom in Christ to serve one another in love (5:13-15), not devour each other as wild animals would do.

As is his custom, Paul follows these comments with an imperative in verse 16. “*But I say, walk by*

the Spirit." This theme dominates the section of this letter which follows.⁴⁴³ "To walk" is an Old Testament figure of speech descriptive of how one lives one's life,⁴⁴⁴ as in Exodus 18:20, when Moses tells the Israelites, "and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do." Paul elaborates upon this notion further, stating that the one who "walks in the Spirit, will not gratify the desires of the flesh." Since the verb "to walk" (περιπατέω) is in the present tense, Paul means that this is something we do *continually*.⁴⁴⁵ Paul exhorts us to walk by the Spirit as a habit of life because in doing so we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Note well, Paul is not talking about something optional—i.e., that Christians can choose to walk after the flesh or the Spirit. Paul says that Christians do walk in the Spirit and they do not walk in the flesh. As Professor Bruce puts it, "‘walk by the Spirit’ means ‘let your conduct be directed by the Spirit.’ The way of the Spirit is the way of freedom; the way of the Spirit is the way of love."⁴⁴⁶ Life in the Spirit is not a choice made by the more zealous followers of Jesus, it is a characteristic of all those justified through faith. Whereas before conversion we are dominated by the flesh, now that we are in Christ, we walk according to the Spirit. In Adam, sin characterizes us. In Christ, sin is an exception, a contradiction.

There are several loud Old Testament echoes here. Throughout the prophets, the promise of life in the Spirit would be manifest in the coming messianic age and with the new covenant yet to dawn. More specifically, this a major theme in the prophecies of Jeremiah 31:31-34 (of the new covenant) and of Ezekiel (chapters 36, 37). As B. B. Warfield elaborates on this point,

In the Messianic times, Isaiah tells us, the Spirit shall be poured out from on high with the effect that judgment shall dwell in the wilderness and righteousness shall abide in the peaceful field (Isa. 32:15). It is in such descriptions of the Messianic era as a time of the reign of the Spirit in the hearts of the people, that the opulence of His saving influences is developed. It is He who shall gather the children of God into the kingdom, so that no one shall be missing It is He who, as the source of all blessings, shall be poured out on the seed with the result that it shall spring up in the luxuriant growth and bear such rich fruitage that one shall cry 'I am the Lord's,' and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob, and another shall write on his hand, 'Unto the Lord,' and shall surname himself by the name of Israel (Isa. 44:3). It is His abiding presence which constitutes the preëminent blessing of the new covenant which Jehovah makes with His people in the day of redemption: "And as for me, this is my covenant with them, saith

⁴⁴³ Moo, Galatians, 352.

⁴⁴⁴ Longenecker, Galatians, on 5:16.

⁴⁴⁵ The verb περιπατέω ("go about," "walk around") appears frequently in Paul's letters and occasionally in the Johannine letters in the figurative sense of "live" or "conduct oneself" (cf. Rom 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 1 Cor 3:3; 7:17; 2 Cor 4:2; 5:7; 10:2, 3; 12:18; Eph 2:2, 10; 4:17; 5:2, 15; Phil 3:17, 18; Col 2:6; 3:7; 4:5; 2 Thess 1:12; 4:1, 12; see also 1 John 2:6; 2 John 4, 6; 3 John 3–4), though its only occurrence in Galatians is here at 5:16. See, Longenecker, Galatians, on 5:16.

⁴⁴⁶ Bruce, Galatians, 243.

the Lord: my Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever" (Isa. 59:21). The gift of the Spirit as an abiding presence in the heart of the individual is the crowning Messianic blessing.⁴⁴⁷

Under the old covenant, the law was said to be an external code of conduct written on tablets of stone, a list of rules set down in the two stone tablets of the law which reflect the perfections of YHWH. But with the coming of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when the Spirit is given to all of God's people as promised in the new covenant era, God's law is now said to be written upon our hearts as an inward principle through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴⁸

The Old Testament expectation of a new covenant was, in part, that the messianic age would be characterized as one in which the law would be written on each heart, through the Spirit's indwelling of each believer.⁴⁴⁹ The two things—the law written upon the heart, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—necessarily go together. Those who are called to be free in Christ are also called to "walk in the Spirit." We are not to let sin reign in our lives because we are no longer under the domination of the "flesh." Paul is speaking of the third use of the law (to regulate the life of a Christian believer), where an imperative (command) follows the indicative (statement of fact) in Galatians 5:13. Since we are called to be free (indicative), we are to walk in the freedom that is given us by the Spirit (the imperative). Our freedom in Christ is not to be abused.⁴⁵⁰ Our freedom in Christ does not mean "free from the commandments," but rather freedom to obey them.

As Paul stated earlier in Galatians 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" Paul is speaking of a life empowered for good works because we are united to Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. For Paul, the old Pharisee is dead, the regenerate Paul is now alive to God and his commandments. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul similarly explains, "*now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*" To "*walk by the Spirit*" is to live in the light of the freedom we have in Christ. We are free to obey God's commandments not in order to be justified, but because we *are* presently justified. Since we are indwelt by the Spirit of freedom, the Holy Spirit directs our course of life as revealed in the word of God. We are free from bondage to the things which once enslaved us; the curse of the law and the tyranny of sin. Says Paul, now we are free to serve one another in love. As Jesus promises in John 8:36, "*so if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*"

⁴⁴⁷ B. B. Warfield, "*The Spirit of God in the Old Testament*," in *Biblical Doctrines*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 122.

⁴⁴⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 248-249.

⁴⁴⁹ Vos, "*The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit*," 95-97.

⁴⁵⁰ Silva, "*Galatians*," 810.

Nowhere in his discussion does the apostle give the Galatians a list of things to do, nor does he hint or imply that “walking in the Spirit” will be easy. Paul never states that in “walking by the Spirit,” Christians will be able to subdue all manifestations of the sinful nature in our lives (the flesh), and attain a state of Christian perfection (holy living) as taught by John Wesley.⁴⁵¹ The sinful nature (the flesh) is not eradicated at the moment of regeneration, but the sinful nature is cut off from its source of life through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The flesh will slowly but surely wither and die, a process which is complete at the time of our death. Although a defeated foe, the flesh will nevertheless fight a determined guerrilla war until we die or until Christ comes back, whichever comes first, as Paul states in verse 17, which we will take up momentarily.

The critical question is “how do we walk in the Spirit?” In the confessional Reformed tradition, the work of the Spirit is connected to specific means, the so-called “means of grace,” the preached word and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace that God has given to us.⁴⁵² The Spirit works in and through the word (read, preached, or studied) to convict us of sin, to reveal God’s will to us, and to point us continually back to the sufficiency of Christ’s death for our many sins. What is promised to us in the word, is signed and sealed to us (confirmed and strengthened) in the sacrament which are visible pictures of invisible workings of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit assures us that Christ’s righteousness covers our own unrighteousness. The indwelling Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8), and motivates us to pray (Ephesians 6:18). The Holy Spirit enables us to live in freedom by serving one another in love as a result of the mysterious union between ourselves and other members of Christ’s church into one body as together we are conformed to the image of Christ.

But we cannot fulfill Paul’s imperative by merely re-doubling our efforts, or by using spiritual technology in a futile attempt to reach a higher-level of victorious living, or a more intense Christian experience. Walking in the Spirit is participating in the ordinary means of grace (word and sacrament), as well as things such as prayer, fellowship, and the service of our neighbor. The result of utilizing these means (given us by God) is steady growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, along with progressive conformity to the image of Christ. We do not gratify the desires of the flesh when we take avail of the means God has given. But, if we focus upon stopping the desires of the flesh apart from God’s chosen means, we will only fuel the fire within as Paul implies in Romans 7:8; *“but sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.”* We must be careful not to confuse cause with effect!

For Paul, life in the Spirit is the characteristic of every Christian. There is nothing to indicate that some Christians “live in the Spirit,” while others do not. The New Testament does not teach a bifurcated Christian life, wherein some of God’s people choose to live the Spirit-filled life, and

⁴⁵¹ See John Wesley’s Plain Account of Christian Perfection (London: The Epworth Press, 1976), 112-113.

⁴⁵² See the discussion in Horton, Rediscovering the Holy Spirit, 244-283.

others are content to remain “carnal Christians.”⁴⁵³ Paul’s indicative is clear—every Christian who has been called by God will persevere in the faith until the end and will “*walk by the Spirit*” until conformed to the image of Christ.

In a parallel discussion (cf. Romans 8:1-17), Paul contrasts life in the Spirit and life in the flesh in more detail. The contrast Paul sets out in Romans 8 is not an option for the Christian to walk in the flesh or to walk in the Spirit as a “victorious” Christian. The contrast between flesh and Spirit is one between believer and unbeliever. All Christians “walk by the Spirit” (which is a defining characteristic) while all non-Christians “walk in the flesh” (as unregenerate). As Paul states in Romans 8:8-9, “*those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*” The contrast between Christian and non-Christian is obvious and fundamental.

But if this is true, as Paul indicates in Galatians 5:16-18 and Romans 8:1-17, why is the Christian life such a struggle? In Galatians 5:17, Paul makes clear what has been implied previously, “*for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*” This explains, in part, why it seems so difficult to actually do what Paul has commanded in the previous verse. While we are exhorted to walk by the Spirit (and not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies) the reason that we so often do not obey the law as we should, is because the sinful nature and the Spirit “*are opposed to each other.*”⁴⁵⁴

The normal, indeed healthy, Christian life is characterized by an intense struggle between the new life in the Spirit and the old way of life in the flesh, or what is also known as “indwelling sin,” which refers to the remnants of sin and its habits. I take this to be a strong parallel to Paul’s comments in Romans 7:14-25.⁴⁵⁵ In that passage, Paul describes his present struggle with sin—the struggle with sin experienced by an apostle. The “normal” Christian life as one characterized by a struggle with indwelling sin, not a life of immediate victory over all sin and sinful habits supposedly achieved by some. The Christian life is one of slow, sustained, and at times, painful progress. But all of Christ’s people reach the appointed goal which is conformity to the image of Christ.

Sadly, Christians are often told that the presence of a sustained struggle against sin coupled with a perception of lack of victory over that sin, is reason to doubt the assurance of their salvation. But it is only a Christian, indwelt by God’s Spirit, who experiences such a struggle between the Spirit and the flesh (“indwelling sin”). Non-Christians live entirely in the flesh. Non-Christians

⁴⁵³ See Warfield’s critique of such views in; B. B. Warfield, “Review” of He That Is Spiritual. By Lewis Sperry Chafer. [New York: “Our Hope” Press, 1918], 12 mo., pp. x.-151, The Princeton Theological Review, XVII, no. 1-4 (1919), 322-327.

⁴⁵⁴ Moo, Galatians, 356.

⁴⁵⁵ See the discussion of the differences of opinion of the identity of the “I” in Romans 7:14-25, in C. E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), I.340-347.

do not experience an intense struggle between the sinful nature and the indwelling Spirit. God's Spirit is not provoking internal conflicts within them. I would suggest that the struggle with sin is a sure sign that one is actually converted not that one is not a Christian.

Because of the intense nature of the struggle with sin, we must learn to draw our assurance of salvation and God's favor toward us from the promises given to us in the Scriptures, rather than by attempting to draw assurance from our personal progress in holiness. Some of those who have progressed the farthest in sanctification are often times those most dissatisfied with the progress they are making in the Christian life. Assurance should be drawn primarily from the promise in Scripture that God will save sinners, from the witness of the Spirit to those promises, and only secondarily from our progress in the Christian life. While we will indeed make progress, it is at times very difficult to gauge.⁴⁵⁶

This is why we must hear law and gospel on a continual basis and not moralistic exhortations to do better and try harder. The law excites and gives life to sin, exposing our need for a Savior (Romans 7:7-8). The law is written upon our hearts, so the sinful flesh (which remains) resonates with the law's demands. Our default setting is legal and performance based. When we do good, good things happen. When we do bad, bad things happen. This why we must hear the external proclamation of God's favor towards us in Jesus Christ—the absolution or declaration of the forgiveness of sins—or else we have little hope of forgiveness from our repeated and constant sins. When someone is overcome by the guilt of sin, they need to hear the gospel. If someone is apathetic or indifferent to their sins, they need to be confronted by the law of God which condemns.

What such people struggling with sin do not need to hear are moralistic exhortations to do better or try harder. Moralism, as opposed to the preaching of the law, consists of watered-down imperatives designed not to expose sin, but give us principles for making ourselves better. Nothing is more poisonous to the soul than moralistic preaching. Like New Year's resolutions, we do not keep such rules for long. Our failure to keep "law-lite," moralistic rules only frustrates us. As Paul pounds home in his Galatian letter, Christianity is primarily a religion of rescue and redemption, and only secondarily a religion of morality and ethics. Proper conduct is the manifestation of a sound biblical theology.

In verse 18, Paul repeats his original assertion made in verse 16, "*if you are led by the Spirit,*" adding that "*you are not under the law.*" It is important to carefully spell out what Paul means when he says we are not under law.

⁴⁵⁶ The *Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks of this as follows (19.2-3): 2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption. 3. This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

There are three ways in which those who are in the Spirit are not under law.

- First, Paul means that we no longer suffer the law's curse for our infractions of God's revealed will as in Galatians 3:13—"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" The curse is removed through the death of Christ for us.
- Second, we are no longer under the slavery of the law (Galatians 3:22; 25; 4:1-3), since Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1, 13).
- Third, we are free from all of those "things indifferent" (*adiaphora*) things which are not expressly forbidden in Scripture. The Spirit gives life and freedom, something the law cannot do.⁴⁵⁷

Although we are not under the law as a means of justification, in no sense does this mean that Christians are not to strive to obey the law. As we have seen, all ten of the commandments are re-affirmed in the New Testament. The Reformers were correct (and helpful) to speak of a second and a third use of the law. What Paul is talking about is that because we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, we are free from obedience to the law as a means of justification—according to the second use of the law. But this also means we are now free to obey the law according to the third use. We do so out of gratitude because we are justified. Now we can serve one another in love knowing this fulfills the law, as this is the Spirit's work in our lives.

We find much practical wisdom by listening to both Luther and Calvin on this matter. We start with Luther, from his *Lectures on Galatians*:

If you are led by the Spirit . . . You owe the law nothing. God mercifully pardons us for failing to do what we want to do in the Spirit. We are not yet pure spirits ourselves, but we are led by the Spirit and forgiven accordingly.

