

Freedom

Teaching Galatians

Dave Williams, July 2023

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1 Introduction to the book

1.1. Author

This is a letter, signed off by the apostle, Paul. His authorship is effectively undisputed even amongst the more sceptical of scholars.

1.2. When was the book written?

Nowadays it is usually viewed as an early letter, if not the earliest of Paul's letters. Some reformers including Luther considered it to have been written later though, seeing it as summarising Romans.¹ Current views are that it was written somewhere between the mid 40s - mid 50s AD.² This depends on whether it was written following Paul's earlier trips to Jerusalem (see Acts 11:30 & 12:25) or whether Galatians 2:1-10 is a reference to Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council.

1.3. Where was it written to?

There were two parts to Galatia. The north was associated with settlements of Gallic/Celtic people (an alternative Gaul), who would be regarded as wild/lawless as a stereotype.³ Historically, this was assumed to be the recipient area but this may be simply because the southern boundaries were redrawn and those areas reallocated later.⁴ Today the view is that South Galatia is more likely, it was more urban with better road connections meaning that there was likely to have been greater Gospel spread.⁵ Additionally, there was a substantial Jewish population which might help explain some of the issues.⁶ Barnabas is known to the recipients and he accompanied Paul in the south but not further north.⁷

If South Galatia was the destination then it was intended for the churches planted in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14).⁸

1.4. Why was it written?

Paul writes in response to "opponents." We don't have their side of the argument. It may be possible to work this out through "mirror reading," establishing a construction of what do think the mirror opposite of what Paul says would be? We need to be cautious though about superimposing our own views.⁹ However, from the text we might conclude that:

"Paul writes Galatians to combat people who are pressurising the Galatians to undergo circumcision and submit to the law of Moses as a means of completing their Christian experience."¹⁰

¹ Keener, 8.

² Keener, 7.

³ Kenner, 15. See also Moo, 2-3.

⁴ Keener, 18.

⁵ Moo, 8. Keener, 20.

⁶ Keener, 21. Moo 8,

⁷ Keener, 21.

⁸ Keener, 22. Both Keener and Moo lean towards the letter being Addressed to South Galatia. C.f. Moo, 8.

⁹ Kenner, 23.

¹⁰ Moo, 19.

However, this does not completely tell us everything about what the exact nature of the danger was. Martin Luther and many protestant readers since saw this primarily in terms of a conflict between Law and Grace. The Gospel they received was that they were sinners who deserved the penalty of death as God's righteous judgement. Religion could not save them, whether the rituals of their old way of life, or Torah observance. Therefore, Jews and Gentiles alike were saved and brought into God's eternal kingdom through Jesus' death and resurrection meaning that he bore the penalty for sin in his body on the Cross and in exchange, he has imputed (credited) his righteousness to all believers so that we are justified (declared right with God). As Paul puts it elsewhere.

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."¹¹

What has become known as "the Old Perspective", the Lutheran one assumed that the danger Paul was countering was from people seeking to "Judaize" Gentile converts. The perception of first century (sometimes known as Second Temple) Judaism was that it was a works based religion, people were brought into Covenant relationship with God by keeping his Law.

The Judaizers then would be people who were themselves tempted to retreat to a legalistic understanding of salvation. If so, they would assume that the Galatian converts needed Jesus but needed more than that, they needed to become fully fledged, law observant Jews starting with circumcision as a sign of that transition and leading on to other aspects of law observance. The Cross therefore gives Jews a second chance to be true Jews and Gentiles an opportunity to become Jews, so again, it is a second chance at life.

This perspective however has been significantly challenged in recent years. This began with the studies of scholars such as EP Sanders and James Dunn which challenged assumptions about the nature of Second Temple Judaism. Sander's New Perspective was as much a New Perspective on Second Temple/Rabbinical/Pharisaic Judaism as it was on Paul but if it questioned the nature of opposition to Paul, then it would also question our understanding of Paul's argument too.¹²

Sanders, followed by Dunn and NT Wright argued that the Jews of Jesus' and Paul's day held to what has become known as "Covenantal Nomism." Jews believed that they were part of God's people because they were God's chosen people, in other words, when Paul talked about "Election", then this would be language they recognised. God has chosen them as a people and that was nothing to do with them being stronger or holier. It was purely because of God's promise to Abraham. Therefore, the Covenant was all to do with election and grace. However, God's people had also been given the Law in order to identify them and put the boundary markers in place in order to help them to be distinguished as God's people. It could also be argued that you came into the covenant by grace and election but you stayed in by keeping the law (hence nomism).

If the New Perspective is right, then it means that the problem Paul faced was potentially different and Paul's counter would be very different. It would mean that the Judaizers would be essentially arguing that the Gentile believers were admitted into the covenant by faith and by grace but needed to observe the same boundary markers as Jews, circumcision and Torah. From this perspective, it is likely that Paul wouldn't have a problem in principle with the idea that Gentile believers should be obedient to God, however, he would have had an issue with those boundary markers such as festivals, kosher dietary laws and most of all circumcision that he saw as specifically ethnic. Paul's

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

¹² See particularly EP Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism.

issue would be that if the Gospel was for all peoples, then the boundary markers should not be so exclusive as to make it harder to draw them wide and include non-Jews.

I think there are some substantial problems with the New Perspective. It does, however, help us to nuance our understanding of 1st century Judaism and if we see the issues, purely in terms of legalism then we may end up with a rather shallow understanding leading to an equally shallow application.

However, we would also do well to remember the following

1. That Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees seems to include issues with both ethnic and legalistic pride. He did charge them with seeking to keep external laws in order to be holy and right with God.
2. We need to be careful about over-conflating some Rabbinical teachings with the entire expression of Second Temple Judaism. It is possible that those Rabbis were challenging presuppositions within their religion. It is also possible that ordinary Jews could have heard "Covenant-Nomism" as legalism.
3. That the distinction between "how you get in" and "how you stay in" can be over defined. If we need to keep the Law perfectly for God to continue loving us then that does make for a legalistic religion.
4. That it seems highly unlikely that Paul's concern would be purely with some ethnic markers given that
 - a. He saw Gentiles as ingrafted into Israel?
 - b. That he was actually fairly relaxed about the possibility of Gentiles being circumcised for the sake of the Gospel (c.f. Timothy),
5. Whether or not Paul would have been okay with Covenant-Nomism, so long as it didn't require circumcision is up for dispute

A third proposal has been made recently by Neil Martin in his book, "Galatians Reconsidered." Neil argues that both Old and New Perspectives have something to offer and both are found wanting. Key to his thesis is Paul's concern that the Gentile converts were slipping back into their old lives.

So, he argues, the problem was not that they were being drawn into an unhelpful form of Judaism that undermined their faith. Furthermore, if this was the case, then Paul didn't really have a problem with the Law and with the rites and rituals of Judaism. His issue was not with Jewish Christians observing circumcision, sabbath days or food laws. This was all well and good, indeed it might be helpful for those who understood what the laws and rituals truly meant. However, such things were toxic to baby Christians fresh out of pagan idolatry. They would be tempted to see the entry rites of Judaism as akin to the rites they followed in their past life and so be drawn back to the heart beliefs they had been rescued from, seeing Law observance as a means to appease Yahweh in exactly the same way as they had appeased Greek and Roman gods.¹³

I think that Martin is correct to be alert to the fact that something about the Judaizer's offer risked not so much drawing the Gentile believers into a form of Judaism but rather back to their old beliefs. The letter should help us to see how. Where Martin's argument falls down is that when we look at Galatians, he doesn't seem to see the Judaizers as well intentioned but unhelpful. He sees them as dangerous opponents.

¹³ See Martin, *Galatians Reconsidered*, 159-169.

Furthermore, I think Martin misses the point that Paul sees their approach as being just as toxic for them and for fellow, mature, Jewish believers as it was to young Gentile Christians. Jews and Gentiles alike were in danger of turning away from the Gospel back to their own ways.

So, it is my view that Paul recognised in his opponents that even if they attached their approach to covenantal grace, that “works religion” would win out. The Gospel of Grace is precious and so has to be strenuously guarded. As Paul would argue in another context, just a little bit of yeast will affect the whole batch of dough. That was the danger in Galatia.

We too need to be careful that we don’t allow the Gospel message to be contaminated in ways that so distort it as to change and destroy the message altogether.

This then is the primary point and application of Galatians. We must be on our guard against, even innocent sounding proposals that risk distorting the Gospel and distracting us away from Christ and the Cross. The result is that another Gospel is preached. What this will look like will vary from context to context, but we can learn from the experience of the believers in Galatia.

2 A different Gospel

You get the impression that Paul is writing in a hurry when he sends his letter to the Galatians. Not for them, a lengthy introduction with prayers of praise and descriptions of what they are doing well. Paul gets straight down to business, identifying the problem in the church.

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.¹⁴

To be alert to the danger of other Gospels requires us to have a sense of what the true Gospel is. So, unsurprisingly, Paul will spend a significant amount of time throughout the letter drawing his readers attention to that. First, he needs to defend himself against criticism. We may infer, that Paul's opponents were suggesting that he was not presenting the authentic Gospel, that he differed from the founding Apostles in Jerusalem.

So, Paul tells us two crucial facts. First, he insists that he did not receive the Gospel second hand with the potential for misinterpretation and distortion. Rather, he had a direct encounter with Jesus Christ in a vision. Paul wants to insist that Jesus is the sole author of the Gospel. ¹⁵ Second, he shows that this Gospel had been verified and confirmed. He met with the Jerusalem church leaders.¹⁶ The Jerusalem church glorified God because he was preaching the good news and later when he checked in with them again, they affirmed both his message and his methodology. The point is three-fold here, first Paul shows that there wasn't a distinction between him and the apostles in Jerusalem. Second, he shows that he hasn't been sneaky, he's not been spending time infiltrating in order to pick up their ideas and subtly twist them to this agenda. He's not learn enough of what the Apostles were saying in order to imitate them and so deceive. Rather, thirdly, we have an example here of two independent witnesses, the witness of the apostles who were with Jesus throughout his life, death and resurrection and the witness of this additional apostle who had met Jesus in a vision. Both witnesses were in full agreement about what the Gospel was.

Then, Paul articulates what the Gospel is, in order to contrast the true Gospel with what his opponents were saying and doing. The crucial passage is this:

“We know that a person is not justified^[a] 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 endeavour 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

¹⁴ Galatians 1:6-9.

¹⁵ Galatians 1:11-17.

¹⁶ Galatians 1:18-2:9.

me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness^[b] were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Notice first, that the Gospel is to do with being justified", declared right with God. Second, that Paul tells us how this does and doesn't happen. We are not justified by "works of law". Paul would particularly have in mind, circumcision in this context. However, notice the positive description of how justification happens as well as the negative description of how it doesn't.

Paul tells us that there has been a death, Christ died on the Cross and he, Paul (and by implication, we, the Galatian believers at the time and you and me today), died with him. Christ's physical death brings about a spiritual death for us,

We can see that death involves moving from one place to another. Death is a transition, not the end. You die to one thing in order to live to/for another. When I physically die, I will die to life here on this earth in order that I might live to eternal life with Jesus forever.

Paul says that when he died with Christ, he died to his old self. This bit is perhaps reasonably obvious. It's about leaving behind our identity as condemned sinners. However, notice that Paul also says that he has "died to the law." In other words, the Jewish Law was part of his identity as a sinner and he has left it behind. I would suggest from Paul's other letters that this is because the Law placed him under condemnation. Indeed, it is "through the Law" that Paul dies "to the Law." In other words, the Law condemned him, legally he deserved death and so that legal penalty was received at Calvary. Christ died on our behalf and we died with him.

The Gospel then is all about Christ's death on the Cross. It means that we are reconciled to God, we are justified, right with him, forgiven. It means that we have a new life and a new identity. We are no longer condemned.

Anything that moves us way from that position of being justified, right with God, in Christ and places a different status on us, therefore moves us back to the place of being under condemnation and so is a different Gospel.

3 What is the Gospel?

Paul's big concern for the Galatian church was that they risked being captured by a different Gospel. The other day, I wrote something about this and observed that if we are to avoid falling for different, false Gospels, then we need to know what the true Gospel is.

Now, we might assume that the answer to the question is obvious. Ask any Christian from a reformed, evangelical background and they are likely to give an answer along the following lines

"The Gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died on the Cross in our place, bearing the penalty of sin so that we can be forgiven. He took our guilt on himself and in exchange gave us (credited/imputed) his righteousness so that we are now right with God, we are justified through faith."

Like I said, that sounds fairly straight forward and to be clear up front and to avoid mild peril, that's pretty much how I would describe it too. However, that working definition has been challenged from within Evangelicalism in recent years, particularly when it comes to what the New Testament and Paul mean by the word. NT Wright says:

"I am comfortable with what people normally mean when they say "the gospel." I just don't think that it is what Paul means. In other words, I'm not denying that the usual meanings are things that people ought to say, to preach, to believe. I simply wouldn't use the word 'gospel' to denote those things."¹⁷

Now, at first glance, we might think then that this doesn't matter too much, it all sounds a little academic. Wright isn't saying that we shouldn't preach what we call "the Gospel" as an evangelical he still believes in salvation and conversion. However, I want to suggest that it does matter. You see, whilst Wright is allowing us to continue saying and assuming certain things, he is in effect breaking the link between what we believe/say and what Scripture says. He seems, from all that I've read of Wright to do this without coming back to where in Scripture we would find those things. When that happens, we risk moving to assuming certain things and the things we assume in this generation tend to be forgotten in the next.

That's one good reason for challenging and questioning Wright but his approach to the word "Gospel" also matters as we seek to understand what Paul is saying in letters like Galatians. It will affect our understanding of the danger that the Galatians were in and of what Paul means when he talks about things like faith, works and justification.

Wright says that:

"The 'Gospel' itself strictly speaking is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus."¹⁸

It's not that it has nothing to do with people getting saved, people do get saved as a result of it but that's not what the message is.¹⁹ Now, it is worth observing at this point what Wright gets right because there is something important that he is on to here. It's why I said that the description of the Gospel I suggested is "*pretty much* how I would put it" rather than "how I would put it." In his response to John Piper on justification, Wright uses the example of someone who is convinced in a

¹⁷ NT Wright, *What Saint Paul really said*, 41.

¹⁸ NT Wright, *What Saint Paul really said*, 45.

¹⁹ NT Wright, *What Saint Paul really said*, 45.

pre-Copernican kind of way that The Sun goes round the earth. Sometimes our presentations of the Gospel can give the impression that God orbits us when the truth is the opposite. So, Wright has a healthy desire to see the Gospel become first and foremost about God again, to ensure that we proclaim Jesus.²⁰ This good and healthy desire, in fact, reflects the Reformation desire to put the focus back on God as sovereign and supreme.

This means that the primary issue with human sin and why we need a saviour is not so much that we need help with the problems in our lives and nor even about getting our ticket to heaven in order to escape hell. Rather, the primary issue is that we are not worshipping God as we should. However, it is still the case that primarily, the Gospel is about good news for us. You see, if I do not worship God, then that's not really a problem for him. He's still God, he's still king, in fact there's a sense in which I cannot help but glorify him, even in my rebellion. But my attitude doesn't matter too much, first because God has other options, he could have chosen to wipe us out and start again but he didn't. Furthermore, God is not dependent upon us, he is, to use the theological term "A-Se", he is self-existent, he has his life from within himself.

So whilst the Gospel is about God, it is also the Gospel, or good news for us. It might be helpful to use an example from history. In fact, this is the one that Wright and others have tended to rely on. Whenever a new Roman Emperor came on the scene, through birth or accession to the throne, or whenever they won a great victory, this was announced as "good news" or "Gospel" in a declaration, heralded to the Empire.²¹

Yet, this begs the question as to the declaration of the Emperor's arrival, accession or victory was good news for. To be sure, it was good news for the Emperor himself but obviously, the suggestion was that it was good news for others too and indeed not just for his armies or the inhabitants of Rome itself. Rather, it seems to have been seen as good news (gospel) for the entire Empire and indeed for the whole world, even beyond the Empire's borders at that time.

So, why was it good news? Well, helpfully the example that Wright cites tells us. The message was good news because the Emperor (in the specific example, Augustus) was a saviour who was bringing peace and ending wars.

Similarly, check out Isaiah 52:7, also cited by Wright as an example of Gospel. There the prophet says: How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Did you notice it there? Just like with the Roman Emperors (and long before they came on the scene), Scripture told us that Gospel or Good News is all to do with salvation. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that the New Testament writers would be drawing far more upon the origins of the word in Isaiah than on what Roman Emperors had to say.

Therefore, whether implicit or explicit, the good news needs to tell us how it is good news for us and in effect how we come under it. Now at one level, the answer is that we do nothing, we believe in God's grace to us. Jesus is the one who has won the victory and so we have nothing to add to that. However, there is a response. Just as Roman Citizens or the liberated people of Jerusalem benefited

²⁰ Tom Wright, *Justification: God's plan and Paul's Vision*, 3-9.

²¹ NT Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 43.

from the salvation of their rescuer/king/emperor by giving their loyalty to him, so too must we surrender our lives to king Jesus

Coming back to Galatians then, we would do well to observe how Paul is using the word “Gospel” in the letter. As we saw in the previous section, it becomes clear that Paul’s “Gospel” is not just a bare bones description of Jesus’ Kingship, an announcement of who he is and what he has done, it certainly involves that but it is more than that. Paul says:

“we know that a person is not justified²² 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.”²²

And then

“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.”²³

In those verses, Paul shows that the Gospel involves an explanation of how we are included in it. Furthermore, it is also clear that it is this particular issue of our inclusion that is at stake when another Gospel is introduced.

To come back to our starting question, what is the Gospel? As I said, my original definition was close to how I would put it but not quite. So, how would I phrase it? Well, I’d suggest something along these lines.

We have good news to share because God is eternal, sovereign and good. He is sovereign because he is without rival and he is good because he is love. This loving God created a good world and placed us in it to care for it, to love each other and most of all to love and glorify him. We have failed to do this, rebelling against God in sin, we have failed to love him with our whole being or our neighbours as ourselves.

So, God in the person of Jesus came to deal with the problem of sin. Jesus’ death on the Cross and resurrection means that he took our place, he lived an obedient life on our part and died in our place for our guilt. He bore the penalty for sin and so we are justified, declared right with God because in effect we died to ourselves with him and rise to new life with him.

The promise then is that if we repent from sin and believe in Christ, then we will be forgiven and Christ, through the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. Believers are part of the Church, God’s new people and so are raised up to be able to fulfil their original purpose of caring for this world, loving each other and loving/glorifying God. We can enjoy his presence with us now in this life and look forward to eternity with him too in his wonderful new creation.

²² Galatians 2:16.

²³ Galatians 2:19-20.

4 Distorted Gospels

There are a number of ways that the Gospel can be distorted but we might divide them into three rough categories. First, there are distorted Gospels that completely miss the point of what the Good News is by offering a solution to the wrong problem, they fail to treat the problem of sin. Secondly, there are distorted Gospels which recognise the problem of sin but fail to take us to the true solution of Christ's death and resurrection, they reject Grace. Thirdly, there are false Gospels which add to grace, they recognise Christ's death but then require something extra of us.

4.1. Failing to treat the right problem

These Gospels offer salvation but from what? The answer is that they see the problem as being our circumstances, particular around suffering, poverty and oppression. These Gospels offer freedom from such things.

Obvious examples include, social gospels and liberation theology where the emphasis is on lifting people out of poverty and challenging power structures. Of course, it is true that poverty and oppression is part of the Fall and we often see power exercised corruptly and unjustly because of sin. So, Christians will have a concern for these things. The danger comes when they take central place.

Then there is the prosperity Gospel. Now, as with the social Gospel, its danger comes because there is a kernel of truth there which this false Gospel takes out of context and then corrupts. Yes, the ultimate vision of the Gospel is that we are being raised up with Christ as conquerors and so we look forward to sharing the abundance of the inheritance in the New Creation. God's people will prosper. However, the Prosperity Gospel takes those promises that are for all God's people, in eternity, through grace and says that you or I can enjoy them now, in isolation on our own, in return for a specific expression of faith. My view is that Prosperity Teaching actually sells us short. It's like settling for the instant coffee instead of the good quality that comes when you take freshly ground beans and percolate them.

We may not fall for the more overt and obvious examples of such false, distorted gospels but there are other ways that we can be taken in. I think we see this particularly with things that can draw us into prosperity teaching. We would immediately recognise it with the promises of some faith healers but what about when we assume that no-one with true faith should suffer from depression or what about the way that purity culture seemed to guarantee young people a great marriage to come? I think too that this thinking can creep into conversations about fertility.

4.2. A different solution

Some "Gospels" do see the problem as sin. However, they fail to point to us as saviour. These approaches arise out of Pelagianism which taught that we all have the potential within us to live morally good lives that please God. Such Gospels will treat Jesus as a wise moral teacher to listen to, an example to follow and/or one who demonstrated God's love to us in his death. However, these Gospels fail to recognise that we cannot save ourselves.

Again, it is important to remember that Jesus did offer us an example in his life and death which was truly a demonstration of love. Furthermore, Jesus was a good teacher and his Great Commission requires us to pass on his teaching and call disciples to obey him. However, Jesus is more than example, teacher and demonstration.

Whilst we would not accept such views and tend to associate them with liberalism, we can allow our preaching to drift into moralising and sadly I've seen a lot of kids ministry stuff that leans into that kind of emphasis. It's important that we remember to apply the Gospel to each and every situation.

4.3.A distorted solution

Some "gospels" recognise Jesus' sacrificial death but add to it in such a way that it becomes distorted. Traditional Catholic thought, for example teaches that Christ's sacrifice motivates God to look on us with favour and accept our works, prayers and sacraments. This is in effect "semi-Pelagian".

We can distort the Gospel when we speak and act as though Christ's death gave us a second chance but after that, it's up to us. That's why teaching on assurance and security is so important. Another distortion can be when we create two-tier forms of Christianity which distinguish between believers and disciples, between those who have accepted Jesus as Saviour and those who are going deeply, learning to obey him as Lord. The Gospel calls us all to submit to the Lordship of Christ from the off.

4.4. Conclusion

It's important to be aware to these potential distortions and dangers. In particular, we need to be alert to how they can subtly creep in.

5 What is justification all about?

One of the key themes that seems central to Paul's argument in Galatians is that we are justified by faith.²⁴ In recent years, there's been much discussion and dispute about what justification really means, especially since the emergence of the New Perspective. Whilst the reformed position since Luther and Calvin has been that justification is central to the Gospel and of first importance, those holding the New Perspective view have argued that whilst justification is important, it is not of first importance and that it is less to do with how we are saved and more to do with how we are identified as part of the church. I think that this aspect of the New Perspective is especially weak but in any case, it is unlikely to be of particular interest to your average church member so I'm not proposing to go into particular detail regarding the controversy here. Instead, it is perhaps more helpful to give an overview of what Scripture shows justification to be.

5.1. Righteousness language

Scripture frequently talks about God as righteous and it is this word that provides the root both in Hebrew and Greek for our word justification. When we say that God is righteous, we are saying something about God's character in terms of his holiness, his moral standing as the faithful arbiter of right and wrong. This is reflected in creation, which God creates and declares good. His righteousness is then seen relationally through his covenants²⁵ and even in God's concern for his own glory.²⁶ This might sound ego-centric until we remember that if God alone is the most good thing, then he alone is worthy of highest praise and glory.

Now, in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters, we often read about "the righteousness of God." Grammatically, "the righteousness of God" could indicate God's righteousness (subjective), the quality that God possesses, or it could refer to "righteousness from God" that it is a moral quality that God gives to us. It could also indicate God's actions, his faithfulness in saving us. It may well be best to presume that all of those meanings are wrapped up in the phrase. God is righteous and so acts rightly towards us in saving us so that he gives his righteousness to us.

Righteousness is also to do with our relationship with God. It's about being right with him. That's why justification language is also courtroom language. If you are justified in court, then you are declared to be innocent of crime, you are right in the eyes of the law. This means that a justification such as self-defence is far better than an excuse such as provocation. The justified person, therefore is considered innocent of sin and Paul in Romans 5:1-2 says that we have peace with God.

5.2. The Great Exchange

How do we receive this righteousness? How are we justified? Well, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul says about God and Jesus that:

"²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Justification can be seen then as a great and mysterious exchange. It is as though a prince marries a debtor, he takes on all her debt and she receives all of his riches. In Romans 4:1-8,

²⁴ Galatians 2:16.

²⁵ so that NT Wright equates righteousness to covenant faithfulness. I think he is right to see the link but wrong to narrow it down to this alone.

²⁶ This is Piper's take in John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A response to NT Wright*.

Paul talks about righteousness being credited to us through faith. The word "credited" is a business term and it has the idea of something being transferred into our account.

So, we sometimes talk about "imputed righteousness", this is the idea that Jesus lived a completely obedient life and was obedient even to death. His obedience is seen in that he loved the father with his whole heart and loved his neighbours, even loving his enemies to the point of dying for them. Remember that those two commands, to love God and love neighbour sum up the law.

Romans 4 and 2 Corinthians 5 are saying that Christ's righteousness is credited or applied to us. It's like we get to share the same bank account or like him putting his clothes on to us. God looks at you and me and instead of seeing our sinful life, he sees Jesus and his righteousness. How is this possible? Well, it's possible because as Paul says in Romans 6 and Galatians 2 that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Like a husband and wife, we become one with him.

There used to be a saying that "justified means 'just as if I'd never sinned.'" The late Mike Ovey used to argue that it was better than that. "God treats me just as if I'd kept his law perfectly."

6 Circumcision, table fellowship and the Gospel

In Galatians 2, Paul sets out a specific example of how people can distort and even depart from the Gospel. We can safely assume that this is the particular issue that has reared its head again in Galatia.

Paul explains that when he went to see the church leaders in Jerusalem that they were in agreement on the Gospel and this fed through to their expectations for Gentile converts. Remember that at that time, whilst Peter had shared the Gospel with Cornelius, it was primarily the church in Antioch and Paul who were engaging in the Gentile mission.

Titus, a Gentile was with Paul. Now, Paul wasn't adverse to doing things for the Gospel and so on another occasion, Timothy was circumcised to enable him to serve the Gospel among Jews and Gentiles more effectively, However, no requirement was placed upon Titus to be circumcised. The implication then is that Titus as an uncircumcised, Gentile believer was welcomed in as part of the Church and offered full fellowship.

However, something happened at a later stage, some people, linked to James, although Paul doesn't say whether James himself was caught up in the controversy, seemed to have got to Peter and spooked him, even though he had been one of those who had affirmed Paul and welcomed Titus without condition. Peter was spending time with the church in Antioch and whatever it was that these others said, it got to him so that he withdrew from eating with the Gentile believers (Table fellowship).

Paul describes these visitors as "the circumcision party". In other words, unlike the Jerusalem apostles, when Paul visited, this group were insisting that Gentiles had to be circumcised. They were willing to welcome them into God's people but in order to do so, they were insisting that these new brothers had to receive circumcision.

The result was that until such time as the new Christians received circumcision, a boundary or barrier was created between them and the circumcised believers. They were being treated as at best second class in the kingdom. If you could not even have a meal with them, then that suggested you considered them unclean. I mean, Jesus had even had dinner with tax collectors, prostitutes and publicans, so to refuse to eat with someone, to give or to receive hospitality in their company was to indicate that they were beyond the pale.

At one level, therefore the issue of "who I have dinner with" might seem like a second order issue but Paul spots the danger and sees how it links back to the Gospel. You see, Peter's dining decisions supported a view that created extra hurdles for people to belong to God's people. What is more, by refusing to share fellowship with them, by indicating that they did not consider uncircumcised Gentiles as one with them, they were exercising a form of discipline, exclusion would in effect have also meant that such people were not able to engage in the gathering of the church which seems to have happened over a meal. If Peter would not eat with them, then he probably also would not have taught them because teaching would have happened in such contexts. If they could not eat with believers then how could they share the Lord's Supper.