The rule of the Spirit is so powerful that the law cannot accuse us for the sin that is in us. Christ our righteousness is beyond reproach and cannot be accused by the law. As long as we cling to him we are led by the Spirit and are free from the law.⁴⁵⁸

And then we turn to Calvin (from his *Commentary on Galatians*):

Although believers stumble in the way of the Lord they should not be discouraged because they want to satisfy the law. They need comforting words like the ones we find here. What they lack is not counted against them, but their duties are accepted by God as

⁴⁵⁷ See John Murray's essay, "Law and Grace," in *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 181-201, especially Murray's discussion of what law *can* and *cannot* do (184-186).

⁴⁵⁸ Bray, George, and Manetsch, *Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament*, vol. 10, on Galatians 5:18.

if they were full and complete in every respect.⁴⁵⁹

Next, we continue Paul's discussion by turning to his discussion of the fruit of the flesh in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit, in the balance of the chapter.

C. The works of the flesh (5:19-21)

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Having spoken of "walking in the Spirit" in verse 16, Paul summarizes his statements in vv. 13-18 regarding serving one another and living by the Spirit by contrasting the works of the flesh (in verses 19-21) with the fruit of the Spirit (in verses 22-23). To refute the charges made by the Judaizers of libertinism and antinomian behavior in those who embrace Paul's gospel of justification *sola fide*, Paul responds with a new contrast. Christians do not merely have a choice between striving to keep the law (the Judaizing position) or living as godless Gentiles did (the charge being made against Paul). Rather, Christians have a better calling—life in the Spirit.⁴⁶⁰

The contrast drawn out by Paul between the two reflect Paul's frequent use of antithesis. For Paul, the flesh and the Spirit can be understood as two warring powers which reflect Paul's two age eschatology. We live under the dominion of the law (this present age), or we live under the dominion of the Spirit (the age to come).⁴⁶¹ Paul is warning any of the Galatians still on the fence regarding circumcision about the dangers of works of the flesh which lies at the heart of the conduct of the Judaizers, who were insisting that Christians abandon the realm of the Spirit to re-embrace the flesh.⁴⁶²

As for pastoral reflection on why this distinction matters, John Calvin points out something obvious yet which we are often reluctant to acknowledge, [Paul] "now draws a picture both of the flesh and the Spirit. If [we] knew ourselves, [we] would not need this declaration that we are nothing but flesh, but such is our innate hypocrisy that we never perceive our foulness until the tree has been made known by its fruits."⁴⁶³ The works of the flesh is our default moral setting until God gives to us the blessed Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ. Left to ourselves and apart from God's grace, we cannot truly understand the gravity of our sins nor grasp our

⁴⁵⁹ Bray, George, and Manetsch, Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, on Galatians 5:18.

⁴⁶⁰ Longenecker, Galatians, on 5:19.

⁴⁶¹ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 428-453.

⁴⁶² Moo, Galatians, 351.

⁴⁶³ Calvin, Galatians, 103.

true condition. While in bondage to the flesh, we see ourselves as better off than we really are.

In verses 19-21 of Galatians 5, Paul give us a list of those behaviors which are characteristic of the flesh, and are the manifestation of life in this present evil age.⁴⁶⁴ This is one of the so-called “sins lists” which are found throughout the New Testament.⁴⁶⁵ Paul writes, “*now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” Paul’s use of “now” (*de*) ties his comments here back to those he made in verse 13 (“*for you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another*”). Once set free from the flesh’s bondage, we are to cease acting as though the flesh still dominates us as evident in the behaviors mentioned by Paul.

Before we go any further in addressing the closing verses of the chapter, it is worth noting that there is no distinction made by the apostle between “mortal” and “venial” sins as the Roman church erroneously teaches.⁴⁶⁶ Nor is there any distinction made between “big” and “little” sins, as many Christians assume (or imply) in their teaching. Not mentioned are any of the so-called “house rules” of American fundamentalism, i.e. smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, etc. When we look at what Paul actually says about the flesh, it becomes apparent that far too many Christians are concerned with things that God is not, and not sufficiently concerned with things that he is. While all sin condemns equally, (sins in our thinking, our speaking, or in our actions), not all sins have equal consequences. The person who commits adultery or theft in their hearts is as guilty before God as the cheater or the thief. But sins of the heart do not enrage a jilted spouse, nor will the police be called if I steal my neighbor’s car in my heart.

The fifteen works of the flesh mentioned by Paul fall into four basic categories. All of these “works” were common throughout the Greco-Roman world, so none of the things in this list were new to the Galatians. What is new is that they are identified as “sin” accruing guilt before God. With several exceptions, these terms which Paul characterizes as “works of the flesh,” were often mentioned in ancient sources, and are quite similar to the Hellenic (Greek) contrast between “two ways,” that of vice and that of virtue.⁴⁶⁷ The Gentiles among the Galatians probably engaged in many of these things before their conversion, perhaps even seeing some them at the time as virtues. To be in bondage to the flesh is to be easily self-deceived about whether the things on Paul’s list are virtues or vices.

⁴⁶⁴ Such vice lists were common in Paul’s day and likely go back as far as Plato and his pupil, Aristotle.

⁴⁶⁵ According to Longenecker, “it need be noted that lists of virtues and vices appear in the NT not only here at Gal 5:19–23, but also frequently elsewhere: in the Gospels at Mark 7:21–22 (cf. Matt 15:19); elsewhere in the Pauline letters at Rom 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor 5:9–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor 12:20–21; Eph 4:31–32; 5:3–5; Col 3:5–8; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 2 Tim 3:2–5; Titus 3:3; and in the “hinder parts” of the NT at Jas 3:13–18 (esp. v 17); 1 Peter 2:1; 4:3, 15; and Rev 21:8; 22:14–15. See Longenecker, Galatians on 5:19.

⁴⁶⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, sec. 1854.

⁴⁶⁷ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 246; Longenecker, Galatians on 5:19.

While those Jewish converts to Christianity knew these things were contrary to God's commandments and strived to avoid them, those listening to the Judaizers were also seeking to be justified by works of law. If they did not practice such things (like the godless Gentiles did) and if they avoided the behaviors on the list, doing so was seen as an act of righteousness, or to put it more directly, earning merit (or favor) with God. Worse, being in bondage to the flesh often means externalizing the sin. "I do not do these things with my body, but doing them in my heart doesn't count as a sin." So, while living under the dominion of the flesh, those sins of self-centeredness which are internal (in the heart) are not seen to be sinful because they are not acted upon. Furthermore, we are not convicted of our sins of the flesh by the Holy Spirit (although we may feel vaguely guilty), nor do we benefit from the Spirit's restraining influence.

Paul's "vice" list breaks down as follows. First, there are manifestations of sexual sins, such as sexual immorality (*pornia*), which refers to sexual sin, including participation in temple prostitution. The Christian sexual ethic limits sexual relations to marriage, and that sex before marriage (fornication), sex outside of marriage (adultery), or same sex acts (homosexuality) are considered sinful and a manifestation of the flesh.⁴⁶⁸ Debauchery; The Greek word means uncleanness, and a good translation would be promiscuity. Second, there are false religious practices such as idolatry and witchcraft. The latter is *pharmakeia* (φαρμακεία), from which we get our word pharmacy. As used here, the word likely refers to magic, spells, etc., where intoxicating drugs are used in connection to pagan religious practices. Third, there are sins of self-centeredness such as hatred of others (hostility), discord (quarrelsome), jealousy, fits of rage (outbursts of anger), selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (both of which would apply particularly in Galatia), and, finally, envy. Fourth, there are sins of intemperance such as drunkenness and orgies (the latter probably tied to feasts and banquets associated with worship of pagan gods, often times leading to orgiastic behavior).⁴⁶⁹ In case he missed anything, Paul adds to his list, "*things like these.*" Paul has already explained this to the Galatians previously—as *I warned you before.*

Vice lists often end with a stern warning, such as Paul issues here (verse 21), "*those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*"⁴⁷⁰ Paul's warning reflects the language of inheritance as used in the Old Testament which refers to those things God promised to his people through Israel's prophets. Under the Sinai covenant, these prophecies are tied to the Promised Land. But in light of the dawn of the kingdom of God associated with Christ's messianic mission, the inheritance is reinterpreted as eschatological, i.e., eternal life in Christ.⁴⁷¹ Those bound by the flesh will not receive the promised blessing. They will perish in their sins. Those in the Spirit will receive the promised inheritance.

⁴⁶⁸ For a thorough and careful discussion of sexual sin, see, Andreas J. Kostenberger, God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

⁴⁶⁹ For a discussion of the meaning of these terms and their various nuances, see Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 247 ff; Moo, Galatians, 359-361.

⁴⁷⁰ Moo, Galatians, 362.

⁴⁷¹ Fung, Galatians, 261.

Paul is emphatic that those whose lives are characterized by such manifestations of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God (which refers to the reign of God in ushering in the new creation and the age of the Holy Spirit through the death and resurrection of Jesus) is mentioned by Paul thirteen times in his letters.⁴⁷² Paul speaks of the kingdom as inaugurated by the coming of Jesus, but not yet consummated this side of Christ's second advent. The kingdom is eschatological and is but another way of describing the arrival of the age to come, breaking in on this present evil age.⁴⁷³ This is the way the kingdom is depicted throughout the gospels.⁴⁷⁴

Paul is not warning the Galatians that if any of these sins are present in our lives at the time of death, we will not inherit the kingdom of God. But his list does push us to realize that "*all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them"* (Gal. 3:10). Paul's list condemns each one of us because we do not do the things mentioned perfectly and continually. There is not a person on earth who is entitled to look down on anyone else and say, "I am better than you are." It is not that some or all of vices on Paul's list may be present in our lives which leads to condemnation. Indwelling sin remains as a fact of the Christian life. But if these things are *characteristic* of our behavior (the "works of the flesh") it is because we remain under the domination of the flesh. The big picture is that the works of the flesh are the defining characteristic of those who belong to this present evil age, while the presence of the fruit of Spirit is one of the characteristics of being set free from the flesh because we are now under the reign of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, these sin lists do condemn all of us, as they are designed to do (cf. Romans 7:7-8). The law of God exposes these works of the flesh in all of us. Just because we have not committed these sins with our hands or bodies does not mean that we have not done them in our minds or hearts. If we have merely contemplated doing it, we are as guilty as if we had done it a million times, though as previously mentioned, thinking about doing these things certainly does not carry with it the consequences of actually committing the act. Our own sinfulness is readily apparent in the fact that we are all prone to hear or read these sin lists, think of others who we think do such things, and then condemn them based on our faulty estimation. Luther reminds us that "in every church there are some who are strong and some who are weak. Paul is trying to achieve a balance between them so that one group will not cause unnecessary offense to the other."⁴⁷⁵

But the flesh is what we were and the flesh remains even after we come under the dominion of the indwelling Holy Spirit, so that "*the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want*

⁴⁷² L. J. Kreitzer, "Kingdom of God/Christ," in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 524-526.

⁴⁷³ Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory, 98-100.

⁴⁷⁴ Gaffin, In the Fulness of Time, 65-118, Moo, Galatians, 362.

⁴⁷⁵ Bray, George, and Manetsch, Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, on Galatians 5:25.

to do" (Galatians 5:17).

To summarize how Paul's declaration impacts the Christian life, those who are in the flesh are enslaved by the law and are characterized by conduct just described by Paul. The things on this list are the outward manifestation of the sinful nature (the flesh). The Christian, on the other hand, is characterized by the following list (the Fruit of the Spirit), not the former (the works of the flesh), although the remnants of indwelling sin will frequently manifest themselves in our lives, since the sinful nature conflicts with the Spirit which "*keep you from doing the things you want to do.*"

D. The fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26)

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Having set out the vices (of the flesh), in verses 22-26 Paul sets out nine virtues identified as "fruit of the Spirit." These stand in obvious contrast to the works of the flesh just enumerated. Wright is correct to remind us before we consider the details of Paul's list, that "in order to become a fruit-bearer in this sense, one must have been 'crucified' with the Messiah."⁴⁷⁶ Indeed, to be justified and united with Jesus in the new creation is to enter the dominion of the Spirit. The virtues on Paul's list are not associated with character formation as with the Greek lists of virtue (as important these virtues are in the civil kingdom), but instead are to be understood as brotherly obedience and expressions of liberty in Christ which are the basis for the communion of the saints and the building up of the members of Christ's church—an especially important point in churches as those in Galatia, torn by strife.⁴⁷⁷

Martin Luther points out something obvious, but easily overlooked. Paul does not contrast the "works" of the flesh with the "works" of the Spirit. As Luther observes, "Paul does not call these works of the Spirit but gives them the nobler designation of fruits, because those who have them give glory to God and by their virtues point others to the teaching and faith of Christ."⁴⁷⁸ The nine fruit(s) of the Spirit mentioned by Paul become characteristic of a Christian indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The indicative of justification (being declared righteousness) becomes the imperative of striving against the flesh which is the characteristic of life in the Spirit.⁴⁷⁹ Both the declaration of righteousness and the striving against the flesh are the fruit of justifying faith

⁴⁷⁶ Wright, Galatians, 345.

⁴⁷⁷ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 297.

⁴⁷⁸ Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, on Galatians 5:22.

⁴⁷⁹ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 257

which will produce the Fruit of the Spirit as Paul is about to elaborate.⁴⁸⁰

To be more specific, as for justification and the fruit of the Spirit, Vos points out that there is in Paul's letters a direct connection between the righteousness given us in justification and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Says Vos, "the possession of the Spirit is for Paul the natural correlate, the crown and in so far the infallible exponent of the state of δικαιοσύνη [righteous]."⁴⁸¹ For Paul, to be justified and reckoned as righteous is to possess (via indwelling) the Holy Spirit. To possess the Holy Spirit is to bear his fruit. Vos puts the matter as follows:

Here the righteousness of the world to come, which is to be bestowed in the last judgment, is represented as a thing which the Christian still waits for. This waiting, however, is determined by two coordinated factors: on the one hand it takes place ἐκ πίστεως, [from faith] on the other hand πνεύματι [in the Spirit], and these two designate the subjective and the objective ground respectively on which the confident expectation is based. In the Spirit, not in the σὰρξ [flesh], in faith, not in ἔργα νόμου [works of law], has the Christian assurance that the full eschatological righteousness will become [theirs]."⁴⁸²

When a Christian receives the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, we enter into the age to come, we participate in the new creation, and we spontaneously begin to bear the Spirit's fruit as a sign of the Spirit's indwelling. All of these benefits are provisional and await to be fully consummated when the Lord returns.