If they were cut off from the body then this meant they were viewed and treated as though they were not truly saved, they did not belong to Christ. They were treated as under condemnation. That's why Paul sees this as serious. Paul has a low tolerance level for such actions and despite Peter's status in the church he confronts him. We can assume with resulting repentance.

We may not have the same particular live dilemma today. However, what we read in Galatians 2 shows how our attitudes in horizontal relationships can demonstrate unhealthy beliefs and even beliefs that indicate a misunderstanding of the Gospel. If we treat people from other ethnic minorities, women, the poor or those with disabilities and second class and not worthy of our time and fellowship then we may be betraying a false understanding of how Christ sees and treats them. This indicates too a form of pride that suggests we have forgotten that we too are saved by grace.

7 The Law

A key thing to think about when studying Galatians is what it tells us about The Law or Torah. It seems at times that Paul is quite negative towards the Old Testament Law. Some Christians therefore will emphasise that we are not under Law but under Grace and can even speak and live as though everything in the Old Testament is not just inapplicable but irrelevant to us.

Sometimes the term “antinomian” (against law). Is used to describe those who so emphasise grace as to down play or dismiss the place of law.

However, Jesus, speaking about The Torah said:

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

Indeed, significant parts of the New Testament including James’ letter and the letters to churches through John in Revelation seem to be negative against antinomianism.

How do we resolve the temptation between Jesus’ insistence that he came to fulfil the Law and Paul’s insistence that we are no longer under the Law and have in fact died to it.

Traditionally Christians have identified a “threefold division” in the Law. This is particularly associated with Reformed/Calvinist teaching and the first serious emphasis on it seems to come from Aquinas, the medieval scholar. However, suggestions of it can be found in thought of much earlier writers. This approach divides the Law into the following categories:

1. Moral
2. Ceremonial
3. Civil

The Moral Law concerns God’s standards for how we should live life in his creation. It’s specifically associated with the Ten Commandments. Civil Law is also called Judicial Law and those laws apply specifically to the people of Israel living in the land, it includes those laws that set out the penalties for crime and how disputes are to be settled. The Ceremonial Law describes those laws concerned with religious worship, festivals and the Temple. It includes the sacrificial laws.

Under the threefold division, Ceremonial and Civil Law no longer apply, the Civil Law because it was specific to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the ceremonial law because Jesus fulfilled this by becoming the true sacrifice. However, the moral law is to do with God’s standards for all time, for everyone such as not murdering, not committing adultery etc.

I think that this approach is helpful but it doesn’t completely account for everything. In particular, when you look at the Old Testament Law, it doesn’t always neatly fall into the categories. Moses doesn’t write about civil laws and them moral laws. It’s all mixed in together. One possible example of this is “The Sabbath”, is this ceremonial or moral? It is there in the Ten Commandments and so many reformers treated it as moral law, however, other Christians do not and point to Paul’s negative approach to those who feel the need to keep days and times.

Indeed, the people of Israel did not seem to work with our kind of categories. Torah itself is not just a neatly coded rule book but includes history, poetry and arguably also prophecy. Furthermore, Jesus doesn't see the Law as detachable, notice that he came "to fulfil The Law and The Prophets", he might well have said "I've not come to abolish God's Word."

So, another helpful way of understanding the Law might be to think of it in terms of concentric circles. Right at the middle of the Law is God's commission/mandate to "fill and subdue the earth." Then in the next immediate circle, we are told how to go about doing this by "loving God" and "loving our neighbour", we then learn how to do that by seeing the Ten Commandments which are explained in more detail by all the different rules and cases in Exodus – Deuteronomy. The historical accounts then describe what life looks like either in obedience to or rebellion against God and his Law. We can then also see how the wisdom literature encourages meditation and reflection on the Law and the Prophets challenge God's people to come back to the Law when they depart from it.

If we see a distinction introduced, it is between the Law as something external, written on stone and touching only on our outer life as seen by others versus the law as something written on our hearts that affects our thoughts, emotions, desires and will. In fact, the emphasis of Jesus and the New Testament is that the Law is now written on our hearts, we have the Holy Spirit and so, without being a heavier burden, the Law expects more of us.

So where does this leave us with Paul and Galatians? We need to consider one further aspect and that is how the Law is used. There seem to be three elements to this.

1. The Law acts as teacher/guide. It tells us what God is like and shows us how to live in his presence.
2. The Law as ruler. It is the Law itself that controls our life, dictates how we are to live and commands our obedience.
3. The Law as judge. It condemns us and requires that we pay the penalty for failing it.

This helps us to consider how Jesus fulfilled the Law. He lived in perfect obedience to it but at the same time bore the penalty that it demands. Christians in Christ therefore know that his obedience was on our behalf and he was condemned in our place. This means that the Law no longer has power to condemn.

If the Law has no power to condemn, then it no longer has any means to control and rule over us. We are free in relation to it. Its relationship to our lives changes. This means that it still acts as teacher, it shows us what God is like, it shows us what good life in his presence is like. We should still do those things. However, we are no longer condemned and so we do not obey out of fear, hoping that this will save us, that it will get us out of trouble. Instead, we obey as those who already know we are forgiven and free, not under the compulsion of the Law but of the Holy Spirit as we seek to listen to and please him.

8. Overview of chapters

Galatians 1 No other Gospel

The theme of this chapter is that there is one true Gospel and that this is the only way of salvation. The Gospel is all about how Jesus has delivered us from evil. This was God's will and plan, it is for his glory.²⁷

Paul is concerned that the Galatians are being led astray by opponents who have crept into the church, so he emphasises that the Gospel is not to be replaced or altered in anyway. The true Gospel is what has come direct from Jesus Christ. He is so keen to emphasise this and so he shows that he received the message directly from the Lord. It is not something he has borrowed and adapted from other Christians for his own purposes, not even from the apostles. Rather, he and the apostles received it independently and were able to verify it. This would be important to hearers of the day where there was an emphasis on having at least two witnesses.

Galatians 2 Invited to dinner?

In chapter 2:1-9, Paul continues to emphasise that he independently and directly received the Gospel but also that it was confirmed and affirmed by the other apostles. Importantly, there was agreement on the status of Gentile believers like Titus who were welcomed and offered fellowship without any additional obligations such as circumcision.

Paul then goes on to give a bit more detail about the nature of the problem in Galatia by reference to a controversy that happened when Paul visited Jerusalem. This controversy may well relate to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. It seems that some Jewish Christians were refusing to sit down to eat food with Gentile Christians. This would link into some insisting that Gentiles had to be circumcised to become part of God's people.

"Table Fellowship" is seen by Paul as at the heart of the Gospel. If we are all one in Christ Jesus, then we cannot be making distinctions about who we spend time with and share fellowship with, particularly here on the basis of race. It's a Gospel issue because if a Jew would not eat with someone, they were saying that they weren't part of God's people and so were unclean. They were therefore imposing additional steps on Gentiles before they were accepted as part of God's family.

The requirements were to do with keeping the Old Testament Law, probably particularly ceremonial aspects such as circumcision and observing festivals. Paul points out the foolishness of these things. No amount of obedience to the OT Law had been able to save him and the other Jews. So, why were they imposing standards that they could not keep on the Gentiles?

Paul emphasises that we are justified by faith because we have been united to Christ in his death. This means that we have died to our old self, even to the law and now live to Christ.

²⁷ Galatians 1:4.

It is important for us to be aware that things that may seem like secondary issues can become Gospel issues if we use them to put up barriers to others. The only stumbling block should be the Cross itself.

We might sum up, that if Jesus is happy to invite someone to eat with him then we should be too.

Galatians 3 Terms and Conditions

Paul reminds the Galatians of what they've seen, heard and received, They've seen the Gospel clearly presented, that Christ was crucified for them. They've received the Spirit. They know that their new life in the Spirit is founded entirely on Christ's crucifixion and has been received by faith. So how can they so easily get deceived? As in Romans 4:1-8, Paul goes back to Abraham and points out that he was "credited righteous" by faith, through believing.

This is important because Abraham was the ancestor of God's people and the initial Covenant was made with him. Jews identified their place in God's covenant people to their lineage from Abraham. The circumcisers were in effect arguing that to receive God's blessing, the Gentiles had to be connected into Abraham.

Paul goes on to insist that the issue is all about faith. There are two ways to live under curse or blessing. Righteousness brings blessing and is by faith but those who attempted to rely on the Law are under curse because if you break the law you come under its curse and no-one can fully keep it. Living by Faith means that we no longer live under the Law's terms and conditions. Christ has "redeemed us", he has bought us so that we are no longer under the Law's Ts and Cs because he has fulfilled them by becoming cursed for us. It is through him and his work on the Cross alone that we are connected to Abraham.

In fact, this point is true for all people, Jews and Gentiles. That's because it's important to go back and read the terms and conditions of the covenant with Abraham. :Paul argues that covenants are permanent, binding and not to be messed about with. The Jews and the Circumcision Party would argue that this binding covenant was with Abraham and his descendants. However, Paul says "not so", the promise was to Abraham and to his descendant (singular), in other words it was a promise of/to and a covenant with Christ. You cannot get into the covenant independent of Christ. That's why elsewhere we see that those who lived before Christ were justified because they had faith in the promise. They were looking forward to Jesus, just as we look back.

Note, that the Law as a later covenant to the one with Abraham cannot annul or amend the Covenant with Abraham. If the original deal was that God made a promise to Abraham concerning his descendant Jesus, then the Law did not provide an alternative way of relating to God.

Paul concludes with two images. First, that of being imprisoned. The Law acted like a prison, keeping everyone captive to the curse because we were under sins' rule. We needed to be liberated, set free. He also uses the image of a "guardian". In Greco-Roman culture it was possibly for a son to be put under the guardianship of a slave who acted as their tutor-

guardian until they came of age and then were in effect “adopted” back into their true family and fully recognised as sons and heirs.

Paul says that negatively, the Law acts like a prison and more positively like a guardian/tutor. Either, way, the day comes when we need to be freed from it. That’s what the Gospel does. It does this when we put our trust in Christ and belong to him, expressed in baptism.

The result of this is that in God’s people the old distinction markers between race gender and class are broken down so that we are one in him.

Galatians 4 Regression

Paul develops the theme of Law’s temporary responsibility by fleshing out the image of a guardian that looks after the young child. During childhood, it is impossible to tell the difference between children and slaves, both are restricted, both under compulsion, both unable to make decisions for themselves.

In other words, prior to the coming of the Gospel, even though the Jews had a covenant with God, it was impossible in some respects to distinguish them from the Gentiles. The Gentiles were slaves to their masters, false gods but the Jews were in practice, slaves to their master, The Law. The Gospel marks coming of age, legal adoption, freedom for Jew and Gentile alike.

So, the question for Jews and Gentiles alike is “why would you go back, why would you regress?” To go back from the Gospel is to return to your previous position. For Gentile believers, adding in circumcision was regression not progress because it meant a return to the condition of slavery.

Note that there is some emotional game play going on as well. The opponents of Paul are manipulating the Galatians pretending to particularly care for them, flattering them, giving them lots of attention. So Paul reminds them of his personal, intimate connection with them. This is to get their attention and warn them that the manipulation is intended to harm them, to shut them out from the Gospel.

To drive home his point, Paul uses an allegory with a twist. He tells the story of two sons, Hagar’s son and Sarah’s son. Sarah’s son Isaac is the free born son of promise, Hagar’s is the slave’s son. He then aligns the sons with two mountains. Isaac is linked to Jerusalem, possibly because the city was linked to the mountain where Abraham took Isaac to offer him and received him back as the promise was affirmed. The twist is that Paul aligns the slave-born son with Mount Sinai and the Law. Torah, instead of marking you out as part of God’s people and an heir of the promise can only exclude you from the promise and the inheritance.

Galatians 5 “Freedom”

The goal of the Gospel is “freedom.” Christ has set us free so that we are no longer slaves to sin, Satan and death. This is why the Galatians are urged not to seek circumcision as that would be to take on the slaves’ yoke again.

You cannot choose to opt into some parts of the Law and not others, you are either under its rule or not. Similarly, you cannot choose both Christ and the Law, one cuts you off from the other. So, to come under The Law is to fall away from grace. The Law functions like yeast, it will affect the whole of your life and the whole of the church.

Presumably, some people are claiming that Paul actually sides with the circumcision party, so he takes time to rebut this too. If he was willing to compromise on this, then he wouldn't be subject to severe persecution by the Jews.

True freedom though is not a freedom to sin, to go back to lawlessness. Rather, it is freedom for godliness and love. It is freedom to live in and by the Spirit. So, there is no law against goodness because these things are not condemned, there is no penalty for them. Hence, a believer who is truly free, in the Spirit will bear appropriate fruit.

Galatians 6 Bear one another's burdens

Of course, it might be asked "if there is no penalty from the Law to keep one another in check, then how do we encourage believers to live godly lives?" The answer is that the church should lovingly care for one another, encouraging accountability. Bearing burdens, is about keeping each other accountable, seeking to encourage one another on in holiness. We should challenge sin and seek to restore those who fall. Furthermore, God sees and is not deceived. Grace therefore is not an excuse for licence.

As Paul closes, he emphasises again, the authenticity of the message, reminding the Galatians of his own suffering that they had witnessed (linked to eyesight). He insists that it is the circumcision party who are trying to deceive them and says that they are doing this to avoid persecution. They are also seeking to empire build, to boast about their recruits. Paul will not do this, his only boast is in the Lord.

So, the letter concludes with what the Galatians most needed to hear, a reminder of God's grace.

9. A letter arrives

I remember when I was at University, I used to love looking forward to getting letters from my parents and my grandma. Similarly, when my mum and dad were first in China, mum was a phenomenal correspondent and each week she'd write to tell me about her adventures. The art of letter writing has died out somewhat, first we moved to emails but now it's much easier just to post news on Facebook for everyone to find.

Letters of course didn't always bring good news. I remember once that we received a long letter from someone who had visited us. It seemed that somehow, unintentionally we had managed to cause them great offence when they stayed. Whatever, the rights and wrongs of the situation we were able to write back and seek to put things right.

The Apostle Paul's main way of communicating with the churches he was connected to was through visits and letter writing. Each letter came in the hands of one of Paul's co-workers who no doubt would also have been able to spend time with the Christians following up on what Paul had raised. Often a letter contained a mixture of encouragement, correction, doctrinal teaching and pastoral advice.