There is much important Old Testament background to Paul's discussion of the Fruit of Spirit well worth our consideration. As Moo points out, the fruit of the Spirit is the concrete manifestation in the life of individual Christians of the very thing that Israel's prophets had predicted. In the age to come, the Spirit will take possession of God's people and bear his fruit, something life in the flesh cannot bring about.⁴⁸³ The Old Testament prophets foresaw that the Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh (Joel 2:28 ff), and that he will enable the coming Messiah to fulfill his mission (Isaiah 11:2, 42:1). Furthermore, the Spirit will renew Israel and dwell in the land (Isaiah 32:15-17, Ezekiel 36:26). The coming of the Spirit is the agent through whom YHWH accomplishes his purposes for Israel.⁴⁸⁴ What was promised through the prophets is a complete re-ordering of our lives once freed from the dominion of sin and indwelt by the Spirit.

When we turn to the specific fruit mentioned by Paul, we find love at the top of the list (as previously indicated in Galatians 5:13). As Paul has indicated elsewhere (cf. 1 Corinthians

⁴⁸⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 259.

⁴⁸¹ Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," 109.

⁴⁸² Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," 111.

⁴⁸³ Moo, *Galatians*, 351.

⁴⁸⁴ Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," 109.

13:13), love is superior to faith or hope. There are numerous references to love throughout Paul's writings. The reason that Christians are to love one another is because God has first loved us (Ephesians 2:4-7; Romans 5:8). Love is described by Paul as the atmosphere in which we relate to one another (Ephesians 5:2). It is described as a garment that we are to put on (1 Corinthians 16:14). It is the secret of unity (Colossians 2:2) and is characteristic of Christian maturity (Ephesians 4:15). Love provides the proper restraint of Christian liberty (Galatians 5:13; Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 13). The "fruit of the Spirit has to do with the way we relate to others."⁴⁸⁵ The law is fulfilled in love, and love is demonstrated in serving one another. As Horton puts it, "love is not the completion of justifying faith, but its fruit."⁴⁸⁶

Joy is also mentioned, but joy is not to be equated with happiness. The joy of which Paul speaks is awareness of God's favor towards us because the work of Christ has been applied to us through the Spirit. Paul exhorts us to "rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 3:1). We are to have joy in the faith (Philippians 1:25). We may be in the midst of difficult circumstances, unhappy, suffer trials, and endure tribulations, and yet still possess the joy of which Paul speaks through knowing God's love for us manifest in Christ's cross and his empty tomb. Peace (εἰρήνη) is drawn from the Hebrew *shalom*, and conveys the idea of a sense of peace with God, wholeness, soundness, and prosperity. In Paul's writings, peace, "appears most commonly in greetings and benedictions, where God (with Jesus) is identified as the source of peace. Paul also speaks of 'the God of peace,' (Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11, etc.) . . . The [gospel] is called 'the gospel of peace' (Ephesians 6:15),"⁴⁸⁷ because Christ has made peace with God for us, through his shedding of blood on the cross for our sins.

Patience derives from God who is patient with us (Exodus 34:6). According to Paul's letter to Timothy, the supreme example of patience is realized through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, "I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1:16). We are to be patient with others (Ephesians 4:1-2) and to keep the unity of the Spirit. Kindness refers to God's gracious attitude toward sinners, primarily the kindness by which God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). In fact, salvation itself is spoken of as God's love for humanity (Titus 3:4). As we have experienced God's kindness to us, so too we are to demonstrate that same kindness to others.

Goodness is closely related to kindness, and refers to "an attitude of generous kindness to others, which is happy to do far more than is required by mere justice."⁴⁸⁸ Faithfulness is understood in the sense of being trustworthy. Gentleness refers to "an ethical grace in the believer's life [and] may be described as a humble and pliable submission to God's will which reflects itself in humility, patience, and forbearance towards others, regarding even insult or

⁴⁸⁵ Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit*, 220-221.

⁴⁸⁶ Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit*, 223.

⁴⁸⁷ Fung, *Galatians*, 265.

⁴⁸⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 269.

injury as God's means of chastisement (cf. 2 Samuel 16:11) or training (cf. Numbers 12:3). It implies but is not identical with, self-control."⁴⁸⁹ Self-control is the ability to keep one's lust or passions in check. As Calvin points out, "the death of the flesh is the life of the Spirit. If God's Spirit lives in us, let him govern all our actions By life is here meant an inward power and by 'walk' to the outward actions."⁴⁹⁰ Sin no longer controls us because we have died to the flesh.

No doubt, love would be on any list the apostle would draw up, but it is likely that the particular fruits mentioned here are specifically relevant to the situation in Galatia, especially among those who were so busy causing division in the churches, a point which is evident from verse 26, which closes out the chapter. "*Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*" The works of the flesh cause division, while the fruit of the Spirit will bring unity. The Judaizers obviously manifest the works of the flesh, something which was common to all before coming to faith in Christ. But had the situation in Galatia been different, so too might Paul's vice list be different. While love is supreme, this is not the only fruit the Spirit bears.⁴⁹¹ After all, "we live by the Spirit," (v. 25), and he will bear his full range of fruit in the lives of his people and in his church.⁴⁹²

According to Paul, then, the indwelling Holy Spirit will begin to produce these fruit in the lives of each Christian believer. On a practical level, we do not bear such fruit by self-consciously trying to produce the fruit mentioned on the list. There is no imperative here to "bear more fruit." Instead, we will bear the fruit of the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace that God gives to us (the word and sacraments). But Paul speaks of life in the Spirit in verse 25, as "*keeping in step [walking] with the Spirit.*" If we walk in the Spirit, we will bear fruit. Yet, as Horton points out, "the more we receive from the Spirit of the realities of the age to come, the more restless we become, having already received a foretaste of the future."⁴⁹³ The presence of the Spirit's fruit in our lives is often accompanied by a profound awareness that in spite of our very real spiritual progress, we still have a long way to go.

As another practical matter, it is important that we not attempt to derive the assurance of our salvation from the fruit that we are bearing (or not), although some of us may be able to do so at times in the Christian life. It is often times better to cut back on introspection and instead look for fruit in the lives of our neighbor, encouraging them with the fruit we see in their lives. We

⁴⁸⁹ Fung, Galatians, 270.

⁴⁹⁰ Calvin, Galatians, 106.

⁴⁹¹ Moo, Galatians, 366.

⁴⁹² Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, on Galatians 5:25.

⁴⁹³ Horton, Rediscovering the Holy Spirit, 222.

should learn to look to the merits of Christ to gain our own assurance.⁴⁹⁴ Too often we are taught to look within to see how we are doing—whether we are gaining victory over particular sins and increasing our personal holiness. The danger is that dissatisfaction with our own personal progress in sanctification, which might be a genuine mark of Godliness, is instead turned into a morbid fear that we might not be Christians because we are not bearing the kind of fruit we think we should. We must train ourselves to look to Christ's promises in the word and confirmed by the sacraments for the assurance of salvation.

In verse 24, Paul returns to the Spirit-flesh conflict as first mentioned in verse 17. *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* The apostle reminds the Galatians to focus upon Jesus's victory over sin and “the flesh” for “those who belong to Christ.” Those who are “in Christ,” those who “belong to Christ,” are said to have “crucified the flesh.” Jesus died for us, yet another reference to Christ's work on behalf of his people which accomplishes its purpose—putting to death the passions and desires of the flesh.

Paul uses the active voice emphasizing perhaps the importance of accepting the indicative (Christ crucified the flesh) as the basis for fruit bearing—*“walking in the Spirit.”* In other places, Paul's speaks of Jesus' crucifixion using the passive voice. He speaks of being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:19) and will go on to speak of being crucified to the world in the next chapter (6:14). The fact that the verb (“have crucified”) is in the aorist tense, meaning a completed action, a strong indication that the believer was crucified with Christ at the time of their conversion (Galatians 2:20), and which was signed and sealed in their baptism when Paul says “they put on Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). The power of sin over a believer has been forever broken (objectively). But subjectively (i.e., in terms of our Christian experience), victory over the flesh will not be the constant psychological experience of the Christian (cf. Romans 7:14 ff). Instead, we often feel the struggle with sin. The power of the flesh has been broken, yet we remain in the flesh until we die. To put it yet another way, Christ's death for us is the starting point for living the Christian life—the indicative is the first word (have crucified) and is the basis for the following imperative, *“if we walk.”*⁴⁹⁵

It is the defining characteristic of every Christian believer that despite the difficult struggle with indwelling sin, the power of sin over us is broken. Every Christian will make some progress in their growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and steadily be conformed to the image of Christ, because the Spirit will bear his fruit in us. The curse of the law has been removed by Christ's death. The sentence of death, which the curse brings upon us, has been replaced for every Christian by the life of the Spirit. The slavery that resulted from our bondage to sin and the flesh has been done away with through Christ's death for us and through the life imparted to us by the Spirit. While the sinful nature remains a potent and subversive foe, its power over us has been broken. It is defeated.

⁴⁹⁴ In Q & A 21 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we read the following: What is true faith? A. True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit works in me by the gospel, that God has freely granted, not only to others but to me also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. These gifts are purely of grace, only because of Christ's merit.

⁴⁹⁵ Here a present, active subjunctive of the verb *στοιχέω* (to walk in a straight line, as in how one conducts oneself).

The Christian life, while a struggle, is not one of continual defeat. Christ has lived the victorious life for us. Everyone who is in Christ has already crucified the flesh and will *“keep in step with the Spirit,”* since it is through the Spirit that the Christian lives at all. Once the power of sin has been broken through union with Christ we are to walk by the Spirit. As we walk by the Spirit, we daily crucify the flesh. We walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace (word and sacrament), through fellowship with God’s people, and through prayer, which is the chief exercise of thanksgiving.

As Paul understands the Christian life, those in Christ will persevere to the end and be saved because we live by the Spirit, who is the down payment (ἀρραβών) which guarantees the redemption of our bodies (Ephesians 1:14). Meanwhile, we are to strive to put to death the deeds done in the flesh. We are to strive to serve one another in love. Paul commands us (an imperative) not to become conceited to the point of provoking others as the Judaizers were doing in Galatia, since all that we have (in terms of the promised inheritance) is a gift from God. We did not earn this gift. Rather, we were given the gift through faith in Christ. Possessing such a wonderful gift, we are not to provoke or envy each other, because God calls us to faith as a gracious gift grounded in his sovereign pleasure and purpose, not because of anything good he sees within us.

Although the guilt and power that sin once held over us is broken, we will nevertheless struggle with the remnants of that sinful nature (“indwelling sin”) until we die, because the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit (5:17). Paul describes the normal Christian life as “walking by the Spirit” which is characterized by a fierce struggle with the remnants of the flesh and its works. But every Christian will win this battle because Christ ensures that they do. The struggle with indwelling sin is not only normal, it is essential, since the indwelling Spirit will never allow a Christian to live in complacency towards their sin. He will convict us of our sin and move us to repentance.

As Christians “living by the Spirit” and struggling against indwelling sin, our hope should be focused upon the grace and power of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us and who, as the Risen and Ascended Lord of Glory, lives to make intercession for his people ensuring that our faith will not fail (cf. Hebrews 7:25). It is the Risen and Ascended Lord who baptizes his people in the blessed Holy Spirit who ensures that all of Christ’s saving benefits are made ours through faith alone. Since we “live by the Spirit,” we live in the light of Christ’s death for our sins and trust in his perfect obedience to the law as our only means of withstanding God’s righteous judgment. Living by the Spirit means that we must take avail of those glorious gifts that God gives to us, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ, which comes to us through the Word and then confirmed in the broken body and blood of the Savior who is offered to us in the Lord’s Supper. To hear and believe the Word of God, to receive the sacraments in faith is to wage war on indwelling sin, to bear the Spirit’s fruit is to “walk by the Spirit.” This is what Paul commands us to do.

VII. Sowing and Reaping (6:1-10)

1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one

another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. 5 For each will have to bear his own load. 6 Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. 7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Throughout his Galatian letter, Paul reminds the Galatians of the gospel which he has preached to them. He also exhorts his brothers and sisters to stand firm and not give in to the false teaching they have encountered. Before he wraps up his letter to these struggling churches, the apostle gives some practical counsel and pastoral advice to those suffering from the effects of the dissension and back-biting which the Judaizers inflicted upon the Galatian churches. What does it mean to "live by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16), or "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25)? Many of those influenced by the Judaizers stooped to such a low level that they were actually spying on other's liberty, and, in doing so, created a bitter atmosphere of judgment and in-fighting. This is conduct not in line with living or walking by the Spirit.

Much of the conflict in the churches was the unintended consequence of fear and doubt about one's relationship to God—had they done enough "works of law" to be justified? This also arose from worrying about the consequences of too much Christian liberty. Since the false gospel of the Judaizers was based upon human compliance to law, and therefore, grounded in human merit, Paul reports that many of those who had been taken in by the deception of the Judaizers were now acting in a self-righteousness and conceited manner, provoking, and envying each other. Such is the inevitable consequence of thinking that your personal merits, which you mistakenly assumed that you have earned, are actually greater than someone else's who, you think, has not earned as much as you have. They may identify themselves as followers of Jesus but they are behaving like self-righteous Pharisees.

To curtail the bickering in the churches, Paul closes out his letter by giving the Galatians specific instructions as to what it means to "walk by the Spirit." As is typical of Paul, these instructions take the form of imperatives (commands), are all very straightforward, and make a great deal of sense in the context of the situation then facing the Galatian Christians.

The theological problem created by the Judaizers was bad enough—professing Christians enter or stay in relationship with Jesus Christ through ritual circumcision and good works. But theological nomism also generated a number of practical problems as well, all tied to self-righteousness. If envy and conceit are manifestations of the false gospel of the Judaizers and fall under the heading of the "works of the flesh," this behavior should not characterize Christians. Those who walk in the Spirit should be willing to come to the aid of those who are struggling with sin and its effects. They, of all people, should understand that if God was gracious to them, calling them to faith in Jesus Christ even though they were unworthy sinners, then, they too, should be gracious to others called by Christ into his glorious kingdom through the gospel of

Christ crucified. But the self-righteous who manifest works of the flesh, cannot see the need nor muster up the willingness to be gracious.

Paul has accused the Judaizers of spying on the Gentile's liberty in Christ Jesus. As a result, there were very likely instances where someone was caught red-handed in his or her sins. Paul's command is that the Galatians are not to devour such a person, as the Judaizers were doing. Instead the Galatians are to come to the aid of such a person. Paul puts it plainly in verse 1; "*brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*" According to the Judaizers, the very fact that they caught a sinner in the act is proof that the problem is Paul's gospel. The agitators have accused Paul of being a libertine, so the presence of "sinners" in the churches was proof that those who believed Paul's gospel were insufficiently concerned with obedience to the law of God. Paul, they say, has taken good works and human effort out of the equation when it comes to justification. According to the Judaizers, a renewed focus upon the law and commandment-keeping as their fathers understood the law, would put a stop to such things. Never mind that the Judaizers do not keep the commandments either.