A look at the text (read Galatians 1:1-5)

(v1) How Paul introduces himself is significant for the letter "apostle, not from men nor through man" this was a big emphasis in the first few chapters is on where Paul gets the Gospel from, that he isn't dependent on the instruction of others but has received it direct from Jesus. He is an apostle, claiming equal standing with the twelve as one commissioned to take the Gospel out as a founding member of the Church. Therefore, it is crucial for him to show, that like the other apostles, he is sharing what he has received directly from Jesus, rather than through other people.

When he says, "not from men nor through man", he begins with the general point that his Gospel isn't a human tradition (men plural) but he moves to the particular, he has not received his message from any specific man.²⁸ He has received it directly from Jesus. Note that this implies something about Jesus' identity too, that he is not any mere mortal. So, when talking about Jesus, Paul pairs him with God the Father, indicating their unity. Notice too that the Father's relationship to the Son specifically focuses on the resurrection. The Father is the one who raised Jesus from the dead. In Romans 1, Paul will indicate that whilst Christ is the eternal son, it was this powerful act where Christ "was declared to be the Son of God in power."²⁹

(v2) The greetings come both from Paul and from his co-workers. As Keener observes "though he was not commissioned by other mortals, many others stand with him."³⁰ Paul was not a lone wolf. The greeting is to the churches in Galatia. Note, the plural, this would have gone to a number of congregations in the region. Observe too, the terseness of the greeting. Paul would often say something about the character of the Christians, later in the introduction he might identify some positives about them, things to give thanks to God for. There is none of that here. He will get straight down to business.³¹ Here, he doesn't even add the descriptor "saints". Of course they were saints,

²⁸ Moo, *Galatians*, 68.

²⁹ Romans 1:4 (ESV).

³⁰ Keener, *Galatians*, 51.

³¹ Moo, *Galatians*, 70.

set apart but some commentators suspect that the very bare introduction reflects Paul's sense of urgency and even an element of rebuke.

(v3) "Grace and peace" form the classic opening to Paul's letters. A traditional Greco-Roman letter would begin with "greetings" and the word "grace" sounds very similar but obviously imports specific Christian/Gospel content into the letter and is of particular relevance to what is coming up in Paul's letter. Paul combines this with the Jewish greeting wishing peace and wholeness.

(v4-5) Jesus is the one who died in our place, he gave himself in order to deliver us from sins and "from this evil age". Salvation reflects both our own culpability, we are sinners, we have rebelled against God and our weakness, that we are enslaved, imprisoned by Satan and this world as it stands in opposition to God. Jesus as the one who has saved us is worthy of worship and glory.

Digging Deeper

We are already learning something about what is going to come up in the rest of the letter here in the greetings. One thing that Paul is keen to do, right from the off is to emphasise the authenticity and authority of his message. There are particular distinctive elements here, even in comparison to his other letters.

It's important to remember that his purpose for doing this is not to demonstrate his leadership credentials for the purpose of personal leadership authority but because his personal authority is attached to the authenticity, uniqueness and authority of the Gospel. As a foundational, apostle, when Paul emphasises that his message is no human derivation but comes from God, he is reminding us that The Gospel, that Scripture comes with that authority. Elsewhere he will declare that all of the Bible is "God breathed" and he intentionally includes his own writing in this.

A look at ourselves

The question then for us is not about how we will respond to particular preachers, pastors and leaders in our churches. Rather, it is about how we will respond to the authority of God's Word. Do we treat it as inspired by the Holy Spirit or do we treat it as human opinion and advice. Are we ready to let God's Word disagree with us, to challenge and correct us?

10. Transfer?

As I write, the football season has just finished and it's now the transfer period. Lots of football players will be on the look out for a better offer. Some will be willing to abandon a club that they've played for over many seasons, that has looked after them well and where they've enjoyed the devotion of the fans in order to turn out for their team's deadliest rivals. Why? Well it may be in the hope of winning trophies, getting an international call up or simply a better pay deal.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 1:6-10)

Paul is amazed, shocked disturbed at how quickly the Galatian believers have been led astray. I guess that the reference to "the one who called you" could suggest personal rejection of Paul himself but in fact, it is God the Father who has called them to follow Christ and into his family. This means that it is the Gospel itself they are being transferred from to a different Gospel (V6).

There isn't really a different Gospel because there isn't anything else that is truly good news. Instead, what happens is that people distort/corrupt the good news so that its joyful goodness is lost. Notice that Paul, sees the agitators actions in distorting the Gospel as intentional (V7).

No-one regardless of status, not even apostles nor angels, is authorised to change the Gospel because the good news message belongs to Jesus himself. Paul uses strong words for those who attempt to distort the Gospel, they are to be "anathematised" or declared cursed. In other words, they should be treated as outside of God's people, they are to be disciplined and excommunicated from the church. This is because what they do is harmful. This is repeated for emphasis (V8-9).

Paul sets his own approach up in contrast with the agitators. Who is he trying to please, God or people? If the latter, then he no longer serves Christ. The point is that Paul willingly identifies with Jesus, the one considered cursed and afflicted by people, in contrast to those who seek honour and strength from a human perspective but are in fact under the curse of judgement (V10).

Digging Deeper

There seems to be a tendency in some contemporary approaches to Galatians to assume that the agitators in Galatia were well intentioned but misguided. So, it has been suggested that their position arose out of a desire to encourage holiness, unity and assurance. From this perspective, the problem was not with the suggestion that Gentiles should be circumcised, this would not have been a problem for those who truly understood the nature of the sign. However, Galatian believers misunderstood the sign and so it became a burden and a distraction to them.

Paul's tone, the urgent switch to rebuke, the expressed shock and his explicit denunciation of those involved are not hyperbolic here. It is clear that he sees the intent of at least the core group of agitators as malign. They were not merely naively getting things wrong from good motives. Their motives were wrong and hence they were under a curse.

It is important that we treat false teaching seriously. It is not just an intellectual failing but a moral one too. Of course, it is true that people can be in error, mislead or misunderstanding Scripture out of good motives. However, we need to be alert and on the watch for deliberate false teachers who sadly are wilfully seeking to lead people astray for personal gain. Adding rules to the grace of the Gospel enables false teachers to impose a guilt burden on others and so create dependency cultures.

Sadly, too often we see false teachers given the benefit of the doubt and actively promoted. They are given airtime in interviews and enabled to write articles, speak at conferences and publish books. This should not be so.

A Look at ourselves

The crucial question for you and me is whether or not we might be tempted to look around for “the better deal.” False teaching and alternative Gospels are often attractive because they seem to offer ways of guaranteeing assurance and blessing. Yet, if the promise is not from and not about Christ and Christ alone then it will prove empty and futile.

11. Calling

One of the things about the Transfer window is that you get all kinds of rumours. For example, this year, there are a few rumours doing the rounds concerning Billy Sharp, Sheffield United's veteran and prolific striker. He has been linked with my home team, Bradford City. The only thing is that he gets linked with us every year and so the rumour is as believable as the idea that Lionel Messi might sign for us, after all, he too is available on a free transfer. How do you know whether or not to believe the rumours? Can you be sure that the people making the claims really are in the know, that they are credible?

What point was there for the Galatian Christians in reading Paul's letter. Why should they listen to his voice over and above the voices of the agitators, especially as those agitators seemed to be claiming to come with the authority of leading pillars in the church such as James and Peter? Was he really to be trusted?

In this section, Paul begins to answer the question and it will help us to see the relevance of Paul's message to us today. Why should we read his letters? Why should we pay attention to him?

A look at the text (Galatians 1:11-24)

Paul doesn't preach a message that he has picked up and adapted from others. It's not a human message but the message which he has specifically received from Jesus (v11-12). To prove the point, Paul demonstrates how unlikely his conversion to Christianity was. There are two aspects to this, negatively, his strong antagonism to Christianity, he saw the church as dangerous and so tried to destroy it by persecuting Christians. Positively, as in Philippians, Paul presents himself as the archetypal devout Jew, standing out in his generation. Paul is qualified to speak about the benefits and failings of Torah because he was a Torah keeper. He was "zealous ... for the traditions of my fathers". This likely links to what Jesus refers to as "the tradition of the elders" or the oral law developed through Rabbinic teaching and debate (v13-14).³²

Something happened to change this. Paul had an encounter with God. This wasn't a chance encounter. God had chosen and set Paul apart even before birth. This is what we sometimes refer to as "election" and links to the doctrine of predestination (v15).

God, the Father called Paul and revealed Jesus to him. Paul is no doubt referring back to his vision on the road to Damascus. At that stage, Paul doesn't see anyone else, his only knowledge of the Gospel is through this direct encounter with Jesus (v16). He doesn't even go back to Jerusalem at this stage but instead stays in the region close to Damascus (v17).

It's three years later before Paul goes up to Jerusalem. There he meets with Cephas, another name for Peter and spends time with him (v18). He doesn't meet with the other apostles but he does see James, the brother of Jesus. It is possible to infer from this passage either that James is classified as one of the apostles, an exception to the rule or that Paul does not classify him as an apostle (v19-20). He goes, presumably with Peter and James' blessing to begin serving the Gospel back in Syria (v21). At this stage, he has not met and got to know the other believers in Judea in person (v22). However, his reputation is growing and it is a positive one (v23). The believers hear that he is no longer persecuting but is instead preaching. The result is that they praise God (v24).

Digging Deeper

³² See Moo, *Galatians*, 102.

By insisting that he received the good news directly from Jesus and wasn't dependent upon other human beings, Paul places himself directly alongside the apostles. Their claim to apostleship was based on being eyewitnesses of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. Whilst Paul, to the best of our knowledge did not meet Jesus in person, he does encounter him directly after the resurrection. He is now an eyewitness. This also places Paul in the company of the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs as we might see his Damascus Road vision as a form of theophany.

A look at ourselves

Remember that whilst preachers and pastors may at times feel the need to emphasise their own credentials when facing opposition, this is not Paul's purpose here. It is not to promote himself but to encourage renewed confidence in the Gospel itself. By claiming apostolic authority, he is also insisting that his words are scripture.

The application for us is not to see Paul's defence as an example for us but to also be encouraged by his defence, our confidence in the Gospel and Scripture should be renewed. This is because when we read the New Testament Gospels and letters we are reading the first hand accounts of those who were close to Jesus, who he commissioned to proclaim his Gospel and who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring God's Word directly to us. This means that to read or listen to Scripture is to enter into a conversation ourselves. We should expect God to speak to us

12. What about the small print?

I frequently receive offers that look too good to be true and the usually are. I'm told that if I sign up to this or that offer then it will be totally free. Of course at some point the free trial runs out and the hope of the organisation making the offer is that by then I'll be sucked in and find myself paying the monthly subscription. Of course, the small print which I never read will mean that I'm then locked in for a few years.

Is Christianity like that? Do we get in for free but then find that there are additional expectations and burdens placed upon us if we want to stay in or to grow closer to God?

A look at the text (Read Galatians 2:1-10)

Fourteen years after his first meeting with Peter and James, Paul returns to Jerusalem. This was possibly at the time of the Jerusalem council. He is accompanied by Barnabas and Titus (v1). He goes because of a revelation he has had and there, he goes through with them the Gospel that he has been preaching to the Gentiles. This is a private meeting with the prominent leaders and Paul says that he does this to ensure that he hasn't been acting in vain. In other words, to confirm again that he is preaching the true Gospel (v2).

Titus was a Gentile and if circumcision was crucial, you would expect the Jerusalem leaders to insist on it for him but they don't. There were some of the agitators there who did seem to be pushing for this. Paul calls them "false brothers" and says that they were "smuggled in" or had managed to infiltrate the meetings. He accuses them of being spies, seeking to discover and bring to an end the freedom that they had in the Gospel. However, Paul, Barnabas and Titus refuse to submit to their demands. Nor do the Jerusalem leaders demand this of them. They are happy with Paul's account of the Gospel and have nothing to add. Paul sees this as a crucial victory on behalf of the Gentile believers. If he had given in then something of the good news would have been lost to them (v3-6). Note, that whilst these are the prominent/recognised leaders, Paul places little stock on their status/identity. Just as he will on his own. He doesn't see a place for human hierarchies or celebrity cultures in the church (v6).

The Jerusalem leaders, particularly Peter, James and John observe that Paul has been called by God in the same way that Peter was, Peter to Jews and Paul to Gentiles with the same good news (v7-8). They offer "the right hand of fellowship", symbolising Gospel partnership and encourage Paul's team to continue with their mission (v9). The only thing they insist on is that Paul and his team should seek to care for the poor, this is something they were more than happy to do (v10).

Digging Deeper

Paul is beginning to set out his stall here. The Jerusalem leaders and the apostles represented by James and Peter had very clearly endorsed his ministry and message. They had not sought to change it or add to it. When there had been an attempt to add an additional burden onto one of his co-workers, Titus, this had been recognised for what it was, an attack by infiltrators, intent on undoing the freedom work of the Gospel. These infiltrators were "false brothers", they weren't really part of the church, they were not saved. So Paul, with the clear blessing of the apostles had resisted their demands.

If that was the case when Paul visited Jerusalem, then it was unlikely that the apostles were going to go back on their position now. If no additional burdens had been imposed on Paul and his team, then the Galatian Gentile believers could be confident that no additional burdens would be imposed on them either.

A look at ourselves

This should help us to respond to any demands or extra expectations that are placed on us. The Gospel does not work like those sneaky “special offers”. We have not been sucked in with the offer of something free, only to discover that we are tied in to all the additional long term fees and small print. The Gospel genuinely is about the free gift of eternal life.

Are there any ways in which you have been encouraged to think that there is something additional for you to pay back or do in return for your relationship with God? Be very clear that such expectations are not from Jesus and can be safely ignored.

13. Face to face

Would you draw a connection between who you had round for dinner and whether or not you really believed the Gospel? Paul did.