Christian liberty is not an invention of Paul, but the fruit of the death of Jesus, who freed us from the guilt of our sins and from the yoke of the law as a means of justification. Jesus has also freed us from the so-called things indifferent (the *adiaphora*), things not explicitly forbidden by the Scriptures. In light of Christ's cross, Christians should not treat those who struggle with their sin as "pariahs"⁴⁹⁶ who should be cast out of the church in shame and humiliation. Rather, those who fall are to be restored, *if* repentant.

Paul probably does not have in mind scandalous sins—sins which are public and potentially bring scandal to Christ's church and the gospel. Rather, the context here seems to be those who are caught as a result of being "spied-out" by the self-righteous Judaizers. Paul's instructions are not to discipline such a person publically, which he does advocate in the case of scandalous sin as in 1 Corinthians 5:11. But even there the offending party remains unnamed.

Paul intends that those who are "spiritual," that is, those who are mature in the faith and who manifest the fruit of gentleness, restore such a one. Although some critical scholars have seen in Paul's reference to "the spiritual" a class of believer possessing superior or secret knowledge—a class of super-spiritual Christians—this is not the case. As Longenecker points out,

There is, therefore, no reason to doubt and abundant reason to believe that Paul here uses this designation with approval in speaking about *all* his converts in Galatia. They are, despite their legal and libertine enticements, "the true spirituals" simply because by being "in Christ" they have become the recipients of God's Spirit. So by reminding his converts of their status as πνευματικοί [spiritual] Paul calls on them to live up to that status.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁶ Bruce, *Galatians*, 260.

⁴⁹⁷ Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 6:1.

This is an important point for Paul because the Judaizers were obviously finding people struggling with sin and systematically devouring them, driving them away from Christ and his cross and back to the law of Moses. This exhortation probably arises in light of Paul's prior comments about people biting and devouring each other as a pack of wolves maul an animal that they have managed to isolate from the safety of the herd. Those who are spiritual—in this instance, I take Paul to be referring to the elders or teachers in these churches—are to gently restore such a one whose sin becomes known through such self-righteous “tattling.” Such gentle restoration certainly involves instruction from God's word about the propriety of the conduct in question, a confession of sin and a declaration of pardon, followed by the expectation of repentance (a change in conduct). But it does not mean crushing the person under the weight of self-righteous judgment on the part of those endeavoring to restore them. Someone caught in this manner needs to be reminded of the promises made to sinners in the gospel.

The two errors that are most easily made in such situations are first, to do as the Judaizers were doing and publically identify such and their specific their sins, isolate them, before holding them up to ridicule, gossip, and shame. A second and more common error is that the leaders of the church take the easy way out and simply do nothing. To ignore smoldering embers near flammable material is to soon have a raging inferno on your hands. Therefore, Paul's directive is that those who are caught in sin are to be restored, not only for their own well-being, but also so that public scandal does not result, bringing harm to the reputation and health of Christ's church and the gospel. Reformed churches consider church discipline to be a mark of a healthy church which seeks to restore the fallen and discipline the unrepentant.⁴⁹⁸

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin urge Christians to have compassion on those weak in faith and who and struggle with sin. Luther cautions us to consider the case in point.

Whoever diligently weighs the apostle's words may see that he is not talking about heretical errors and offenses but about sins of minor consequence, in which anyone may fall not of his own free will or a firm purpose but out of weakness. That is why he uses

⁴⁹⁸ See, for example, article 55 of the church order of the URCNA: Article 55 – The Discipline of a Member: Anyone whose sin is properly made known to the Consistory, and who then obstinately rejects the Scriptural admonitions of the Consistory, shall be suspended from all privileges of church membership, including the use of the sacraments. After such suspension and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the impenitence of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation, the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him and repeated admonitions, so that the congregation may speak to him and pray for him. This shall be done in three steps. In the first, the name of the sinner need not be mentioned, that he be somewhat spared. In the second, the Consistory shall seek the advice of classis before proceeding, whereupon his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, if he remains impenitent, so that his excommunication may take place with the full knowledge of the church. The interval between the steps shall be left to the discretion of the Consistory. In the event a member seeks to resign while under church discipline, the Consistory need not proceed further with the aforementioned three steps of discipline while they warn the member against resignation. If the member remains impenitent and persists in resigning, the Consistory should seek the advice of classis before acting to exclude him from membership. The Consistory need not seek advice if classis has previously advised it to proceed to the second step of public discipline. Having been advised by classis, the Consistory may proceed to exclude from membership the one who is forsaking Christ's church. The Consistory should notify the person of this action, admonishing him and calling him to repentance. The Consistory should also inform the congregation of this action and solicit their prayers for the former member.

such tender and fatherly words, for he does not call an error a sin but a fault.⁴⁹⁹

Luther adds,

Thus Paul teaches how to deal with people who have fallen in this way – that is, those who are strong should lift them up and restore them with a spirit of meekness. . . . Those who are leading the church should be aware of these things, lest they be in such a hurry to kick people out that they forget the paternal and maternal affection that Paul requires from all who have souls in their care. . . . The pastors and ministers should certainly censure firmly those who have fallen but when they see that they are sorry for their offenses, then they should begin to lift them up, comfort and diminish their faults all they can. They should counter their sin with mercy, lest the fallen drown in an overwhelming despair.⁵⁰⁰

Indeed, the supposedly stern and cold-hearted reformer John Calvin implores us to have tender compassion on the weak.

Just as ambition is a particularly poisonous evil, so also great harm is often done by inappropriate and excessive severity, which goes under the noble name of zeal but frequently springs from pride and from dislike and contempt of the brethren . . . those who sin should be reproved, . . . but the vinegar must be tempered with oil. Paul teaches us to show mildness in correcting the faults of our brethren and says that no rebukes are godly and Christian that do not savor of meekness. . . . When we see that a brother has fallen, let us reflect that he has fallen into the snares of Satan. Let us be moved with compassion and ready to forgive him . . . It is the duty of spiritual people to raise up the fallen, for what other purpose does their superiority have? . . . Whenever we have occasion to criticize, let us remember to begin with ourselves and then, conscious of our own weakness, let us be restrained with others.⁵⁰¹

Paul knows that the struggle with sins of the flesh affects not only those who get caught, but also those assigned to restore them. Paul wisely exhorts those exercising this gentle restoration to be on guard and “*keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*” So as not to end up like the vice-cop, who, over time, becomes more jaded than the criminal they are trying to trap, those to whom God gives the responsibility for exercising discipline must always be on their guard so that they not become involved in the sins of those they are attempting to restore. Paul is warning us that those who do not think this can happen to them, often become victims of their own sinfulness. Both the sheep and the shepherds need to be on guard because sin is pleasurable as well as deceptive and easily overcomes us when our guard is down.

Unlike the methods of the Judaizers who prey upon those who struggle, using them as an

⁴⁹⁹ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect. 39, on Galatians 6:1.

⁵⁰⁰ Luther, Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Lect. 39, on Galatians 6:1.

⁵⁰¹ Calvin, Galatians, 108.

example that Paul's doctrine of justification is dangerous and leads to license, Paul exhorts those who walk in the Spirit to *"bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* The Judaizers were portraying keeping the law, ritual circumcision, and observing dietary laws and feast days, as a yoke that those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah would gladly bear so as to earn right standing before God. But we can never bear such a yoke—an issue which is raised at the Jerusalem Council which took place shortly after Paul composed this letter. Luke recounts how Peter (after being chastened by Paul), told the assembly *"now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"* (Acts 15:10).

The very thought that we can bear the yoke of the law, is a distortion of the true purpose of the law and circumcision, which is to point us not to the merit of our own efforts, but to the merits of Jesus Christ who alone has fulfilled the demands of the law. In fact, the yoke of the law was intended to crush us under its weight so that we would look to the merits of Jesus Christ as our only hope of withstanding the judgment yet to come. As Paul has repeatedly told the Galatians, one purpose of the law is to crush our self-righteousness so that we seek a Savior, not foster self-righteousness.

From one perspective (second use of the law), Paul sees the law as a yoke of slavery from which the Christian is now freed through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, and no longer needs to bear. As noted previously Paul certainly knew of our Lord's word of comfort that his yoke was easy (cf. Matthew 11:30). Since the law is fulfilled through love of neighbor, in the case of those who are Christians and who struggle with burdens of all kinds, one way in which the burden and load is lightened is when those who are weak are aided by those who are a bit stronger. Paul has a tender place in his heart for those who struggle with sin, difficult circumstances, and the turmoil of life. We see this in Romans 15:1, where he writes, *"we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak."* Since the Judaizers have left in their wake a pile of carcasses of those whom they have devoured, Paul exhorts the Galatians to bear with those who are weak and who are struggling with their sins.

While the Judaizers devour the weak, the struggling Christian is to be supported and encouraged by their brothers and sisters. This is the inevitable fruit brought forth in our lives by the Holy Spirit when we come to see that we are justified by the merits of another (Jesus Christ) and not through our own efforts and righteousness. In doing this, says Paul, we fulfill the law of Christ. Paul exhorts us to bear with those who struggle to keep up. But the apostle has no tolerance whatsoever for the self-righteous or the hypocrite, who lord it over the weak and frail and destroy their confidence in Christ and his gospel.

Paul's discussion (in verse 2) leads to an important question. "What does Paul mean by the disputed phrase the *law of Christ?*" Is Jesus merely a new and improved Moses who gives us easier laws to keep than those of the old covenant? Hardly. Paul is likely not using the phrase *"law of Christ"* as a figure of speech for the law of Moses even though previously in this letter he has only spoken of the law of Moses. The genitive (Χριστοῦ- "of Christ") has the sense of "belonging to" or "stemming from."⁵⁰² Paul is reminding the Galatians that the law of Christ is

⁵⁰² Moo, Galatians, 377.

the equivalent of “walking by the Spirit,” including taking avail of the means of grace (word and sacrament), as well as prayer and fellowship. The apostle has just said that Christians “walk by the Spirit” (5:16), that they “are led by the Spirit” (5:18), that they manifest the gifts of the Spirit (5:22-23), and they “live by the Spirit” (5:25). He will go on to say that Christians are to “sow to the Spirit.”

The “law of Christ” is the spontaneous obedience wrought in the heart of each Christian believer by virtue of the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁵⁰³ As professor Bruce puts it, “the law of Christ . . . is a contrast to the law which his converts were being urged to accept; the law of Christ is a ‘law’ of quite a different kind, not enforceable by legal sanctions.”⁵⁰⁴ As such, the “law of Christ” stands in direct contrast to the “law of Moses” which demands perfect conformity to its every stipulation as an external set of rules. Since Paul says that the law is fulfilled in the command to love one another, the Christian fulfills the law of Christ when we serve our brothers and sisters in love.⁵⁰⁵ This is evident when Christians help to bear the burdens of those who are weak and who struggle with sin, lack, and other such burdens of life.⁵⁰⁶

In verse 3, Paul again takes the opportunity to level the field and destroy any remaining vestiges of self-righteousness. “For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” The immediate context is the self-righteousness implicit in the teaching of the Judaizers. This created a dynamic in which those who thought they could obey the law of Moses and had attained a right-standing before God through circumcision and obedience to the traditions of the fathers, had obtained a greater degree of righteousness than others and looked down on Gentile “sinners.” Self-righteousness is fundamentally judgmental and detests weakness.

Paul reminds us that all attempts to be justified by our obedience only condemn us all the more. It was Bernard of Clairvaux, who once lamented, “not only can I not give account for my sins, I cannot even give account for my righteousness.”⁵⁰⁷ Paul exhorts us to see ourselves for what we really are, sinners, who cannot be justified by our own obedience, but only on the basis of the

⁵⁰³ Longenecker puts it this way; “I propose that ὁ νόμος το Χριστο here (as does ἔννομος Χριστο of 1 Cor 9:21) stands in Paul’s thought for those ‘prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel (usually embodied in the example and teachings of Jesus), which are meant to be applied to specific situations by the direction and enablement of the Holy Spirit, being always motivated and conditioned by love.” Longenecker, Galatians, on 6:2.

⁵⁰⁴ Bruce, Galatians, 261.

⁵⁰⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, The Law and Its Fulfillment (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 159; Fung, Galatians, 288, Moo, Galatians, 377-378.

⁵⁰⁶ N. T. Wright contends that Paul is speaking eschatologically here. Those who bear one another’s burdens in obedience to the law of Moses are performing “a genuine act of law fulfilling, but it is the Messiah’s law (*the nomos tou Christou*) that is thereby fulfilled.” This prepares the believer for the coming day when all must stand before the Messiah’s judgment seat. A two-fold justification is implied here. The first is based upon faith in Israel’s Messiah which includes God’s people into the redemptive history of Israel as Abraham’s children, while a second judgment (as implied) is according to works. See Wright, Galatians, 354-356.

⁵⁰⁷ Cited in James Buchanan, The Doctrine of Justification (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 92.

merits of Jesus Christ. Deluded by self-righteousness, we may think we are something when we compare ourselves to others. But we are not measured by others, we are measured against standards of the law of God. This is the great folly of self-righteousness. The paradox is that in ourselves and our own efforts we are nothing—a fact which the self-righteous cannot grasp. But in Christ, even the weakest sinner is an heir to all of the riches of heaven found in Christ. Why look to our own righteousness when we can instead gaze upon the merit and glories of Jesus Christ?

For Paul, this becomes a matter of letting “*each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load*” (v. 4). Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life and sanctification is grounded in the principle of personal responsibility.⁵⁰⁸ As one famous wag put it, “there is often confusion in the minds of many about the apostolic principle of ‘bearing one another’s burdens.’ It too often translates into ‘minding other people’s business.’”⁵⁰⁹ Let us not miss the point that Paul is putting into practice what he exhorts the Galatians to do. He is very gently restoring his readers and hearers by telling the Galatians that the Christian life is, in part, minding our own business and carrying our own weight if we are able.

Again, the context is that the Judaizers in the Galatian church were snooping and spying on everyone’s liberty. Paul has identified such behavior as works of the flesh: discord, jealousy, envy, factions and dissension and the like. He is wonderfully commonsensical in his approach. Those who need help, need help. The strong are to help the weak, showing generosity. The weak are to accept the help from the strong, demonstrating gratitude. Paul is not happy with busybodies or those too lazy to carry their own weight, obvious manifestations of the flesh.