A look at the text: Read Galatians 2:11-14

When Paul had visited Jerusalem, he had found himself in agreement with Peter but at a later date, Peter had reason to visit the Antioch church and this time things are not as amicable. Paul says that he opposed Peter, face to face. Notice that he doesn't seek to compromise with or appease Peter, he doesn't grumble behind his back either. He is straight with him. This is because Peter "stood condemned." Peter was in the wrong but the language seems even stronger than that, he is judged, he is found to be acting unrighteously in God's eyes, though notice that later there is the suggestion that Peter in effect condemned himself (v11).

The cause of the dispute was that when Peter first arrived in Antioch, he had happily eaten with both Jewish (circumcised) and Gentile (uncircumcised) believers alike. Then more people had come from the Jerusalem church. We know two key things about them. They were linked to James, though James may not have held the same view himself and they were from the circumcised. This seems to have been a party within the church that was encouraging Gentile believers to receive circumcision. Peter was afraid of them and so withdrew from fellowship with others (v12). Other Jewish believers, including Barnabas got drawn into the same behaviour which Paul considers hypocritical (v13).

Paul will not accept this, he considers it hypocrisy. Peter and other Jewish believers had welcomed the freedom that the Gospel brought including freedom from certain laws such as the kosher rules. Peter was in effect choosing a Gentile/uncircumcised lifestyle whilst denying this possibility to Gentile believers. He was imposing a level of law and restriction on them which he had discarded for himself (v14).

Digging Deeper

Paul sees Peter's actions as significant and uses the language of condemnation to make this clear. The Galatians may have been tempted to see issues such as circumcision and table fellowship as "second order" issues but Paul establishes a direct link between who you will share fellowship with and the Gospel, just as he links attitude to secondary external rituals to the Gospel.

This is because refusing to sit and eat food with someone for a Jew meant to treat them as unclean. In effect, Peter was treating uncircumcised believers as outside of God's covenant people, as unbelievers. This amounted to a form of unsanctioned church discipline. So it was the actions of Peter and the Judaizers that brought these two issues of circumcision and table fellowship into the sphere of first order Gospel issues. They became Gospel issues because by refusing to accept people who weren't circumcised, by treating them as outsiders, they were in effect saying that the Gospel had been ineffective, that those Gentiles were not yet truly saved.

A look at ourselves

The challenge for us then is that our ethics, how we choose to live our lives tell us something about our doctrine, what we believe. In other words, what you believe affects how you live and how you live affects what you believe.

We are not saved by our good works but we are saved for good works. This means that how we live our lives, our love and concern for others, our care for those in need, our ability to welcome, our

readiness to forgive demonstrate whether or not we have grasped the Gospel. Indeed, the heart attitude that these actions show is more important than the external show of religious ritual.

14. No U-Turns

In the musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, towards the end, the Phantom makes his move to bring Christine fully under his power. He commits murders and then she removes his mask on stage exposing him. He sings “Past the point of no return” arguing that there is now no going back, they are fully committed to the destiny he sees for them.

Is it possible to turn back? Margaret Thatcher once said “U-Turn if you want to ...the Lady’s not for turning.” She was insisting that with her political agenda, she was fully committed, past the point of no return.

Do you ever get cold feet as a Christian, wondering if there is a way back from the life you’ve committed to?

A look at the text (Read Galatians 2:15-21)

Central to Paul’s argument was that and Peter both had inside knowledge and experience as Jewish believers themselves. They had grown up with the understanding that Jews were righteous and Gentiles were classified as “sinners” because they were outside of the Law (v15).³³ They’d learnt through experience that you cannot be “justified”, or made right with God by doing the good works that the Law required. Rather justification comes by believing in Jesus. That’s why they themselves had put their trust in Christ. Paul is emphatic that no-one can be made right with God by keeping the Law (v16).

The starting assumption of the Jews, as seen in verse 16 was that Gentiles were sinners and Jews were righteous. However, Peter and Paul, as Jews had discovered that they too were sinners, their Jewish Torah observance did not justify them. That was the logical conclusion of realising that they needed faith in Jesus. Did that mean that Jesus was in some way an “agent of sin”? Not only that but in their new life, they had already begun to live as though they were not under obligation to the law, such as by eating non kosher food and already mixing with Gentiles. They were living like Gentiles as so, in the old Jewish category of sinners.³⁴ It seems to have been frequently argued by those seeing to impose law observance onto Gentiles that if works were not effective and not required then people would live as they pleased. Was Paul by preaching Christ encouraging licentious hedonism? Paul insists “by no means” or “surely not” (v17). You see, Paul had insisted that justification, being right with God was by faith. If he insisted that, after all, you do need to be circumcised and keep the purity rules, this would in effect mean he was rebuilding the structure of Torah service that he had so systematically dismantled by preaching the Gospel and this would mean that since he (and Peter) had failed to consistently observe those rules, then they too were sinners because their obedience to the Law was patchy. They would be condemned again (v18).²

Paul insists that the Law has played its part, he hasn’t disregarded it. It was in a sense “through the law” that he came to salvation but not in the way normally assumed. Rather “through the law, he died to the law.” In other words, the Law brought the just condemnation of death. So Paul considered his old sinful self to have been crucified with Christ. His sinful nature was condemned on

³³ Keener argues that this is a summary of Paul’s speech to Peter. Keener, *Galatians*, 167.

³⁴ See Keener, *Galatians* 168. See also Moo, *Galatians*, 14-165. Commentators including Moo seem to see a conflict here between interpretations. Is Paul talking about pursuing justification through faith as his and Peter’s experience at conversion or post conversion. Moo and Keener settle for the latter. My view is that you cannot really separate these out.

the Cross. He died to his old ways, in order to experience resurrection power and live to God. His argument is similar here to what we find in Romans 6 (v19-20).

Paul's greater concern was not that he might nullify the law but that he might nullify God's grace and so he is careful not to do this. The most crucial matter for believers in Jesus was not that they might make the law seem pointless but rather that they might make Christ's death pointless and so make a mockery of the Gospel. Paul chooses to emphasise grace (v21).

Digging a Little Deeper

Paul's point can be summed up as in effect, that it was no good for Jewish believers like him and Paul to go back on the implications of the Gospel. They could not simply return to their old beliefs and practices as though nothing had happened. They had been living like the Gentiles, acting as though the Law had no obligation on them. The result was that they now had become unclean. They belonged with the Gentile sinners, they had left the Mosaic Covenant behind. If they really were coming to the conclusion that you had to fully keep the Law in order to be free from condemnation, then they were not free. They were condemned by the Law. How then could they put things right for themselves. They were forcibly reminded that the only way that they could be right with God was through experiencing forgiveness through the atoning death of Jesus. They were more dependant upon grace than ever before.

A look at ourselves

Our priority should be to live consistent lives, lives that are consistent with our belief in God's grace. Are there ways in which we can become inconsistent? If I start to believe that in any way that my relationship to God is dependent upon anything in me, or if I give that message to others Then I am being inconsistent, I am showing that I do not live under grace.

This is why it is important that grace saturates the culture of our churches. Sometimes, we can act as though people receive the good news and become Christians by grace but then heap up burdens and expectations on them. We lose grace in our culture. Sometimes, we allow what others have done to affect how we relate to them, they experience a decline in our love and care towards them. Yet if God loves them how can I choose not to or to love them less? These actions suggest that I'm attempting a U-Turn away from Grace.

There is no way back from grace to law. We shouldn't make U-Turns.

15. Saving Titus

One of the striking things in Galatians 2 is the pivotal role that Titus plays in the drama. Titus is part of Paul's team and he goes to Jerusalem with him. Paul tells us that Titus is not compelled to be circumcised. We can skim read it as an incidental extra but actually, the point is central to the argument and the event. Read the account again more closely and it seems that actually Titus' fate is central to the debate in Jerusalem.

The infiltration of the false brothers and Paul's refusal to yield is linked to Titus not being forced to be circumcised. It seems less that they don't even bother about him and more that there was serious consideration. It feels even a bit as though poor Titus is standing there whilst people are debating over whether or not he should be put through a painful, humiliating bit of surgery. Paul stands firm and the other apostles agree with him.

Titus did not need to be circumcised because he was already saved, already part of God's people. Jesus was pierced by the nails on the cross and so Titus did not have to go through the piercing of the circumciser's knife. Jesus was exposed to shame and suffering so that Titus did not have to be exposed to shame and a painful ritual. Jesus was treated as the outsider, the sinner so that Titus was no longer to be treated as the outsider, the sinner.

Paul saw this issue of circumcision as hugely significant. The requirement for it separated people out from God's people. Peter's refusal to eat with uncircumcised Gentiles meant that he treated them as unclean, as sinners, as outside of God's covenant.

Circumcision also re-introduced hierarchy and division into the community of God's people. At a Life Group discussion, one person commented "I wonder what Peter's attitude would have been to eating with women. After all, they couldn't be circumcised." Whilst women didn't have to be circumcised to be included within the covenant, I don't think the observation was off mark. Remember how Martha criticised her sister Mary "You don't belong out here with Jesus and the men, you should be helping me serving." Remember Jesus' response "She has chosen what is best." Mary did belong at the meal, listening to Jesus.

Later in Galatians, Paul makes it clear that the marks of hierarchy have been removed. If circumcision separated out Jew from Gentile, male from female, Paul insists that those divisions do not exist in God's family. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

Titus' salvation meant he was free from sin and death, free from the obligations of the Law and free from hierarchies and prejudice.

16. Exclusion

It is unlikely that we are going to find ourselves in exactly the same boat as the Galatian church. The issue of circumcision is unlikely to come up in our churches. So, what does the application of Galatians 2 have to do with us? I asked the question at our Life Group one evening and I thought it would be helpful to share some of the responses that came back.

First, there's the issue of racism. I've talked about this already earlier. If we divide churches on racial lines or if we act in a way that excludes, puts up barriers and hinders people because of their ethnic background then we may well be excluding people from the benefits of the Gospel. We can also make judgements about people and their giftedness based on cultural misunderstandings.

Second, there's the issue of marriage and fertility. Sometimes and even unintentionally, we can give the impression that a mark of blessing is marriage and a further mark is having children. If you don't fit the "married with 2.4 children" then you may well not fit into the life of the church. You may well hear constant suggestions in conversations, talks, social media commentary and books that imply that something is lacking. This may well be true not just of those who have always been single but those who are single through divorce and a similar message may be communicated to the lady who has come to faith in Christ but her husband has not.

Third, we can also create barriers on class lines. I would encourage the brilliant book "Invisible Divides" by Nathalie Williams and Paul Brown on this. This is an important point because the issue won't be that we preach a different Gospel with our words but we can create a church culture which is fearsome and impenetrable if we belong to the wrong class. It's worth observing that whilst generally, the problem is that our churches exclude working class people, those of us seeking to encourage churches in working class contexts should be careful not to create the reverse image where middle class people would be excluded or looked down on.

Fourth, sometimes we send out the message that faith is based on how much you know, your ability to read and your capacity to follow academic and intellectual arguments. Remember that academic learning is not an indicator of intelligence and even more so is not an indicator of faith.

Fifth, we can make faith itself a barrier if we turn it into a substance we can measure. "Do you have enough faith." We see this most obviously when we slip into prosperity thinking around health. Even the offer to pray for someone to be healed if handled badly can be experienced as a suggestion that they are ill because they do not have enough faith and so need intervention. Of course, this should not put us off offering to pray but we need to think about how and why we offer. The offer comes best out of relationship and conversation. Indeed, Scripture puts the emphasis on the ill person requesting prayer for healing.

One thing that sums up a lot (not necessarily all) of the kinds of things that come up in such a list is that it's to do with how we respond to, relate to, welcome, include and encourage those who for what ever reason, rightly or wrongly we perceive to not have it all together. When we do this, we forget that the Gospel is all about the God who loves those who don't have it all together, including ourselves, draws us into his family and puts us back together.

17. Bewitched

Do you enjoy magic tricks? Are you left amazed by how the magician manages to get the right card every time, pull the rabbit from a hat or make his assistant disappear. Of course, no one really thinks that it's real magic. We know that the magician relies on slights of hand and diversion tactics to bewitch us. Whilst we are listening carefully to them and looking where we want them to, other things are happening that we miss.

How had a church that Paul had been involved in planting, that had got off to such a good start managed to go so wrong so quickly. If we find that a perplexing question, so too did Paul. The answer seems to be that they have been bewitched, entranced like people taken in by the conjuror's slight

A look at the text (Read Galatians 3:1-6)

Paul doesn't mince his words. The Galatians are being taken as fools, they've been enchanted, bewitched, conned. How can they go back on such a clear and vivid revelation? The preaching of the good news is portrayed here as a visual presentation of the crucifixion in order to emphasise its clarity and its effect on them (v1).

Paul now asks them a series of questions, turning his focus onto the work of the Spirit. How did they receive the Holy Spirit, by works or by faith (v2)? If it was the Holy Spirit that brought them into this new life, would they complete it by relying on their own human nature and natural abilities (v3)?³⁵ What was the purpose of them experiencing suffering, or was it pointless (v4)? On what basis do they know the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and the church now, by works or by faith? The last question asking them to consider the basis on which the Father supplies the Holy Spirit which parallels the question of justification in Romans 4, is it a gift or a wage (v5)?

To complete the link back to justification and the parallel to Romans 4, Paul reminds them that the way in which they received and have gone on in the Spirit is exactly the same way in which Abraham, the Old Testament patriarch and ancestor of God's people was justified, declared right with God. Abraham believed in God and this was reckoned or credited to him as righteousness (v6).

Digging Deeper

The rhetorical point of Paul's argument is that how they entered the Christian life is how they have gone on in it. To make the point, Paul offers too contrasts that should be familiar to anyone who has also read Romans. He contrasts faith with works and the Spirit with The Flesh or Human Nature. In Paul's mind, faith and justification are connected to the Holy Spirit whilst "the works of the Law" are linked to flesh, or human nature. That is because, first of all, if they were attempting to please God by what they did, by their own abilities then that was a return to self-reliance, to personal autonomy from God. Secondly, because, as he argues in Romans 8, whilst the Law is not in itself bad, it is weakened and disempowered by human sinful nature.

The point is this, the whole of their walk with God so far has been about faith. They have enjoyed the privileges of that work, especially the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit both in regeneration and sanctification. The agitators are interrupting that walk with a completely novel idea that springs up out of nowhere. Their own testimony, their own experience of the Gospel and of the Holy Spirit should warn them off of the agitators false offering.

³⁵ i.e. Spirit v Flesh -an image we find in Romans 8.

A Look at ourselves

One of the warning red lights for false teaching is that it will offer you something that appears novel, completely new. The offer will not only seem too good to be true, it will go against all the evidence you know from God's Word and from your experience of the Holy Spirit's work in your life.

All too often, the primary aim of false teaching is to take you away from complete dependence on Christ through faith and enjoyment of his grace in order to make you dependent upon others. There will be things you are expected to know, do and say in very specific ways and places, subject to the approval of very specific people.

We do not need to be foolish and bewitched. Keep your eyes open and remember God's goodness and grace to you.

18. Father Abraham had many sons

In Galatians 3:6, Paul has taken us back to the example of Abraham, the ancestor of God's people, to whom, through whom and in whom God's covenant with his people was made. He has demonstrated, as he will again when he writes to the Christians in Rome that Abraham was justified by faith. In other words, his covenant relationship with God, being right with God was a gift of grace that Abraham received by trusting God, believing in him and his promises. It wasn't a status that Abraham kept by his good deeds.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 3:7-10)

If the covenant which created God's people as the promised descendants of Abraham was through faith, then this meant that those designated as sons and heirs of Abraham were sons by faith. They could not earn or force their way into the inheritance (v7).

This had important implications according to Paul, it meant that Scripture itself, or God's Word, his revelation to Abraham was able to see forward into the future and know that Gentiles would be justified, they would be right with God. This was the crucial implication of faith. Becoming a son, an heir of the covenant promise was a matter of faith, not of human effort and therefore not restricted to the ethnic descendants of Abraham through Isaac. So, God's word to Abraham was a promise that blessing would go to all nations in and through him. Paul says that this promise was in effect a Old Testament preaching of the Gospel, before Jesus came (v8).

The consequence of this is that anyone who has faith in God through Jesus is "blessed." In other words, they are full and legitimate recipients of the blessings of the covenant.

Digging a little deeper

To understand Paul's argument here, we need to go back to Genesis 12:1-3 where God first makes a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is a solemn and permanent agreement. This covenant amounted to God's promise of blessing (happiness, well-being, favour) on Abraham. Specifically, he would give him a land to live in where he would be under God's rule, provision and protection. Further, that he would give him descendants, he would make him into a people, a nation. Further, God promises that Abraham's descendants will be blessed and be a blessing. Finally, he says that all nations will be blessed in Abraham.

We further need to remember that blessing is contrasted with curse in the Old Testament. You are either within the provisions of the covenant and under God's blessing which means life or you are outside of the covenant, you are a stranger who does not belong to God's people and you are under curse which means death. There are two options, we can either be under curse and death or blessing and life. The only way to be under blessing and life is to be within the covenant.

This covenant with Abraham was never rescinded. To some extent, Paul would say that there was always one covenant and it was always about Jesus, he was the promised descendant in whom all nations would be blessed (but that is still to come). The important thing at this stage is that the only way to be included in the blessing is therefore through faith in Jesus. This means that the Gospel is both exclusive, only in and through Jesus and inclusive, it is not limited by race gender or class.

A look at ourselves

The first thing we should do, as we read Galatians 3 is rejoice and give thanks to God, that we who were strangers, excluded from God's promises have been brought near, forgiven and united into his

people. This is completely underserved. Secondly, this good news that we are compelled to share with others.

Thirdly, the force of Paul' argument throughout is that this truth should affect our attitudes to others. We will want those who are legitimate heirs of God's blessings to receive the blessing and that blessing is experienced now as part of God's family, the church. We should not be doing anything which puts up barriers to those who are true heirs of grace from receiving and enjoying it.

19. Cursed

When the people of Israel came out of Egypt, God gave them The Law in the wilderness at Sinai. Then, before they were about to go into Canaan, Moses in effect set before them a choice between curse and blessings. This choice was to be enacted in a covenant ceremony. The people were to pass through between two mountains with the Law symbolised on one side. From each side, they were to hear blessings and curses pronounced. The blessings were for obedience to the Law and the curses for disobedience. This image forms the backdrop to Paul's teaching in the next few verses of Galatians 3.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 3:10-14)

Paul refers not just to those who obey the Law but to those who are "out of the Law", the idea is that they in some way belong to the Law, trust in it and put themselves under its terms and conditions.³⁶ If you attempt to rely on your good works, then you are under the curse of judgement rather than the blessing of God's presence. This is because you have subjected yourself to an unattainable standard. The Law requires full obedience to all of its commands and failure to keep them leads to curse (v10). Furthermore, the Scriptures make the same point from the other perspective. Not only do they teach that you cannot be righteous by keeping the Law but they also insist that it is by faith that the righteous live.³⁷ Paul insists that the Law is not to do with faith, it's about doing instead of believing (v11).

Paul sets up Habakkuk 2:4 in opposition to Leviticus 18:5. If the first says that the righteous live by faith, the second says that God's people will live if they keep his commands. Paul understands this to mean that in order to live, you must keep all of the rules without exception, the Law in its totality. This means that all of us were under the curse of God's judgement. We have all broken God's Law(v12). That's why Jesus came. By dying on the Cross, he broke the power of the curse. He did this by becoming cursed for us. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 to show that by dying on a tree (the cross), Jesus, literally became cursed (v13). Jesus by taking the curse on himself enables us to exchange that curse for blessing. He fulfils the promise to Abraham that in his offspring, all peoples will be blessed. We receive God's favour because we are in Christ (v14).

Digging Deeper

Is Paul suggesting that Habakkuk and Leviticus contradict each other with Law and Faith becoming competing alternatives within the Old Testament? One seems to suggest that life comes by faith and the other that it comes by law keeping. It is possible that Paul saw law obedience as a legitimate route to life for Jews who were part of the Mosaic Covenant. However, it is more likely here that he is emphasising the impossibility of meeting the Law's demands. The Law had to be kept in its entirety. You could not negotiate on which regulations to keep. This reflects that whilst the Torah will talk about commandments (plural), there's also a strong emphasis in Deuteronomy on the Law as one single commandment, summed up as "Love God whole heartedly." To fail to keep specific rules indicated a falling short of that whole hearted love.

We all fall short then. So, God stepped into history in the person of Jesus. He was crucified on the Cross and so, Paul says that in that way he became cursed because that's the fate of anyone who dies, hanging from a tree/stake/pole (the word can refer to a tree or part of a tree erected in this way). This is because criminals were either executed by hanging or impalement, or their bodies were

³⁶ C.f. Moo, *Galatians*, 202 -203.

³⁷ Habakkuk 2:4.

displayed in this way post execution. Jesus dies the criminal's death and so shares their judgement and shame.

These verses sum up the great exchange of the Gospel. Jesus takes our place, he is punished, dies, bears the curse of death and exile on our behalf (penal substitution). In exchange we receive the blessing of eternal life that he deserves as the truly righteous one. His faithful obedience is imputed to us.

A look at ourselves

One of the things that reading these verses should do is cause us to pause and be thankful. They bring home to us exactly what Jesus did for us. Often, we focus on the graphic physical suffering of the Cross in our Gospel presentations but Scripture pays greater attention to the spiritual implications. Get this, the blessed, beloved son becomes shamed and bears wrath. He does that for me and you.

20. Binding

Crucial to Paul's argument in Galatians is that God does not change his promises or go back on his word. The idea that Gentiles can be admitted to the covenant is not a novel one or plan B but has always been God's purpose.

A look at the text (read Galatians 3:15-18)

Covenants are binding and permanent. This isn't just something we can say about God's covenant. It's true of human covenants too. The most immediate example would of course be the marriage covenant which contains the words "to death do us part." Technically, Roman and Greek covenants such as wills could be revoked by a new will or amended. However, Paul is probably doing one of three things here (or a mixture).³⁸ Either he is asking his hearers to think in terms of common every day understanding rather than exact legal technicalities, or he is pointing to how an agreement back by oath meant that if you went back on your word, curses would result. The third possibility is that he is thinking about how a will is finally ratified not by the signatories but by the maker's death. In fact, covenants like the one with Abraham were ratified by the symbolic death of the maker in the sacrifices and the oaths (v15).³⁹

So, if the covenant with Abraham is permanent and binding, then it still stands. Who then are the parties to it. God is obviously one of them. The other side was "Abraham's seed" or offspring. Paul then argues that Genesis describes offspring using the singular noun "seed" rather than "seeds".⁴⁰ Of course, this would be grammatically normal. We think of offspring as a collective unity. However, Paul suggests that in that singular word is a clue that something bigger is going on.⁴¹ The covenant is with Abraham and his descendant, one specific person. That person is Jesus. The promises made to Abraham were made to Christ as well (v16).

The covenant with Abraham and Christ was signed off and sealed by God. It was ratified as binding and could not be voided. Then in Exodus, 430 years later, God gives the Law to Moses. This too is a covenant but it is not a replacement covenant. If the one with Abraham and Christ was irrevocable, then the Mosaic one cannot undo its effect. It still stands (v17). This is important because the Jews saw themselves as Abraham's heirs. However, if they thought they inherited the blessing from Abraham by keeping the Law, then the inheritance would come through law obedience and not through belief in God's promise. So, if they benefited through law observance then Abraham's covenant would be voided (v18).

Digging Deeper

Paul's argument is that God made a binding and lasting covenant with Abraham and his offspring. This meant the covenant was specifically with Abraham and Christ. Remember that the promise in

³⁸ See Keener, *Galatians*, 263-265.

³⁹ C.f. Keener, *Galatians*, 262.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Genesis 22:18.

⁴¹ "Four things need to be noted about what Paul is doing here. First, what may be forced or unconvincing for a modern reader would not necessarily have been perceived that way in Paul's context. In fact, what Paul does here is quite in line with certain kinds of rabbinic interpretation. Second, Paul makes clear in this very context that he understands the collective sense of *sperma*; see verse 29 ... Third, there is good reason to think that some of the promise texts in Genesis do, in fact use *sperma* as a semantic singular, referring to Isaac, Abraham's immediate 'seed,' or 'descendant'. Fourth, Paul's application of the 'seed' language to Christ may also reflect the later traditions about a 'seed' of David, for example, see 2 Samuel 7:12 where *sperma* refers to David's immediate descendant, Solomon but ultimately to the Messiah who would come from David's line." Moo, *Galatians*, 230.

the covenant was of land, people and blessing. God would bless Abraham and his descendant and through them would bring blessing to all nations.

The point then is that it has always been about Jesus and always about the grace of the Gospel. Anyone who wanted to receive the blessings of the covenant, to enjoy life in God's presence under God's rule and reign could receive that blessing only in and through Jesus. The law, as we will see had a function but it was never intended and never could act to include people as heirs to Abraham's blessing. You could not become part of God's people, receive forgiveness of sin and enter eternal life through keeping the Law.

A look at ourselves

Once again, we are reminded not to be deceived into thinking that anything we might do or say can earn God's love for us. We are saved by grace alone. It is important that we do not impose works based salvation on others or create a hierarchy in church based on our own measures of how people are doing.

We can also be encouraged as we read these words that they tell us about God's character. God is faithful to his promises, he keeps his covenant. We can trust him to keep his promises to Christ and to us through and in Christ. God will not walk away from us, desert us, change his mind about us. We are more loved and more secure than we can possibly imagine.

21. What the Law does

Paul insists that the Law is unable to make us right with God. He also insists that the original promises to God's people were about faith and not Law. Does this mean that Law and Faith or Law and Grace are in competition?

A look at the text (Read Galatians 3:19-29)

So why was the Law given at all? That's the question Paul answers here. Well, first of all, he explains that the Law was given because of sin, or transgressions. The idea seems to be that following from the first sin and breaking of the first commandment, humans added to that by finding new ways to wander away from God and rebel against him. The Law then fleshes out both what it means to oppose God and how we are meant to live in his presence. The Law furthermore acts as a specific covenant, revealed through angels to Moses who acts as a form of mediator between the two parties to the covenant, God and Israel (v19-20).

Does the Law contradict God's promises? Paul insists it doesn't. The Law cannot give life but it seems that this was never its intention because that would mean that we are made right with God keeping it. This would, in Paul's mind contradict God's promises (v21). Instead, what the Law does, is it sets things up so that the promise might be given. Scripture (referring here to the Torah and prophets), imprisons us under sin, in other words, what the Law does is it highlights our true state, we are like captives, helpless, unable to save ourselves, under sin's abusive control. That's why we need the promise of blessing, forgiveness and righteousness (v22 -23).

The law acts like a guardian, the imagery here is of a Roman household, the children are looked after by a steward, one of the slaves, they at that point have neither relationship to their father, nor status. They are supervised by the slave. Paul says that "this was our situation" speaking of the Jews and including himself with. That was until Jesus came in order to live, die and rise again so that they might be justified. Justification language is used here to point to a new relationship and a new status so that those who have faith are right with God. One faith comes, or once the Gospel has been effectively preached drawing the response of faith, the guardian loses control and authority. It is similar to the point when the son legally becomes his father's heir and is no longer under supervision (v24-25).

"In Christ you are all sons." Notice that despite the temptation to move to gender neutral language, the idea of sonship is important here. Sons were the legal heirs at the time. This is not just about joining the family but about inheritance. It is in Christ that we can inherit the blessings promised to and through Abraham (v26). We are in Christ because we have put him on, the imagery of clothing is used here. It means that we carry his identity. We might compare this with Jacob putting on Esau's clothes so that he carried the feel and odour of Esau (v27). Then we have famous words, we are all one, united in Christ Jesus, the barriers of ethnicity, gender and class are removed through him (v28). We are reminded at the end that the promise is to Abraham and Jesus, so to be united to Christ is to be united to Abraham and to share in the blessings promised to him (v29).

Digging Deeper

Here, Paul shows that the Law is itself not bad, it's not set up in conflict with grace. It doesn't undermine faith and grace because it is designed to do something different. The Law acted as a guardian or steward caring for a minor until they came of age. It could not confer the benefits of sonship but it could help guide and teach so that people would learn about what it means to know God. It could rebuke and reprove to convict of our need for saviour.