In verse 6, Paul raises an issue with the Galatians that may make some uncomfortable, but is an apostolic injunction; “*let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.*” The same principle is stated in Luke 10:7, “*the laborer deserves his wage.*” In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul elaborates on this by giving a bit more detail. “*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*” The point is “the teacher relieves the ignorance of the pupil; the pupil should relieve the teacher of concern for subsistence.”⁵¹⁰ A wide-spread practice in the Greco-Roman world, the Galatians were used to paying pagan priests for performing sacrifices and religious rituals, yet Paul took no pay for his preaching. He chose to be self-reliant.

So, it is probably the case that Paul is not so much making the claim on his own behalf, but on behalf of those faithful teachers and preachers who labored in Galatia in the face of fierce opposition from the Judaizers. The practical application for us is obvious; those who labor to teach and preach are to be supported by those who call them to do so. It is from texts such as these that we derive the idea that although ministers of word and sacrament hold the rank of

⁵⁰⁸ Bruce, Galatians, 262.

⁵⁰⁹ Bruce, Galatians, 262.

⁵¹⁰ Bruce, Galatians, 263.

elder, ministers serve Christ's church on a full-time basis. Those who are called to the ministry of word and sacrament are to be supported by the congregations they serve, so that their financial needs are met, and they are able to devote themselves full-time to their callings.

Paul spells out one of the best-known principles of the Christian life in verse 7, the principle of "sowing and reaping." Paul ties together the practical advice he has just given with the Fruit of the Spirit, discussed in chapter 5.⁵¹¹ Paul begins with a pointed warning to his hearers, "*do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*" There are consequences for our actions. Christians sow to the Spirit, not the flesh. There may be an echo here from the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, who deceitfully held back proceeds from their land during a time of great need and were struck down, producing a great fear in all the church (v. 11).

God will not be mocked because "a person reaps what they sow." Those who grew up in an agrarian society, as did those in Paul's original audience, the principle was self-evident. If you plant wheat seeds, and then you water your crop and cultivate it, wheat will grow and you will, in time, have a harvest of wheat. The point is, if you plant wheat and cultivate it, a crop of corn will not miraculously appear in its place. This is what Paul is getting at when he says in verse 8, "*for the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.*" This principle of the Christian life must be seen in light of the works of the flesh/fruit of the Spirit contrast described previously in chapter 5, and in the light of the specific situation facing this congregation. Those who bite and devour will live in bitterness and self-righteous smugness. Those concerned with the well-being of others will experience joy and satisfaction for doing as the Lord commands.

From this it is possible to draw a broader conclusion. Recall that Paul previously stated that the Christian life is inevitably characterized by a struggle with sin as the fruit of the Spirit begins to manifest itself in the life of every Christian. But Paul is not talking about the Christian struggling with sin and fighting against the flesh. He's talking about a non-Christian, one whose life is characterized by sowing to works of the flesh and who, therefore, reaps no fruit of the Spirit. Paul says such a one will not inherit the kingdom of God, since they are still under the dominion of the flesh, and are not "in Christ" through faith. Calvin draws the same conclusion, but focuses beyond the immediate situation in Galatia. Sowing to the Spirit has eternal consequences as well.

To sow to the flesh is to provide for the needs of the present life without any regard to the future. Those who do this will reap their reward in a store of perishable things. Those who sow to the Spirit look to heaven rather than to earth and direct their lives so as to aspire to the kingdom of God. They will reap the incorruptible fruit of their spiritual endeavors when they get to heaven.⁵¹²

The Judaizers were teaching that the merits of Jesus Christ were not sufficient to justify, and according to them, Christians must submit to circumcision, keep feast days, obey dietary laws in

⁵¹¹ Fung, *Galatians*, 294.

⁵¹² Calvin, *Galatians*, 113.

order to be justified. The seed which is sown to the flesh can only be the false gospel of the Judaizers. What was the crop produced from such seed? According to Paul, the crop was works of the flesh, now evident for all to see in their backbiting and devouring each other, spying on each other's liberty, using deceptive tactics to introduce the false gospel, boasting about the number of their converts, acting in envy, creating factions, causing dissension, and so on.

Paul's warning to the Galatians is direct; if you Galatians sow to the flesh, that is, if you embrace the false teaching of the Judaizers, you have fallen from grace and will produce a crop consistent with such a false gospel. You will not be able to stand in the judgment, for God will not be mocked! He will see our fruit for what it is, no fruit at all, but rather "works of the flesh." God will not be impressed with a self-righteous offering of the crop produced by sowing to the flesh. Like the grain offering of Cain, self-righteousness produces a harvest of destruction. As Hosea lamented of Israel (Hosea 8), a time was at hand when Israel was sowing seed to the wind, and reaping the whirlwind. Israel came under God's judgment. The same will be true for the Judaizers and those who sow to their false gospel.

The contrast between the flesh and the Spirit moves to the fore. *"But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."* The one who believes the gospel as taught by Paul sows seed which also produces a certain kind of crop; a crop which will manifest not the works of the flesh, but the fruit of the Spirit. The result will be equally certain, though in this case the result is not destruction, but eternal life. The principle of sowing and reaping is simple and profound. Which gospel will Paul's hearers believe? Paul's gospel, the seed which produces the fruit of the Spirit and leads to eternal life, or the false gospel of the Judaizers, which indulges the flesh and leads to ever-lasting destruction?

Paul encourages his hearers despite the difficulties they face, urging them *"let us not grow weary of doing good,"* [i.e., doing what is good, that is, believing the gospel and sowing to the Spirit], *for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* Even though the Judaizers may be eating each other alive as they manifest the fruit of the flesh, *"so then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."* The Judaizers were seeking to divide Christ's church, while Christian believers who embraced Paul's gospel are to embrace all those who struggle but who name the name of Jesus Christ as their only hope of heaven. It bears repeating. The love of neighbor as a fruit of justifying faith is something the self-righteous simply cannot grasp! But it is the duty of every Christian.

The problem in Galatia boils down to the false gospel of the Judaizers and their badly-mistaken misunderstanding of the place of the law of Moses in God's plan of redemption. By misunderstanding the role and purpose of the law, the Judaizers saw obedience to the law of Moses as the lens through which to understand circumcision (which is, properly understood, the sign and seal of the prior covenant of grace). According to the Judaizers, the gracious sign became a means of accruing merit and earning a right standing before God. Instead of being crushed by the law, the agitators deceived themselves into thinking they were keeping the law. They became proud, boastful, arrogant, and utterly destructive to the well-being of the Galatian churches. Paul calls this sowing to flesh. Seeking to be justified by human effort, the Judaizers produced a crop as catalogued in chapter five. False doctrine produces the dissension, factions, envy, backbiting, and the shameless devouring of the weak that Paul reports in the Galatian

churches.

Application

Those who embrace Paul's gospel of justification, by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, are "spiritual" and will sow to the Spirit. Although we will struggle against the flesh until we die, we will nevertheless bear the fruit of the Spirit. God will ensure it! Christians are not to devour one another, spy on each other's liberty, backstab our neighbor, cause dissension in the church, as in the list of the sins of the flesh enumerated by Paul. As justified sinners, we are to bear with one another, help the struggling and the weak in our midst, and be patient with those who are at a different place in their sanctification than we are. Bearing one another's burdens, says Paul, is but one manifestation of the Spirit's fruit in Christ's church.

The act of sowing and reaping is as important for us to grasp today as it was on the day in which this epistle was first read in the Galatian churches. We will reap what we sow. If we sow to the flesh, we fan the burning embers of sin with us. If you sow to the flesh, says Paul you will produce a crop—a crop identified as works of the flesh. And, Paul says, you will suffer eternal loss.

But if you sow to the Spirit by renouncing your own righteousness and instead seek the righteousness of Jesus Christ, you will also bear a crop—the "fruit of the Spirit." This is the crop which leads to eternal life. As Jesus bids us to sow to the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of everlasting life, the question still remains. Which will it be? Will you sow to the flesh or to the Spirit? Be warned, whatever seed one sows, it produces the crop they shall reap.

VIII. Concluding Comments and Final Greetings (6:11-18)

A. The true ground of boasting (6:11-16)

11 See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. 12 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. 14 But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Paul's closing words to the Galatians express his deepest desire to boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ. But Paul's desire stands in sharp contrast to everything we have learned so far about the Judaizers. These are men who were ashamed of Christ's cross, since crucifixion was regarded by virtually all first century people as a symbol of shame and humiliation. The famed Roman orator, Cicero, remarked that even the word *crux* (cross) was not to be mentioned in

polite Roman society.⁵¹³

Instead of boasting in the cross of Christ (where God's wrath was turned aside from us and payment for our sin was made), the Judaizers were boasting that their heretical movement possessed the blessing of God because of the large number of converts they quickly made. This is a classic battle between fidelity to the truth versus numerical success. To boast about numbers obscured the fact that to be a Judaizer, one must boast about one's personal righteousness which was supposedly attained through law-keeping, embracing Jewish cultural practices, and submitting to ritual circumcision; things Paul identifies as works of the law. By boasting about their personal righteousness, sadly, the Judaizers made themselves enemies of Jesus Christ and as such, proceeded to bite, devour, persecute the true people of God (believers in Jesus).

In Galatians 1:1-6:10, Paul addressed first the doctrinal and then the practical consequences of the Judaizing heresy. As he wraps up this remarkable and powerful letter (in verses 11-18), the Apostle has several final comments to make. In the first part of chapter 6, Paul discussed the principle of "sowing and reaping." Those who sow to the flesh—those who embrace the false gospel of the Judaizers and who seek to earn favor with God through circumcision and obedience to the ceremonial law—will reap a crop, a crop Paul calls the "corruption of the flesh," which leads to a harvest of destruction. But those who trust in Jesus Christ's finished work through faith alone, and who, therefore, "walk in the Spirit," sow seed to the Spirit. They will manifest the fruit of the Spirit, a harvest which reflects the possession of eternal life. Paul's notion of "sowing and reaping" is tied to believing the true gospel and sowing to the finished work of Christ, not sowing to self-righteousness by thinking one can earn favor with God through obedience to the law as the Judaizers were deceptively teaching.

Before we get to Paul's concluding point—that the Judaizers were trying to avoid persecution by stressing circumcision instead of preaching the cross—Paul slips in a statement about his own health which we ought to briefly address. In verse 11, he informs his reader of an odd fact about his letter; "*see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.*" That Paul is writing in "large letters" is an indication that the illness which originally landed Paul on a sickbed in Galatia some months earlier had to do with his vision. Paul was still having trouble with his eyes when writing, so he indicates why it is that he had written out this epistle in such large letters. Since parchment was expensive and hard to get, some of the Galatians may question why he wasted space (and money) by using large letters. So, Paul explains.

The final point Paul raises as he concludes this letter is his discussion of the motivation of the Judaizers in teaching their false gospel. What causes them to now reject the gospel which Paul initially preached to them? What drives them to be so zealous for falsehood? In verses 12-13, Paul contends that, "*it is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.*" Paul deals with these hypocritical false teachers who were trying to make a good impression outwardly (verse 12), but who do not obey the same law they tell their own converts they must obey (verse 13). To quote a famous movie line, their "hypocrisy knows no

⁵¹³ Cicero, *Pro Rabiro*, 16.

bounds.”

Paul warns the Galatians that the Judaizers were trying to compel (force) new Galatian converts to be circumcised for two reasons. The first is that they want to avoid the shame of the cross and the persecution that goes with preaching it. The second is that the only defense they can offer for doing so is to boast in the number of converts they had made. But to do so meant deceiving the Galatian Christians into taking back upon themselves the yoke of the law which the Judaizers themselves cannot carry.

What follows must be understood in its cultural context. The cross of Jesus Christ is described as a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to Greeks, the very mention of which was offensive to many (as we have just noted). A bit later in the Gentile mission, Paul will tell the Corinthians this directly; “*but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles*” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Though the cross be an offense to many of his contemporaries, if there is no cross there is no gospel. Yet, for the Judaizers, who saw justification as the reward of human effort, the gospel as taught by Paul must be modified so as to remove the offence to avoid persecution. But to remove the offence of the cross was to preach a gospel which was no gospel. The Romans may have thought circumcision to be an obscure Jewish custom and tolerated the practice even if they thought it silly. But circumcision was nothing like the scandal of crucifixion.

If the Judaizers were ashamed of the cross and denied its saving power, Paul, on the other hand, desires to boast only in the cross of Christ. This raises an obvious question. Why would Paul boast about something which Jews and Greeks living in Galatia regarded as offensive and which Romans considered to be outside the bounds of polite conversation?

It is not as though Paul had nothing to boast about. Given his own life-experience and his very impressive background, had he so desired, Paul certainly could have found any number of things to boast about rather than boasting about a cruel instrument of torture. If there was anyone among the first Christians who had reason for boasting about himself, or his own accomplishments it was the apostle Paul. Consider the following.

In Acts 22:3-4, Luke informs us that Paul had trained under the famous teacher of Rabbis, Gamaliel. As noted earlier, Gamaliel is considered by many historians to be one of the greatest teachers in the long annals of Judaism.⁵¹⁴ For Paul to have been one of Gamaliel’s students would have entitled Paul to a very significant stature in the Judaism of the first century. You would think that with a group such as the Judaizers, Paul could have boasted about his educational background (his Ph.D. in Judaism). He could also remind the Judaizers of his own zeal in defending the religion of Israel against this new sect, called “the way” (Acts 9:1-2). It is easy to miss the irony that at one time Paul was far more zealous to defend the religion of Israel than were any of the agitators in Galatia.

In addition to his impressive education, Paul was also an apostle. Certainly that would have

⁵¹⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), s.v. “*Gamaliel*.”

been worth something in terms of boasting before church folk. Paul met the most important qualification to be an apostle, he had seen the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ with his own eyes as recounted in Acts 9 and Acts 22:6-21. To be called by Jesus to serve as an apostle was a call to the highest possible office to which a follower of Christ may be called. When necessary, but especially when dealing the other apostles (i.e., Peter and James) or with false teachers who were deceiving the churches through false doctrine, Paul did indeed pull rank, as he does in the opening chapter of this letter. Paul appeals to the fact that Jesus called Paul to his apostolic office, which is the basis for his authority to rebuke those opposing the true gospel. Paul speaks with Christ's authority because his gospel has been given to him by none other than the risen Jesus. But Paul does not boast about his authority.