However, the function of The Law is temporary in nature, until faith. I would suggest that this points partly to individual faith. There is a point in our lives when we trust Jesus. However, I believe that it is also pointing eschatologically towards the specific faith event, or event that produces faith, the coming of Jesus. At that point the Law's function as guard and guardian comes to an end, God's people are set free from its supervision.

The Law of Moses put divisions and distinctions in place on ethnic, gender and class grounds. The Gospel breaks down those barriers so that God's people know what it means to be united to and in Christ.

A look at ourselves

It is highly likely that you did not grow up under Judaism. Most of us therefore, find ourselves in the shoes of the Gentiles as we listen in. Furthermore, we live this side of Jesus coming. This means that the Law does not have the same functional relationship to us as it did to Jews like Peter, James and Paul.

This does not mean that the Law is irrelevant to us. The Law is good and teaches what it means to be holy, to be people who live in God's presence. Christians today will want to follow up on this to get a better understanding of what the Law says, means and what it does have to do with us.

However, Paul's primary reason for making his point about the Law here is to emphasise that if the Law was not what made Jews right with God, even religiously zealous Jews like Paul, even the founding father, Abraham, then it cannot ever be the basis for how we are made right with God. How we come into faith tends to follow on with how we go on in faith and so what was true at the beginning is true now. We were made right with God by faith, we stay right by faith.

This may pose a challenge. There's the fear that if the burden and restriction of Law keeping is lifted, then people will do what they please. Paul is keen in all his letters to show that this is not the case. There will be more to come on this in Galatians and so later on we will think more about what it means to live godly lives as believers.

The crucial point here is that a church that believes in the Gospel needs to reflect that in its practice. The Doctrines of Grace should lead to a culture of grace. A crucial mark of that culture will be that there will be unity and equality rather than division and hierarchy.

22. Penal Substitution

In 2023, a little book by a prominent Christian communicator shook the evangelical world. Steve Chalke stated in “The Lost Message of Jesus” that the doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement if true would amount to “cosmic child abuse.”⁴² It’s important to be clear about what he wasn’t saying. Chalke did not claim that the atonement itself was “cosmic child abuse.” He was referring to one specific model or explanation of the Cross. He was saying that if that view were true then the atonement would be that.

However, even with that in mind, the argument was still problematic. Chalke and Mann were not saying anything particularly new and original. The debate about how we describe what Jesus achieved on the Cross and why he died has been going on for year. What they did was to elevate the controversy and use particularly provocative language to do so.

When we think about The Cross, we can think in terms of Jesus’ death being

- A demonstration of God’s love for us
- An example to follow
- A price paid (redemption)
- Jesus winning the victory over evil.
- Christ being punished in our place

Chalke and Mann focused in on the last two. They argued that the Cross was primarily about Jesus soaking up evil in order to defeat it (Christus Victor). They argued that if the Father punished the son for the sin of others then that would be horrific, cruel, offensive.

Their challenge to what was seen as the orthodox evangelical position by many came out of the desire to make the Gospel attractive to a present generation and so their issue was not just with the idea that Jesus was punished, that he bore God’s wrath. Rather, they were speaking for a body of opinion within the church that is uncomfortable with the language of wrath, judgement, sin and guilt full stop. They wanted to shift the church away from an emphasis on original sin and guilt to one that emphasised the original goodness of humanity and God’s love for his creation.

Part of the reasoning for this was that society had in any case lost the concept of sin and guilt. In another book, Mann argued that:

Unquestionably Christian theology, especially that orientated around the atonement, has a well developed notion of guilt, and the rites and rituals necessary to deal with it. Such tradition has served its constituents well, especially in the guilt-ridden, Christianized context that was pre-) and to a certain extent), post-Reformation Europe.”⁴³

However,

In an increasingly sinless society, where guilt is less of a concern at the personal level, such functional views of the atonement are wholly inadequate in expressing the actuality of atonement. Indeed, so are many of the rites and rituals that address our sinfulness. What is needed is a fresh engagement with our story.”⁴⁴

⁴² In fact, although we link the book and controversy specifically with Chalke, it was co-written with Alan Mann.

⁴³ Alan Mann, *Atonement for a sinless society*, 58.

⁴⁴ Alan Mann, *Atonement for a sinless society*, 59.

To what extent might Chalke and Mann be on to something? Well, there is, or at least was, something there. It did seem at one level to social observers 20 years ago that the idea of guilt and punishment was something that we were moving away from. However, I wonder to what extent that was a permanent shift and how much it was part of the feel good vibe of millennial culture. Scandals, corruption and shocking accounts of cruelty especially affecting public figures have rocked our culture, both within and without the church. I would say that even if we don't like to think of ourselves as guilty and deserving punishment today, there is as strong a sense as ever that some are guilty and deserve punishment, even if there's disagreement over what counts as sin.

However, in the end, the views of our society matter less than what Scripture says. The Bible speaks in a relevant way to each and every culture but it also challenges those cultures, saying things that they may not want to or even be able to hear. Pay attention to Isaiah 6. The job of a prophet like Isaiah was not to accommodate the message to his context but to recognise that an unhearing, uncomprehending generation not only wouldn't want to hear his prophecy but would in fact be unable.

So, when we come to a verse like Galatians 3:13, we need to sit up and pay attention. Paul writes:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

This is the language of penal substitution, especially when read in the wider context of Scripture that talks about Jesus being "pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5) and becoming sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus became cursed for us. The reason that curse was associated with being hung on a tree was that this was what happened to criminals either as the form of execution or to display their bodies afterwards. The curse was to do with punishment and in fact takes us back to Genesis 3, death itself is the curse, the punishment for sin. Jesus, the innocent one experienced judgement, punishment and curse and Paul tells us that it was "for us." We were the ones that should have been there because of our guilt.

Now, guilt is an objective thing. That's also part of the nonsense. Guilt is not really about how we feel. I'm either guilty or not guilty. I can experience false guilt, a feeling that I deserve punishment even when innocent but I can also suppress my conscience and tell myself I'm innocent even when I'm not.

Guilt and shame are not really alternative approaches to life. Rather they go hand in hand. Guilt is the objective verdict and shame is the associated feeling. I feel shame because I either know that I'm guilty or at least think that others view me that way, either due to my direct actions or guilt by association.

Notice though this, that Penal Substitution is to do with both guilt and shame. Shame is an aspect of curse. The one who hangs on a tree is exposed to mockery, they are considered excluded, unclean, unworthy of being a part of society and that shame continues after death. Jesus on the cross dealt with both my sin and my shame.

Those who have sought to remove Penal Substitution from our beliefs have missed the point. They have misread both Scripture and society. The truth that Jesus won the victory at Calvary, defeating sin, Satan and death by taking our place and bearing our punishment so that we might receive his righteousness was central to Paul's Gospel in Galatians and it is the vital good news that our society needs to hear today.

23. But now I am your son, I am adopted in your family”

One of the greatest risks to God’s people is amnesia, that we forget what God has achieved for us and who we now are. When we do this, then we are prone to the subtle and seductive charms of those who claim to be offering a better deal.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 4:1-7)

Paul uses the example of how sons were treated in Roman families. The son was the heir, so that the whole estate legally was his but until he came of age, this did not affect his status and rights. Up until that point he was treated just like one of his father’s slaves with no rights or freedoms and no control. So an heir, until they reached maturity would still be treated like a slave in practice with someone else overseeing the estate, just as we saw in chapter 3 that the son would be under the supervision of a senior slave acting as his school master. We have similar customs today where you can put a minor’s inheritance into a trust fund so that the trustees legally own and administer the wealth for the benefit of the child until they reach eighteen (v1-2).⁴⁵

Paul compares the status of Christians to Roman children before they hear and respond to the Gospel. This seems to apply to Jews and Gentiles alike. Their status was that of slaves. Notice that he says at this point that they were not slaves to the Law, although Jews would in effect be but rather that all were under the rule and guardianship of the “elements” or “principles of the world.” In other words, the believers had been outside of a familial relationship with God and instead were subject to the world whether through religious legalism or pagan licence (v3).

The fulness of time, which marked our coming of age, was when Jesus was born. Paul describes him first as “born of a woman” which indicates his human nature, and links him with the promise to Eve that her offspring would crush the serpent. He was also “born under the law” as a Jew, subject to the requirements of Torah which he kept perfectly (v4). Jesus’ reason for coming was to “redeem” us. The word “redeem” has the idea of buying back and was often associated with slaves buying or having their freedom bought for them so that they were no longer indebted to their owners. The freedom he purchased was from the law, so that in him, God’s people were no longer under its supervision and control, they were free. This means that they were given the status of fully adopted sons (v 5).

Now that the believers have sonship, they receive the Holy Spirit. We may connect this with Ephesians where the Holy Spirit is described as a downpayment or deposit of our inheritance. It is through the Holy Spirit that we fully realise our new, true status as children of God and in him that we receive the inheritance promised to us. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to call God “Father” (v6). The believer’s status now is sonship and this means that we are full heirs with Christ (v7).

Digging Deeper

The word translated as “elements” or “principles” in most translations could have the idea of the basis foundational materials (elements) of the world, however it was also used to refer to the foundational philosophical principles and to spiritual beings and it is to either, or both of these that Paul seems to be referring in verse 3.⁴⁶

This would be part of his argument against the circumcision and other ceremonial laws being enforced upon Gentile believers. It would in effect take them back to their situation and status before

⁴⁵ Cf. Keener, *Galatians*, 321.

⁴⁶ Moo, *Galatians*, 260-261.

they were Christians. Without the Gospel of Grace, Jews and Gentiles alike have the same status of being in effect slaves, in Christ, they become Sons. The Judaizers were presenting circumcision and Torah observance as a necessary step forward but Paul sees it as a serious and dangerous step back from the status they now enjoyed.

A Look at ourselves

Our status as believers is that we are sons and daughters of the king. Though note that the specific legal status of sons as heirs in the ancient world was central to Paul's language and argument here. It is important to know that God has already given us this full status and invited us into his presence to enjoy the blessings of his inheritance. It is important that we are alert to the ways in which we might be drawn backwards and lose the benefits of this new found relationship with God. There are obvious threats from temptation to conform to worldly habits but the danger can sometimes come in religious guise too.

24. When going forward is in fact going back

We got off the aeroplane at Beijing airport and jumped into a taxi, giving the driver the details of our hotel in the centre of the city. After over half hour of driving, we assumed that we must be getting close to our destination. Except my mum looked out of the window and said “We’ve been passed that building before.” When we passed the building another time, we realised that the driver was simply going round in circles, taking advantage of the naïve foreigners to run up the clock. We thought we were making progress but were further away from where we needed to be.

The agitators in Galatia, the Judaizers claimed to be helping to lead people closer to God but in fact, they were not just taking them round in circles but taking them further away from God and godliness.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 4:8-20)

There is a shift at verse 8 from “we” where Paul includes himself and therefore Jewish believers along with the Gentile Christians to “you” indicating Paul is once again addressing the, primarily Gentile, Galatian believers specifically. Their previous slavery was to objects and beings that may have appeared or been presented as godlike but were in fact not gods at all. The reference here is to the elements and principles mentioned in verse 3 (v8). Such spiritual forces are in fact weak, powerless, dumb idols so why would the Galatians go back to them when they have met with the true and living God. This will be a return to the slavery they have escaped from (v9). Their route back to idolatry and slavery was ironically via the route which seemed to be a step forward in their new faith, by seeking to keep Torah rituals, specifically here the feast days (v10).

Paul is concerned that his efforts with them have been wasted (v11). He reminds them of the circumstances that led him to spend so much time with them, an illness which seemed to affect his eyesight. He reminds them that they had responded with compassion. Didn’t treat his illness as something to look down on and were ready to bless him in self-sacrificing, costly ways (v12-15). The suggestion here seems to be that the Judaizers were linking their message to the promise of blessing, and power, a kind of proto-prosperity Gospel that would fit with the problems Paul observed in other churches such as in Corinth. Now, he asks if they have turned against him personally as well as his message (v16).

The agitators are described as zealous, they have passion, remember that in Jewish tradition, going back to Phinehas that zeal was associated with righteousness but here their zeal is not for good, not for God’s glory. Their aim is to draw a following for themselves and by turning the Galatians away from Paul, to turn them away from the Gospel (v17-18).

Paul too has zeal, he is passionate for the Galatians, like a mother in childbirth for her baby. His desire is a godly one, that they will be returned to the truth. This means that he reluctantly uses a stern tone with them but it is not something he wants to do (v19-20).

Digging Deeper

How could observance of Jewish Law, commandments given by God to his people through Moses be compared with pagan worship by Paul because that is what he seems to be doing here. Is, he, as some have suggested, and perhaps even at the time, he would have been accused of, suggesting that the Law itself is demonic? That suggestion seems unlikely for a rabbi like Paul. He has of course compared his own law observance to filthy rags and counted it as nothing but he has insisted that the Law itself is not bad but rather that the problem with it is that it is weakened by sinful human nature.

So, how then, if the Law was not in itself bad and was from God, could it be a route back not just into a slave like relationship to God but into paganism? Why does it risk landing the Gentile believers back in exactly the same place they were before their conversion and not in a slightly different place, not as Jewish law observers but as idol worshipping unbelievers?

It is possible that what the Judaizers have introduced in terms of ritualistic behaviours is toxic to the Gentile Christians because they mentally and emotionally associate those ritualistic performances, the fasting and feasting, the cutting of flesh etc with the rituals and practices of their past religion.⁴⁷ Certainly Neil Martin in his recent monograph “Galatians Reconsidered” argues that the agitators may have been well intentioned and that encouraging the observation of such rituals may not have been harmful to mature believers who properly grasped the significance of the rituals.⁴⁸ However, the problem with this take, is that Paul very clearly does not see it in such terms. He does not see the agitators as well intentioned but rather motivated by selfish desires. Indeed, the implication would be that the things they were seeking to impose, in the way they were being imposed were harmful both to Jewish and Gentile believers alike, to mature and immature, weak and strong together.⁴⁹

I think we can over-complicate things. The simple point is that the only way that we can relate to God is through the grace of the Gospel. Anyone who is outside of the Gospel, whether or not they are religiously devout and whether or not those beliefs are theologically orthodox is, from Paul’s perspective in the same situation. To Paul, there are only two categories, slaves or free. The agitators wanted to take the Gentile believers out of freedom and back to slavery.