A closely related point is that Paul might have been able to boast about the fact that Peter, and the other apostles, considered his letters to be on the same footing as the Old Testament. Peter even considered certain writings of Paul to be Scripture (cf. 2 Peter 3:16—*“there are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures”*). Paul rebuked Peter to his face before all for “wimping out” and giving in to the pressures of the Judaizers (Galatians 2:11). Peter was living as a Gentile and enjoying table fellowship with Gentiles, but when the Judaizers caught him eating with the wrong people, Peter caved in to the Judaizing pressure and he too began demanding that Gentile converts live like Jews, obey the ceremonial and dietary laws, and withdraw from table fellowship with Gentiles.

Paul clearly has the Word of God and the consensus of the church on his side in this matter, as shortly after this epistle was written, the Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15, endorsed Paul's gospel. But Paul does not boast to the Galatians that the church and the apostles are on his side—although they were. No small point. Paul does not boast about the infallible *magisterium* (the teaching office), nor the consent of the fathers of the church. He appeals to God's word and the revelation given him by Jesus.

While the Judaizers were boasting about the number of converts that they had made in Galatia, and claiming that their gospel is the antidote to Paul's supposed antinomianism (indifference to Christian living), Paul's response is to boast about an instrument of death and shame. Why would Paul boast about such a thing as he does in verse 14? *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* Why would Paul choose to boast about the cross; an instrument of torture reserved only for the worst of criminals and dregs of society? Lest we forget, “it is difficult, after [nearly twenty] centuries . . . during which the cross has been a sacred symbol, to realize the unspeakable horror and loathing which the very mention or thought provoked in Paul's day.”⁵¹⁵ Why would Paul boast about the first century equivalent of an innocent man being gruesomely put to death while helpless and falsely convicted as a terrorist, revolutionary, and blasphemer, dying in the electric chair, in the gas chamber, with the hangman's noose, or before the firing squad? What kind of message is that?

But his Galatian letter is not the only place where Paul speaks of the cross in rather surprising

⁵¹⁵ Bruce, *Galatians*, 263.

terms. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that the cross was foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew. To all of Paul's contemporaries the cross was scandalous. Why boast about it? As one New Testament scholar reminds us . . .

to believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness.⁵¹⁶

The preaching of the *crux* was utterly offensive to a Jew and beyond all comprehension to a Hellenistic Greek or a citizen of Rome. To preach such a gospel in the first century was to preach a shocking and scandalous message indeed.

The cross was known to all as a sign of utter shame and humiliation. Crucifixion was an unspeakably inhumane way to execute criminals. It was described by several writers of the period as "*the infamous stake*," or the "*criminal wood*," or the "*terrible cross*." One executed by crucifixion died in shame and was regarded as an outcast from society.⁵¹⁷ Invented by barbarians and adopted by the Romans, the Greeks considered crucifixion too barbaric for their refined sensitivities and abhorred the practice. Crucifixion was considered so awful Roman citizens were usually exempt from this form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, anarchists, violent criminals, or robbers. Crucifixion was Rome's warning to its subjects, "do not mess with us!" Yet, Jesus offered himself up to die for our sins on this very same shameful cross.

To Greeks, who tended to view their super-hero like gods as immortal, the cross was, as Paul says elsewhere, "*foolishness*" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Not only is the cross a picture of shame and degradation- "how could a god be shamed and degraded?"-but the Greeks found it difficult at best to believe the notion of a "god dying" in order to redeem others from their sin. For the Greeks, various sacrifices offered to the gods to turn aside their wrath were commonplace. But the idea that the gods would sacrifice themselves to remit the guilt of mortals was unthinkable. Christ's cross made no sense to them. To the Jew, however, the cross had completely different connotations. As one writer reminds us,

If the Romans regarded crucifixion with horror, so did the Jews, though for a different reason. They made no distinction between a tree and a cross, and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore automatically applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that 'anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Deut. 21:23). They could not bring themselves to believe that God's messiah would die under his curse, strung up on a tree.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ Martin Hengel, The Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 7-8.

⁵¹⁷ Hengel, The Crucifixion, 8.

⁵¹⁸ Stott, The Cross of Christ, 34. The reference is likely to Stott's IVP commentary on Galatians

To a Jew, the cross would remain an intolerable stumbling block. How could the long anticipated Messiah, the one who was to come to redeem God's people and set up an eternal kingdom, die helplessly at the hands of their Roman oppressors? According to popular Jewish expectation during the time of our Lord's life and ministry, the Messiah was to be a great king who would restore Israel to her former greatness like that of the days of the Davidic kingdom. The cross made little, if any, sense to a Jew. How could the one who would come to save them, *himself* die as a common criminal? How could it be that the conquering Messiah was so utterly defenseless against the Romans? Why would Paul choose to boast about something that would detract from his prestige as an apostle? If he wants people to trust in Jesus, why would he boast about something so repulsive to his audience?

In Galatians 6:13, Paul tells us that the Judaizers took a different approach. While avoiding the scandal of preaching a crucified Savior, they were boasting about the "flesh of their converts." They were bragging about the number of followers they had duped into submitting to circumcision as a way of adding their own merit to the death of Christ. Calvin describes them as follows:

Paul accuses the false apostles of ambition. They thought that by insisting on circumcision they would keep the good will of their own nation, or at least divert their anger. Ambitious people usually fawn on those whose favor they court in order to better themselves, and Paul warns the Galatians to be on their guard against this. Once again, he calls the pure preaching of the gospel "the cross of Christ." He is alluding to the fantasy of the false apostles, who want to preach Christ without the cross. The deadly rage of the Jews against Paul arose because they could not endure the abandonment of their ceremonies. To avoid such persecution, the false apostles were flattering the Jews. This might have been more tolerable if they had kept the law themselves, but they disturbed the whole church for their own convenience and corrupted the preaching of the cross because they were afraid of it.⁵¹⁹

Much like modern Americans who can be talked into almost anything solely on the basis of the fact that "it works," the Judaizers were boasting about how many converts they had made. Apparently, they were quite successful in doing so. Paul was taken aback by the number of those who listened to them (Galatians 1:6). The message of the Judaizers must be true because so many believed them. While not shameful, it should also not be lost to us that the Judaizers were not preaching an easy message—circumcision. You must be very committed to the cause if you, as an adult male, were willing to undergo circumcision in an age without anesthesia and razor sharp surgical scalpels. This is far more difficult than walking an aisle, or praying "a repeat after me" prayer! Yet, because the cross was such an offense, many in the Galatian churches were choosing circumcision over the scandal of the cross. They could boast in the flesh (note the double entendre here) by counting foreskins (pieces of flesh), all the while trusting in works of the flesh (particularly circumcision) to save them from the wrath to come.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ Bray, George, and Manetsch, eds., Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament, vol. 10, on Galatians 6:12.

⁵²⁰ Moo, Galatians, 395.

We might think Paul would reply to his critics by boasting about his personal achievements, his divinely given authority, or his superior education. Paul might even have chosen to respond in kind by boasting about all of the converts that he had won to Christ. But Paul resists this sort of thinking. The meaning and purpose of the cross is far more important than its popularity or his personal success. The apostle is concerned with being faithful to that gospel Jesus revealed to him, not to be successful as men count success. Paul had no desire to think in terms of the numbers of followers he might attract by distorting or watering down the impossible demands of God's law, or downplaying the scandal of the gospel to make his message more palatable to non-Christians. Again, we must ask, "why does Paul state it is his wish that he boast only in something as offensive as the cross?"

There are three reasons to boast in the cross. First, the cross of Jesus Christ is the only way for sinful men and women to be reconciled to a holy God who is too pure to even look upon sin. While the cross may be foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew, Paul says 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"* (I Corinthians 1:18). Paul has already written that *"Jesus loved me and gave himself for me"* (2:19) becoming a curse for us, and in doing so, bore the guilt of our sins in his own body. The cross of Christ reconciles God to us, and us to God. As Paul will later state in Romans 5:10, *"for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."* The cross is the only means by which God reconciles sinners unto himself. The cross will always remain an offence to those who seek to stand before God and boast about their accomplishments, righteousness, obedience to God's commandments, or their conformity to external rituals such as circumcision.

Second, the cross turns aside God's anger towards his people. In Romans 3:25, Paul speaks of Jesus as the one *"whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."* A propitiation is a sacrifice which turns aside of God's anger in regard to our sins—a point we made previously in our discussion of the redemptive language used by Paul. In saying this, we encounter the great mystery that God the Father pours out His own wrath and anger upon His Son, thereby appeasing His anger towards sinners, since Christ bears God's wrath and anger for them while he suffers upon the cross. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have full assurance that God's anger toward our sins has been dealt with. Why? Because the debt we owe for the guilt of our sins has been paid in full. This is true because Christ's death is sufficient to take away all of the guilt of all of our sins, something the Judaizers were denying. Their "different gospel" was really no gospel at all, and informs why anyone who was teaching such a thing comes under God's curse.

Third, Christ's death is also said to be a substitutionary payment for our sins. Paul says Christ has *"died for our sins"* (I Corinthians 15:3), was *"delivered over to death for our sins"* (Romans 4:25) and *"died for us"* (Romans 5:8). This is the heart of Christ's work on the cross. The sinless God-man, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, dies a substitutionary death in the place of the sinner. Here, as in Romans 5:12-19, Christ dies in the sinner's place, bearing the sinner's guilt, which has been imputed to him. Jesus Christ thereby pays the penalty for the sinner's own guilt. Only in this manner can the guilt of our sins, which separates the Holy God from sinful men and women, can be removed.

Paul boasts only in the cross of Christ, because to boast in anything else is to imply that men and women can be restored to a right relationship to God by some other means than through the sacrificial death and perfect righteousness of Christ. But this is exactly what the Judaizers were arguing in their opposition to Paul—that we are not justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Instead, they say, we are justified by works of law, which amounts to faith in Jesus plus submission to ritual circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws, observing the Jewish religious calendar, and through our obedience to the law of Moses. For Paul, this is the ultimate betrayal of his Lord and a horrible distortion of the very gospel that Christ commissioned him to preach. The Judaizers will find themselves under God’s curse and severed from Christ. Their followers risked falling from grace.

Paul also chooses to boast in the cross because the cross of our Lord Jesus is also the pattern for the Christian life, the pattern for those who walk in the Spirit, and who sow to the Spirit, not the flesh. Those who live in light of Christ’s crucifixion are now free to serve one another in love, since the cross is a graphic picture to us that our righteousness is never greater than another’s—as the Judaizers were teaching—and thereby sowing the seeds of dissension and division tearing the churches in Galatia apart.

Paul speaks of one cross, but two crucifixions. Christ has been crucified to remove the curse, and through the cross, says Paul, “*the world has been crucified to me.*” United to Jesus in the likeness of his death through faith, Paul realizes the world will reject him just as the world rejected his Lord, crucifying the Lord of glory. If the issue is popularity and the avoidance of persecution is the goal, the cross is not the answer. To seek to boast in it is foolish in the eyes of many. The self-righteous see the cross as either foolishness or a stumbling block. They cannot comprehend the fact that this is the only way God can justify sinners. To be crucified with Christ is to be identified with an instrument of shame and degradation. To be crucified with Christ means that we are identified with an instrument of scandal. When we come to Christ, we come to die with him and rise with him. To be a Christian requires that we identify with his shame and yet hope in his subsequent glory.

Paul adds that not only has the world been crucified to him, but declares that I have been “*crucified to the world.*” Paul does not deny the importance of the world as the theater of redemption, or even identify the material world with evil as Greek mystery religions which gave birth to Gnosticism would do. For Paul, the world (κόσμος) can mean the realm (or place) of humanity in a comprehensive sense—i.e., “everybody.” Here, however, Paul uses the term κόσμος as a synonym for “this present evil age,” and sin, evil, and death associated with it.⁵²¹ The apostle renounces the standards of the world, the values of the world, and his intellectual identification with the way the world thinks about matters of sin and grace as seen in the Judaizers. Paul is renouncing the “basic principles of the world” and those “works of the flesh” championed by ancient Judaizers, along with their modern descendants who teach a watered down message that people reach heaven by “being good,” and avoid hell by not doing anything terrible.

When all is said and done, Paul can say in verse 15, “*neither circumcision counts for anything, nor*

⁵²¹ Moo, Galatians, 396.

uncircumcision, but a new creation.” There is some evidence that Paul is quoting a proverbial saying, which he cites against the Judaizers to make the point that what matters is to be “in Christ” and “live in the Spirit.”⁵²² For Paul, circumcision has value only when seen as the sign and seal of the righteousness that is reckoned to us through faith as the sign of God’s favor toward those in the covenant of grace through faith in Jesus. But in Galatia, circumcision does not mean a thing when someone influenced by a Judaizer who sees in a mere surgical procedure a means of earning a justifying righteousness. Circumcision means nothing! Neither is it true that a Gentile who has never heard of such a thing is prevented from being justified by the merits of Jesus Christ because they have not undergone the ritual cutting of the flesh.

For Paul, what counts is the “new creation.” The phrase can refer to the age to come which is inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus (as with Vos).⁵²³ The term was used in 2nd Temple Jewish apocalyptic writings to refer to God’s dramatic and final intervention in the world on behalf of his people.⁵²⁴ As Paul speaks of the new creation here, he is drawing a sharp contrast to the world (κόσμος) and its equivalent, this present evil age.⁵²⁵ With the death (crux) and resurrection of Jesus, the power of the present evil age (i.e., the world) has been broken and the new creation begins to dawn awaiting the final consummation at the Lord’s return. It is to the world in this sense (as a sphere of unbelief and confidence in the works of law) that the believer has been crucified.

Through faith in Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile participate in the restoration of all things (the “new creation”) that has been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, irrespective of the presence or lack of circumcision. We participate in the new creation when we are united to Jesus Christ by faith, and when we die with him in his sacrificial death. But we also rise with him in newness of life to walk in the Spirit. This participation in the new creation comes through faith alone, is accomplished by the power of God’s Spirit, culminating in eternal life. This is what counts, not whether we are or are not circumcised.

In verse 16 of the concluding chapter, Paul begins to wrap up this letter and send his greetings, “and as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” The language Paul uses echoes the 125th and the 128th Psalm, when YHWH says, “Peace be upon Israel,” as well as the Eighteenth Benediction (from the *Amidah*) which reads, “Blessed art thou, O Lord, who dost bless thy people Israel with peace,” which was followed by the Nineteenth, which asserts, “peace and mercy on us and all Israel thy people.” Affirming the peace and mercy of God upon Israel from a text very familiar to Paul would lead to the phrase “the Israel of God” to roll naturally from the apostle’s tongue.⁵²⁶ The “rule” of which Paul speaks is a

⁵²² Longenecker, *Galatians*, on 5:16.

⁵²³ Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 46-49.

⁵²⁴ Moo, *Galatians*, 396.

⁵²⁵ Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 426.

⁵²⁶ Bruce, *Galatians*, 273-75.

reference to the new creation, just mentioned.⁵²⁷ The new creation, ushered in by Christ's resurrection, is made manifest when believers walk (live) in peace (not the division and dissension brought about by the Judaizers), because God has poured out his mercy upon his people in Christ.

Paul speaks of those who follow this rule (a new creation where circumcision counts for nothing), as the "*Israel of God*."⁵²⁸ This points to a community established upon something other than circumcision and works of law, an Israel that receives peace from God because of his grace, and given the context, must include Gentiles.⁵²⁹ The "*Israel of God*" refers to those same people who participate in the new creation, namely those who walk in the Spirit and for whom Christ has died to remove the curse.⁵³⁰ We can conclude from Paul's statement that all those who trust in Jesus Christ, whether they be Jew or Gentile, are participants in the new creation, which is the "*Israel of God*." This is Paul's final shot at the Judaizers who simply cannot grasp the fact that through faith in Jesus Christ, Gentiles are children of Abraham and members of true Israel (not national Israel—cf. Romans 9:6) apart from works of law and ethnic badges (circumcision, etc.) along with believing Jews. As Paul sees it, the Israel of God is comprised of those who have been crucified with Christ, participate in the rule of the new creation, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit—i.e., the church.⁵³¹

In verse 15, Paul has made it absolutely clear that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything and that what does count is a new creation. With that in mind, it is difficult to believe in the very next verse (16) when Paul speaks of the Israel of God, he would then suddenly divide the people of God into two distinct groups (Jew and Gentile) with different roles in redemptive history as our dispensational friends teach.⁵³² There are cultural differences

⁵²⁷ Bruce, *Galatians*, 273, Moo, *Galatians*, 399.

⁵²⁸ Moo, *Galatians*, 403.

⁵²⁹ Moo, *Galatians*, 403.

⁵³⁰ There are some who see this as a reference to an "ethnic, religious, Israel," reflecting Paul's wish that his people come to recognize God's mercy. See, for example, Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 252, and Bruce, *Galatians*, 275, who sees this as an expression of Paul's eschatological hope that all Israel will be saved (cf. Romans 11:26).

⁵³¹ Squeamish about identifying Israel too closely with the church, Robert Saucy contends that Paul believed that Israel "still had a future and therefore could not be superceded by a new people of God . . . Israel's strategic position in salvation history is not confined to its past, as if Israel is now absorbed by the church." If you begin with the premise that Paul must be saying something other than what he appears to be saying here—all those who participate in the new creation cannot refer to the Israel of God (the church) because God has distinct purposes for the church and Israel—then you must necessarily conclude that Christ's church is important, but not the *telos* of God's redemptive purposes (as stated in Ephesians 2:11-22). The church is the bride of Christ and he has no other (Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-2). See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 198-202.

⁵³² See, for example, Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: BH Academic, 2010), 143-145. Vlach argues that those "who follow the rule" refers to the "Israel of God," but then identifies these people as "Christian Jews." But the question remains and begs to be answered. Are these Christian Jews not members of Christ's church? Are they not addressed throughout the Galatian letter as members of the very same congregations as those Gentiles whom Paul identifies as the "uncircumcised"? So, is the fundamental identity of these "Jewish Christians" their historical and cultural Judaism, or their

between Jews and Gentiles indeed, and these remain among those were are the “true” Israel. But are those among the Israel of God, Jews in the Old Testament sense, or is Paul referring to Christian believers with Jewish cultural identity and members of the same churches as the Gentiles (the uncircumcised)?

B. The marks of Jesus (6:17)

17 From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Having made his point about the errors of the Judaizers regarding their understanding of the doctrine of justification, Paul puts them on notice in verse 17, “*from now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*” The man who is scarred from head to toe from being nearly stoned to death for preaching the gospel, has seen the strong hand of God deliver him many times before. As Moo puts it of Paul, “You want something to brag about? You want identity markers? I’ll give you identity markers! See these scars? I’m branded for Jesus. Become like me!”⁵³³ Paul has had enough of the Judaizers. In a momentary flash of indignation, he warns them to leave both himself and Christ’s people alone.

C. The benediction (6:18)

18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

After all that Paul has said to the Galatians, he concludes with a benediction (a good word) and not a farewell.⁵³⁴ More important, and something not to be overlooked, after all that he has said so far Paul addresses his readers in Galatia as brothers. He knows these people. He loves these people. That has not changed.

Application

Why should we, like Paul, seek to boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ? The reason why the cross must be central in the teaching and preaching of Christ’s church is very simple. The cross of Christ is our only hope of heaven. Though it be foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew, it is the power of God for those who are being saved. As Gentiles, who were formerly strangers to the promise, aliens, without God and without hope in the world, we have now been brought near to God by the blood of the cross (Ephesians 2:11-22). But as members of the New Israel, we too participate in all the blessings of the new creation. Our standing before God does not depend upon a surgical procedure, nor upon what we eat or drink, nor upon the calendar we use, nor upon our obedience to the law of Moses, despite what modern Judaizers

justification through faith in Jesus and their inclusion into the body of Christ? If the latter, Vlach’s exegetical point is moot.

⁵³³ Moo, *Galatians*, 404.

⁵³⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, 314-15.

tell us. Rather, says Paul, we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ, received through faith alone, apart from works!

In the new creation there is a full and final forgiveness of sin, as well as the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to all of God's people who even now struggle with the flesh as the Spirit brings forth his fruit in our lives. In the new creation, we are clothed with Christ through baptism, and in the Lord's Supper we feed upon our Savior's blessed body—heavenly manna—through faith. Through faith in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, all believers are children of Abraham and heirs to the glorious inheritance that God has promised to all who trust in the death and righteousness of Jesus Christ, instead of their own.

Now in union with Christ, we are free from the guilt of our sins, free from the yoke of the law. We are free from those who seek to enslave our consciences to those things from which Christ died to free us, i.e., the basic principles of the world. It is for this reason that we must stand firm against anyone who seeks to preach another gospel or to bind our consciences to such things as “do not taste, do not touch, do not handle.” All of this comes to us because Jesus Christ died upon Calvary's scandalous tree, and shed his precious blood for us. How can we boast in anything else?

All of these wonderful privileges and promises are ours. The same Savior who loved us and gave himself for us, comes to us through word and sacrament. We hear his promise to save all who trust him in his word, a promise which is signed and sealed in the water of baptism, and which is renewed at the Lord's Table. In the gospel is freedom from the curse inflicted by the law and our bondage to sin. Here is where we sow to the Spirit and bear fruit that leads to life everlasting. Here is where we come in peace and confidence and cry “Abba, Father.” Here is where the weakest, struggling sinner finds rest and renewal and the forgiveness of sins. What foolishness it is to boast in our own righteousness, or seek favor with God through any other means when all that we need is found in Christ's cross.

Let it be our prayer as it was for Paul, “may we never boast, except in the cross of Jesus Christ!” What counts is a new creation, and all of its blessings—the very blessings of heaven itself which are ours when we too seek to boast in the scandal of Christ's cross.

IX. Postscript to Galatians (Acts 15:6-41)

A. Background

What happened *after* Paul sent his letter to the churches in Galatia?

We do not know what happened in the specific congregations receiving Paul's Galatian letter, but we do know how the church at large reacted to Paul's rebuke of the heretical movement we speak of as the "Judaizers." In Acts 15, Luke recounts what has come to be known as the "Jerusalem Council" when Paul, the apostles Peter and James, along with the elders of the church addressed the Judaizing heresy with the full authority of the assembled church—a synod, or a general assembly, if you will.¹ This is one of the most important turning points in the Book of Acts and goes a long way to help us see how the early church governed itself and dealt with heresy.² The Jerusalem Council reached full agreement about the gospel Paul preached to the Galatians, affirming that all people (Jew or Gentile) are saved the same way, by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

We know from Paul's Galatian letter, as well as the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the Judaizers were dividing the church by misrepresenting the teaching of the apostle James (in his epistle), and then pitting James against the preaching of Paul. The Judaizers claimed that James and Paul disagreed about how sinners are "justified" (or given a right standing before God), and that James was right, and Paul was wrong. What transpires during the Jerusalem Council goes a long way toward reconciling James' prior statement in James 2:14-17: *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead,"* with Paul's seemingly conflicting comments in Galatians 2:16: *"yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."*

The Jerusalem Council was called by the apostolic church because Paul's first missionary journey throughout Asia Minor (Eastern Turkey) had been a huge success. Through the proclamation of the gospel revealed to Paul by Jesus Christ, as well as through the demonstration of his miraculous power, God confirmed the still largely Jewish church's mission to the Gentiles. The result was a harvest of Gentile converts to Jesus Christ. But it was not long after that the Judaizers and "the party of the circumcision" took issue with Paul, insisting that the increasing number of Gentile converts live as Jews by submitting to circumcision, keeping the Jewish dietary laws, and observing Jewish feasts. Gentiles must believe in Jesus, but obey the law of Moses, if they are to be justified.

The statements by James in his epistle, the teaching and preaching of Paul, coupled with the

¹ This is the designation given to the broadest assemblies of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 282.

attack upon Paul's gospel by the Judaziers claiming James' authority, all must be addressed if Jew and Gentile were to coexist in Christ's church. If a solution is to be found in clarity about the gospel, then this fundamental question must be settled; "what place does obedience to the law of Moses and ritual circumcision play in relationship to the gospel of free grace and justification?" Are Gentiles to obey the law of Moses and submit to circumcision in order to be justified? If not, how are Gentile Christians to relate to Jewish believers within in the Israel of God (6:16), the new society, the mystical body of Jesus Christ, which is the church, created by God, through the proclamation of Christ crucified?

Most historians date the Jerusalem Council in the year A.D. 48 or 49, shortly after Paul had written his letter to the Galatians.³ But the tensions which led to the council had been present for some time. By the time the Council of Jerusalem convenes, the first missionary journey was completed with Paul and Barnabas staying on in Antioch (a city in southeastern Turkey). The sheer number of converts proved that God was calling Gentiles to faith in Jesus.

It also become clear that Israel's own prophets foretold of a mystery in the last days (still hundreds of years distant when they wrote) in which Gentiles would share in the promises which God made to Israel. In Genesis 22:18, God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham. Isaiah (49:6) saw a coming age in which the Servant of the Lord—who is none other than Jesus of Nazareth—will be a light to the Gentiles and will bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The prophet Zephaniah (3:9-10) revealed that in the messianic age, the Messiah himself will purify the lips of the assembled nations, and all of those gathered would call upon the name of the Lord. Zechariah (8:22) spoke of an age when the nations would assemble at Jerusalem seeking the Lord almighty. "Yes," Israel's God will bless the Gentile nations. But he will bless those nations through Israel. This is the mystery now revealed through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴ The question before the council is clarification of how the gospel is to be embraced (by faith or through works of law) and whether or not Gentile believers must live as Jews.

Once the "Pentecost of the Gentiles" occurred in the household of Cornelius (as recounted in Acts 10:1-11:18—when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Gentile converts just as he had occurred with Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost),⁵ the success of the first missionary journey indicated God blessed the practice of preaching directly to the Gentiles apart from any connection to the Jewish synagogue. Tensions increased between those Jews who converted to Christ but held tenaciously to their old ways, and those teaching that Gentiles need not obey the law of Moses or submit to circumcision in order to be justified. Add to this, the increased political tensions arising with Rome after the death of king Herod Agrippa in A.D. 44, the

³ F. F. Bruce, "Council, Jerusalem," in D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, in New Bible Dictionary (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), s.v. "Council, Jerusalem."

⁴ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 49-55.

⁵ Dennis E. Johnson, The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption (Phillipsburg: P & R, 134-137. Gaffin's caution that while this event bears strong parallels to the Pentecost event, we ought not see in this the establishment of continual Pentecostal events is well taken. The critical point is that Gentiles "received the word" and became Christians (cf. Acts 11:1). See Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 128-133.

situation was rife for confusion and controversy.

As argued previously, it is highly likely that Paul wrote his Galatians epistle *before* the Jerusalem Council as convened. As stated in Galatians 2:1-11, Paul already encountered the deception of those he calls “false brothers,” who were spying on Gentiles exercising their freedom in Christ. These “false brothers” (Judaizers) were attempting to return the Gentiles to the status of slaves—presumably slaves to sin through attempting to be justified by the performance of Jewish rituals. Paul tells the Galatians (2:5), “*we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*” For

Paul, this was a debate about the gospel. Nothing trivial here. Those who sided with the party of the circumcised (the Judaizers), were teaching another gospel, which was no gospel. In doing so, Paul says, they came under God’s anathema (curse) and risked falling from grace. Strong words.

The pressure exerted by these false brothers to deny that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone was so great that even Peter grew weak in the knees, momentarily caved into them, and withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles, before being sternly rebuked to his face by Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Now the leaven of the Judaizers had spread from Antioch to Galatia (to the North) and to Jerusalem in the South. What Luke records in Acts 15 is nothing less than the apostolic church confirming that the merits of Christ which alone justify are received through faith alone apart from works of the law (i.e. “good works”).

The controversy came to a head when a delegation of Judaizers arrived in Jerusalem from Antioch, teaching salvation was not by faith in Christ alone and seeking a hearing with the elders and the apostles, presumably to get Paul’s errant theology straightened out.

B. The Occasion (Acts 15:1-4)

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Apparently not convinced by Paul’s arguments in his Galatian epistle, nor his subsequent preaching in Antioch, the Judaizers sought a hearing with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, where several apostles were present, James and Peter among them. The Judaizers flatly denied *sola fide*—the apostolic teaching that we are justified by the merits of Christ received solely through faith alone. Instead, they were teaching that every Gentile convert to Christianity must believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but in addition, must also submit to circumcision as a sign of their obedience to the law of Moses. According to the Judaizers, if you did not receive

circumcision, you cannot not be justified.

Already on record where he stood on this matter, Paul along with Barnabas, again found themselves in sharp dispute with these false teachers. So Paul and Barnabas, along with others chosen by the church in Antioch, immediately headed south to Jerusalem so that the matter could be settled once and for all. Along the way, Paul and Barnabas visited the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria, encouraging the churches everywhere they went with first-hand accounts of how God was bringing salvation to the Gentiles, just as promised in the Old Testament. Reaching Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed. Before the Jerusalem church, they reported to the apostles and elders all that God had done on their first missionary journey. The success of the preaching of Christ crucified among the Gentiles provoked those who sympathized with the Judaizers to respond to what they felt was Paul's incomplete gospel.

C. The Nature of the Dispute (15:5-12)

5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." 12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Although we have to read between the lines a bit, it is clear from Luke's account that the Judaizers from Antioch found willing allies in the Jerusalem Church among some of the Pharisees who likewise embraced Jesus as the Messiah, but who also felt that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses just as they had done. As Hengel points out, those who appeared in Antioch and who were sympathetic "to strict legalistic demands" of the Judaizing party "posed the severest of threats to the community [of believers in Galatia and elsewhere]." They saw in the Gentile mission a "dangerous tendency toward apostasy."⁶ Their opposition was grounded in the desire to stop such apostasy in its tracks.

We do not know if these converts to Christianity from the party of the Pharisees fully endorsed the idea that the Gentiles could not be saved *if* they did not submit to circumcision. But at the very least we can make an educated guess that they were worried about the threat of antinomianism; if Gentile converts were taught free grace and justification *sola fide*, this would create a situation in which people would simply say they embrace Jesus as Lord but continue to live as pagans, flaunting this liberty in light of Jewish scruples about law-keeping, circumcision, observing feasts and dietary laws. These are the same matters Paul addressed in his Epistle to

⁶ Hengel, Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity, 113.

the Galatians.

Like most church meetings, it is not until there had been lengthy deliberations among the leaders of the church, likely in the presence of the “the whole assembly” as mentioned in v. 12), that Peter stood and addressed the Pharisees. Peter reminded them that he himself preached the gospel to the Gentiles in fulfillment of God’s command. The result was that God gave the Gentiles the Spirit at Cornelius’ house, just as the Lord gave the Spirit to the Jews at Pentecost. The creator of all people made no racial distinctions between Jew and Gentile. The Gentiles’ hearts were purified by the blood of Christ received through faith; a clear reference to the forgiveness of sins and justification. Not one of them was justified through obedience to the law of Moses, or through submitting to circumcision. Peter is echoing Paul’s rhetorical question found in Galatians 3:5; “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” After Paul’s rebuke of Peter, recorded in Galatians 2:11 ff., Peter, in the presence of the assembled church, affirms without equivocation the doctrine of justification by faith alone, not by works of the law. The Judaizers stand condemned, not just by Paul, but now by Peter.

In verse 10, Peter makes a startling admission, describing the law of Moses as a yoke the Jews could never bear. He asks, “why turn around and place the same yoke upon the Gentiles?” “No,” says Peter. We are not saved through obedience to the law of Moses. “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter affirms *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. The law does what God intended it to do, show us our sin and lead us to Christ. Apart from Christ, obedience to the law is a yoke none of us can bear.

Once Peter had finished speaking, Paul and Barnabas took their turn, telling the assembly about the miraculous things that God did during their first missionary journey. The church became silent, spellbound as they heard about the conversion of a local proconsul named Sergius Paullus (Acts 13:6-12) and the judgment that befell Simon Barjesus who opposed the gospel. Paul and Barnabas recounted the story of the whole city of Pisidian Antioch turning out to hear the gospel, when Paul and Barnabas were thought to be Greek gods as a result of God’s healing of a man who had been lame from birth. Perhaps they told of how there had been countless conversions, and how in opposition to Jesus Christ, the Jews stirred up trouble. If God did such wonderful and mighty things among the Gentiles, and blessed the first missionary journey so richly, how could the Judaizers claim to have the truth? The assembly was now quiet. All opposition by the Judaizers and Pharisees to the Gentile mission and the gospel of free grace was silenced.

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had finished speaking, it was James’ turn to speak.⁷ The Lord’s half-brother, was known as “James the Just” because of his deep piety. As indicated in Acts 12:17, James was the leader of the Jerusalem church—perhaps modeled after the Sanhedrin, where the president was first among equals.⁸ James was subsequently put to death by the

⁷ Bruce’s study of James in the New Testament is very helpful and enlightening. See, F. F. Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James, and John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 86-119.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 292.

Jewish high priest, Ananus, in A.D. 62.⁹ According to Christian tradition, “James was [self-denying] and scrupulous in keeping the law. The Judaizers within the church looked to him for support.”¹⁰ James’ response to all of this was eagerly awaited, especially in light of his comments in the second chapter of his own epistle.

D. Words from James (Acts 15:13-21)

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 ““After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.’ 19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

After Paul and Barnabas finished recounting God’s work among the Gentiles, it was James’ turn to speak, calling the assembly to order using a formal address—“*brothers, listen to me.*” James understood that God had visited the Gentiles, calling them to be a people “for his own name,” fully agreeing with Peter’s assessment. James even applies to the Gentiles a designation from the Old Testament which formerly had been used only of Israel. James appeals to a prophecy from the prophet Amos to make his point. According to Amos 8:11, in the last days, God will “rebuild David’s tent,” and “restore it,” a reference to a restored Israel in the messianic age.¹¹ This restored Israel was composed of those elect Jews who embraced Jesus as the Messiah, described elsewhere by Paul as an elect remnant according to grace (Romans 11:5).

But gathered around this elect remnant of Israel in the messianic age will be a similar Gentile remnant. According to James, in addition to those Jews who embrace the Messiah, there will also be a number of Gentiles who seek the Lord and who also bear his name, but who will remain ethnically and culturally distinct from Israel. In effect, James is contending that “no attempt should therefore be made to turn Gentiles into Jews.”¹² This refutes any idea that the Gentiles must become cultural Jews in order to be justified, keeping the ceremonial elements of the law of Moses, submitting to circumcision if they wished to belong to the people of God. In the messianic age, membership in the New Israel is no longer based upon a racial/ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile. Membership is solely based upon faith in Jesus Christ.

⁹ Josephus, The Essential Works, trans., and ed., by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1994), 281.

¹⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, “*The Acts of the Apostles*,” in Frank E. Gaebelien and J. D. Douglas, eds, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 446.

¹¹ Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James, and John, 94.

¹² Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James, and John, 94.

There is now one people of God, composed of Jews and Gentiles who look to Jesus for salvation, who can keep their distinct ethnic identities and culture, even though members together in the New Israel and of the body of Christ. James understands Amos to be predicting this very thing.¹³

Agreeing with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, James too felt that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles to come to faith in Christ by placing in their way the stumbling blocks of the law of Moses and circumcision. Instead, James contends that the church should instruct Gentile converts to live in gratitude before God, no longer living as pagans once they had embraced Christ as Messiah. James counseled the church that Gentile converts should abstain from those things that characterized the pagan religions of the age and which were utterly offensive to Jews; eating food sacrificed to idols, practicing sexual immorality (often connected to pagan fertility rights and temple prostitution), and the drinking of blood (also connected to pagan rituals).

James' rationale is summed up in verse 20. "*Moses is read*" in the synagogues of every major city where the Gentile mission had gone. For Gentiles to continue to do such things would have been as much of an offense to the Jew as the Judaizers demanding circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses was to the Gentile. It would be much easier to keep the focus where it should be—on the saving work of Jesus Christ—if the Gentiles were not doing things which were so offensive to Jews. It would also remove the ground for the charges of antinomianism the Judaizers were no doubt making against Gentiles and their habits.

Once James finished speaking it was apparent that those former Pharisees, who previously sided with the Judaizers, had been thoroughly chastened.

E. The Decision (Acts 15:22-29)

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

¹³ Dispensationalists approach the passage quite differently, contending that Israel's future national significance is not superseded or transcended by the church. Vlach, [Has the Church Replaced Israel?](#) 115-117. I take James to be saying the very thing Vlach says is not the case.

As is clear in verses 22-29, James' exhortation won the day. The official decision reached by the Jerusalem assembly was to be sent in earnest back to the church in Antioch via letter. It is no small thing that "*the apostles and elders, with the whole church,*" were in complete agreement. Says Luke about this, "*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit,*" which stresses the church's role as the vehicle of the Spirit's operations. Such a statement is unprecedented in the New Testament. The Spirit blesses the corporate decision of a deliberative body.¹⁴ The letter produced here was then sent to the church in Antioch via Paul and Barnabas, along with two other prominent leaders in the church, Judas and Silas, who would serve as witnesses to the council's decision. Once the group reached Antioch, the church there assembled, the letter was read and all were greatly encouraged by the decision.

While God's favor toward the Gentiles and the doctrine of justification was reaffirmed, the Gentiles were exhorted not to do things which antagonized Jews. They were not to eat food sacrificed to idols, a matter Paul takes up in more detail in his letter to the Corinthians (chapter 9-10). Animal sacrifices taking place in the local temples were common in Paul's time. So, there was often more meat than the priests could consume. In an age before refrigeration, the extra meat was sold immediately after the sacrifice in the local marketplaces. Many of that age saw a close association between the animal's flesh and the pagan ceremony in which it was sacrificed. Jews avoided eating this meat.

Furthermore, James counsels, the Gentiles were to be careful about eating things which grossed out Jews such as the ritual drinking of blood (which was associated with certain Greco-Roman sects such as the washing in blood by the priests of Cybele), or animals killed by strangulation.¹⁵ Finally, Gentiles were to adopt a biblical sexuality—no sexual relations before marriage (fornication), no sexual relations outside of marriage (adultery), nor same sex relationships (homosexuality). Gentile converts must give up their mistresses, and all forms of improper sexual relationships. These things were not only forbidden in God's law, the Gentile indifference toward such prohibitions clearly offended pious Jews.

G. The Reading of the Council's Letter in Antioch (Acts 15:30-35)

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

After Silas and Judas edified the church in Antioch through their own preaching, they returned home to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas stayed on in Antioch, as a second missionary journey

¹⁴ Bruce, The Book of Acts, 298.

¹⁵ Eduard Lohse, trans., John E. Steely, The New Testament Environment (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 240.

was about to begin.

There are a number of important points made in this passage. First, despite the ethnic and cultural differences between Jew and Gentile, both groups were equal and full members in the Israel of God (Christ's church). As Paul made clear in his Galatian letter, the gospel is not based upon human obedience to the law of Moses or submission to circumcision, which supposedly made the Jew superior to Gentiles. It is clear that the gospel is the preaching of Christ crucified, through which God in his grace, calls his elect to faith in Jesus Christ, whether they be Jew or Gentile.

The law of Moses had been an unbearable yoke for the Jews. It was given by God to Moses precisely for the purpose of showing the people of Israel their sin and driving them to seek the coming Savior. To turn around and insist that unless a Gentile kept the law and was circumcised in order to be justified, was to deny the gospel. God blessed the Gentile mission. No one could deny this. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and even James, were in full agreement that the age of the Spirit had dawned. The Judaizers and those Pharisees sympathetic to them, were fully and completely repudiated by the assembled church, all of the apostles and the elders. Justification, *sola fide*, is the doctrine of the apostolic church. James 2 must be read in light of Acts 15 and Romans 4, not the latter in light of the former.

Second, the church was clearly given birth by the proclamation of the gospel, so that the assembly which met in Jerusalem renders its judgment upon those who *deny* what the Scriptures clearly teach—the gospel revealed by Jesus to his apostles. Despite the contention of the Roman church that this text shows the supposed equality of the authority of the church with that of the authority of Scripture, the exact opposite is true. The Jerusalem Council makes its determination *from the Scriptures* or as directed by the Holy Spirit (in words which are now Scripture). When Peter speaks of Paul's letters as Scripture, (2 Peter 3:16), he is probably referring to the fact that the epistle to the Galatians, and the gospel of justification *sola fide*, was that to which the Old Testament Scriptures pointed all along. There is no sense that the church has authority over Scripture merely because it has apostles (Rome).¹⁶

Acts 15 is also problematic for advocates of congregational, and independent forms of church government (polity), because the argument that the local church has no connection to other congregations, or that individual Christians are not under authority of elders, does not comply with the formation, purpose, and decisions of the council.¹⁷ Despite not possessing *Robert's Rules*, the Jerusalem Council clearly demonstrates the rule of elders; men who are on the same footing as the apostles when the church as a whole assembles to resolve this important dispute. The apostolic church, then, is neither Roman nor congregational in its government. It is Presbyterian. It is ruled by elders. The council rendered a decision which was binding on the churches and which pleased the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 117 ff.

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, as but one example, contends that Acts 15 was an extra-ordinary occurrence during the apostolic age and therefore does not support the "national" [better, "broader"] assemblies claimed as biblical by Reformed/Presbyterian polity. Needless to say, I think the Jerusalem Council points in the very direction Grudem denies. Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1994) 926-927.

The practical consequence of the Jerusalem Council is that the preaching of the gospel creates the church and gives us our unity. Despite all our personal differences, our disagreements, our cultural diversity, when we gather together around the proclamation of Christ crucified, are baptized into Christ, receive the sacrament of his body and blood, we who are diverse, become one. If Jesus Christ is at the center of our faith because he is the Lord of all, we do not need to look alike, think alike, or vote alike, or eat the same food, to have the kind of unity which the Scripture says is characteristic of Christ's church. All of us are under the authority of Christ-exercised through his word and sacraments, and which is made manifest in each local congregation by elders, who rule to ensure the fidelity of teaching and preaching to Christ's word in Scripture wherever Christ's people gather as a church.

Finally, we also learn from the Jerusalem Council that our unity arises only from the preached gospel. Preaching the gospel precludes us from putting stumbling blocks in the way of those who are not Christ's and who need to hear the preaching of Christ crucified. James' speech indicates that while we need not give up our individual cultural preferences and habits, nor be forced or shamed into doing those things which violate our own consciences, we are not to let these things get in the way of our collective mission as the Church of Jesus Christ. If non-Christians are to hear the gospel from our lips, then we must not place our own agendas and foibles in the paths of those who are perishing in their sins. The offense of the church is to be the gospel it preaches, not the conduct of its members. Unfortunately, often the opposite is the case. Non-Christians are often driven away because we offend them through stumbling blocks of self-righteousness. This is a shame and it is sin. If people hear the gospel and are offended, so be it. Let the scandal of the cross be the offence, not us.

Acts 15, and Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council reminds us that the apostolic church placed its confidence for all of its life and missionary endeavors clearly in the gospel of free grace and justification *sola fide*. Paul's gospel was revealed to him by Jesus. It is therefore the church's gospel. Let us do as the first church did, place our confidence in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who comes to us through his word and sacraments. This same Jesus was preached by Paul, James, and Peter, feeds us with the manna from heaven-his own body and blood. Through faith in Jesus, we who are many become one. Our sins are forgiven. We are accounted righteous because Christ's righteousness is now ours, through faith in the same Jesus who was preached by Paul, Peter, James, and affirmed by all the elders at the Jerusalem Council. God's promise to bless the nations through Israel is a reality, and the countless Christians living today are the proof.