A look at ourselves

As we get further into Galatians, we see that Christians are still called to holy living. We are meant to pursue godliness. We should not confuse the message of “free grace” with “cheap grace”. However, it is possible to impose burdens onto people for the sake of godliness which in fact because they turn people away from grace, take them backwards away from godliness. It’s important that we double check our teaching and expectations.

The crucial point is this. What motivates godliness? Where is the person’s heart? If they have the heart of a son or daughter of the king, then they will want to live that out, reflecting their Father’s image and character. If they do not have that heart, then imposing rules, regulations and rituals is not going to change anything.

It is important that we are alert to the risk that we can inadvertently take people backwards, through legalism into slavery. At the same time though it is also vital that we are alert to those who are intentionally seeking to manipulate, distort, control in order to draw people away from the Gospel to dependence on themselves. We need to be on the guard against false teachers. As we are seeing in Galatians, such people can appear to have appealing motives and can be very subtle. However, anything, no matter how minor, that adds to, takes away from or distracts from the message of grace is to be resisted.

⁴⁷ C.f. Martin, *Galatians Reconsidered*, 160-161.

⁴⁸ C.f. Martin, *Galatians Reconsidered*, 170-172.

⁴⁹ Whilst Martin argues that Paul uses similarly robust language about Peter’s actions and we do not consider Peter to have apostatized, even though his actions undermined the Gospel, there are clear differences. Peter seems to act out of fear of the agitators whereas, Paul is clear here in Galatians 4 that the agitators were operating out of malign motives. I would argue that he sees a willing and knowing intent to their message and methods that is not there with Peter.

25. The Allegory of Sarah and Hagar

Remember that the argument being made by the agitators in Galatia was in effect that history and God's Word was on their side. God's covenant was with the Jewish people and it centred on two things, ancestry through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Torah keeping. Paul has been systematically pulling apart this claim.

A look at the Text (Read Galatians 4:21-31)

The next part of Paul's argument is to suggest that if people want to be subject to the Law, then they need to pay attention to all that it says. The Law, or Torah was not just a set of commands but included all of the first five books of Scripture, it mixes statutes and case law with narrative, poetry and prophecy (v21). So, Paul turns again to the example of Abraham, what does the Law/Torah say about him? Well, it tells the story of his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. One, Ishmael, was the son of Sarah's slave, Hagar, the other was Sarah's son, the child of a free person (v22). Paul then distinguishes them by aligning the slave son with "flesh" and the free son with the promise. In other words, Ishmael was a result of human efforts and plans whilst Isaac was the result of trusting God to keep his word (v23).

Paul then goes on to use the mothers, Hagar and Sarah as the basis of an allegory with each representing two covenants, symbolised by the mountains where they were made. Hagar represents Sinai and the Law based covenant made there. We might be surprised to see this at first, expecting Sarah as Israel and Moses' ancestor to be linked to Sinai. However, Hagar and Ishmael would be linked to the Arabia and the desert, and so Sinai. More importantly, Paul is distinguishing slavery from freedom and associates slavery with subjugation to the Law whilst freedom is tied to God's promises and to true sonship. Paul then goes a step further, Sinai is now associated with the earthly Jerusalem because the Temple worship of Paul's day was under his view linked with human effort (the Flesh) and with Slavery (v24-25).

Sarah, Isaac and the promise are linked with another mountain but not an earthly one. Paul says that there is a heavenly Jerusalem, a heavenly mount Zion and this is what they point to. Sarah is the mother not just of Isaac and her physical descendants but all who belong to the promise, she is our mother whether we are Gentile or Jew (v26). He ties this to Isaiah 54:1, which speaks to Zion, and likens the city to a barren/infertile woman who will become a fruitful mother to many children, just as Sarah had her infertility healed by the coming of Isaac (v27). All of this means, that in order to fulfil this promise to Sarah and to Zion of many offspring, we Gentiles are included as sons and daughters in the promise (v28).

In Genesis 21:8-21 we read that Ishmael, the older of the brothers mocked his younger brother, Isaac, even though Isaac was the heir. This led to Sarah insisting that Abraham banished Hagar and his son. Paul says that in the same way, those linked with law-flesh-slavery were attempting to bully God's people, the children of promise out of their inheritance (v29). However, Scripture is explicitly clear, the son of the slave was not the heir of God's promises and blessing. So too with God's people in Paul's day, the riches of God's blessings in Christ came through faith and would not be found by joining with the agitators. So, the Galatians needed to withstand the pressure they were under (v30).

Digging Deeper

Paul's use of allegory here shows that he is able to use a number of different approaches and perspectives to reinforce his point. Here, he uses creativity to retell the story of Isaac and Ishmael. He surprises us by going against our expectations. Isaac could have been associated with either Sinai

or Jerusalem, the first because he was the ancestor of Moses, the second because traditionally, Mount Zion is linked with Moriah where Abraham was ready to offer Isaac as a sacrifice leading to God providing a substitute and confirming his covenant. However, Ishmael is linked to both. Shockingly, the holy places of Israel and even the Law itself are linked to one seen as an outsider. This is because Paul wants to reinforce the point that it has always been about faith and promise and he ties this covenant to no earthly mountain or city. The Covenant was established eternally and permanently in Heaven itself.

A look at ourselves

We now come to the punchline of chapter 4, if not the whole letter. Paul insists that we all, who are in Christ, as brothers and sisters belong with freedom, not with slavery and so with faith and promise. This included Jewish believers like Paul and Gentile believers in Galatia. By extension it includes you and me today. We are not under any legal obligation. We cannot do anything to add to what Christ has done. We cannot force God's hand, we cannot earn his love. We came in by grace, through faith, that's how we stay in and go on.

26. The danger of legalism

A big theme throughout Galatians is that we are no longer under subjugation to The Law. This meant that Galatian believers were not to be subjected to the rituals and ceremonies of Judaism. It also meant that people were not to be excluded from belonging and fellowship on that basis. So, an important application from Galatians is our understanding of Law and the danger of legalism.

It is important to be clear up front about what legalism is not. Legalism is not about obedience, about doing what God says. Torah observance was not in and of itself legalism. In fact, Jesus and the New Testament authors including Paul, Peter, James and John were all clear that Christians were to pursue godliness through costly obedience. Yet they would insist that legalism was not the way to encourage that kind of discipleship and bring about sanctification.

So what is legalism? I would define it as follows:

Legalism is an approach to our relationship with God which is based on a mechanistic understanding of that relationship with him and as a result with each other. The presumption is that if I do x,y and z then I will enjoy a good relationship with God and others as well as a fruitful and happy life both now and into eternity. This means that if I do not enjoy those things then I am tempted to presume that this is because I have failed to do x,y and z either at all, in the way or to the standard demanded.

What this means is that legalism is both to do with how I think I come into Christianity and how I go on. This is important because if I think that my relationship with God is dependent on what I do then not only will I think that I'm saved by my works but it will affect my attitude to daily Christian life, calling and use of gifts.

In fact, I am likely to see my calling and the specific responsibilities I have in church life not as a gift at all but as a burden. These are things I have to do. I may know that I'm saved by grace but I may be tempted to think that God's ongoing love is dependent upon them. I may either lack assurance, thinking that if I don't keep up the standards then God will give up on me and I will lose my salvation. Or I may consider myself a second class Christian if I am not achieving certain things. The problem with such a view is that whatever we do is never enough, the burden keeps growing. There is always something more that I could and should be doing for Jesus. In that respect I find the account of God's message to David in 1 Chronicles 17 so helpful. In that passage, David has expressed his intent and desire to build a house for God. The Lord sends Nathan to tell David that he is not the one to build a house for God but in fact God will build a house for him. In fact, God points out that he has always been providing for David and the people. God has never asked for and never will ask for anything in return.

But legalism is also about our relationship with other people. Church leaders, pastors, ministry leaders and parents can use it in a way that controls others. This can come out of a genuine desire to encourage godliness and protect the church. I don't think that everyone who got caught up in the agitators' agenda in Galatia was doing so from bad motives but they do seem to have acted out of fear. However, it is easy to use legalism to create a dependency culture and so those with evil motives will certainly rely on it as a tactic.

Legalism is dangerous because it encourages pride. We think that we can earn God's pleasure and the approval of others. We see God's love and the welcome, care and friendship of others in the church family as based on who we are, our qualities and what we do.

Legalism is dangerous because it is transaction and this leads to manipulation and control. Legalism therefore is often motivated by guilt and linked with shame. In fact, we can find ourselves thinking that those making the rules are judging us and shaming us. Sadly, sometimes we are spot on, we are being judged and shamed. Romans 8:1 is very clear that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is no place for judging and shaming in the Christian life.

Legalism is dangerous because it deals with externals and so fails to deal with heart matters. We keep the rules externally but our inner thought life and our deepest desires are never challenged or changed. In Galatians, Paul offers a better way, life in Spirit where the heart and its desires are changed leading to truly fruitful and godly living.

27. True Freedom

Have you ever had one of those dreams where you are trying to escape from a scary place where you are trapped. You get through to the other side, only to realise your efforts were in vain, you are still captive. It's a common theme, it invades our worst nightmares and is often picked up in books and films, especially of the horror genre. Is our fallen situation like one of those nightmares you cannot escape from?

A look at the text (Read Galatians 5:1-6)

Paul begins this section with a fascinating phrase, which translates literally along the lines of "therefore it's to/freedom that Christ has set you free." Freedom therefore becomes the act of rescue and the destination to which the liberator takes us. This is well captured by the NLT's phrase "Christ has truly set us free." He hasn't set us free from one slave only to subject us to a new slavery, it's not a case of "out of the frying pan, into the fire." The believer therefore is to "stand firm" and not to allow anyone to subject them to slavery again. They are to keep living in and enjoying this new found freedom(v1).

"Indicatively, we are children of the free woman (4:31) and therefore free in Christ. But imperatively we must stand firm to maintain that freedom, in Paul's theology, a past conversion remains effective only as long as the person does not deconvert."⁵⁰

This means that in their specific context, if the Galatian believers accept circumcision, they will be going back into slavery. They receive no benefit from what Christ has done for them. Their situation is as bad as it was before (v2). To emphasise his point, Paul restates that you cannot pick and choose between commands and rituals, if you are going to be judged by your law keeping, then you need to keep the whole thing (v3). You are either justified by keeping the Law or by Christ, you cannot mix and match. To choose the Law, is to cut yourself off from Christ. So, someone who chooses to make their law observance the standard has fallen from grace, they are no longer basing their relationship with God on what Christ has done for them and freely gives to them. In fact, they have no relationship to Christ (v4).

If we want to enter into the hope of the Gospel, then it will not be through ritual and Torah observance but through the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice that, consistent with Paul's theme, this is expected and received by faith, not by our efforts. Hope, in the New Testament refers to something that is future but certain, in other words, it is about receiving everything that God has promised in his covenant. "the hope of righteousness" could mean either "the hope received by righteousness or being justified" or "the hope which is righteousness." If the latter, then there is a future dimension to our justification and our right relationship with God. I am happy to leave the interpretation option open and it is possible that Paul himself allowed for both meanings. We may be attempting an over distinction due to modern grammatical rules which may not be there in the original text. Certainly, we can see that our future hope of resurrection life in God's presence is wrapped up closely with our being right with God. Further, we can talk in terms of a "now and not yet" in terms of our experience of our relationship with him.⁵¹

Digging Deeper

⁵⁰ Keener, *Galatians*, 439.

⁵¹ See Keener, *Galatians*, 456-457. Keener is also happy to leave the options open here. Moo leans towards the second option noting that the first is rarely taken, Moo, *Galatians.*, 328.

Paul's point is this, that the Law operates as a whole system. You cannot separate out one part of it, in this case circumcision, and isolate it from the rest. It's not that there aren't things within the Law that we shouldn't be doing. We are not to steal, murder, commit adultery etc. That was not the problem in Galatia. The problem was about relating to God through the Law, being assessed and judged on it. Galatians were being assessed as in or out of God's family based on one specific question, were they circumcised. Paul insists that once you go down that route, you cannot just ask "have they kept the law of circumcision" to determine their standing before God, you have to ask whether they are keeping all the Law.

This was particularly true with the requirement for circumcision. Circumcision was not just one law among many but was the gate-keeper law. It was the ritual that marked your entry into the Mosaic covenant. So, by insisting on circumcision, the agitators were requiring Gentiles to sign up to Torah observance as a way of life.

There are therefore only two ways in which we can relate to God, either through Christ or through the Law. If we attempt to relate to God through the Law, then we will always fail because we cannot keep it all. The choice then is between law and grace. To opt for the law is to fall away from grace because you are no longer depending on its benefits.

A look at ourselves

Circumcision is no longer the hot potato that it was in Paul's time. It's unlikely that we will be judging people on whether or not they are circumcised. However, we can find other ways to judge people, colour of skin, gender, class, political leanings etc. We can judge them on doctrinal purity. Of course, doctrinal correctness matters, just as the Ten Commandments mattered to the Galatians. The issue is not whether or not we should strive for this but whether we incorrectly judge others based on whether they measure up to our standard of doctrinal purity. Whether its about doctrine of practice, if we judge others on this basis, we become hypocrites forgetting that we are not perfect ourselves.

If the point is that we subject ourselves to the whole system by which we judge ourselves, then it is possible to see a broader application. The focus on law observance in Galatians may tempt us to focus specifically on legalism as the danger because that seems to have been the immediate and pressing danger for that church. However, licence and superstition can be just as dangerous. If I look to how people judge me in terms of looks, popularity etc in the context of going clubbing on a Saturday night, then I am subjecting myself to this World's entire values system. Similarly, if I find self-worth in winning something on the lottery then I am buying into a whole system that is about chance.⁵²

It is important for individuals to consider whose judgement they are submitting themselves to but we also need to think about how a church culture can set in place certain standards of judgement that lead away from grace and in effect sever the church member's relationship with Christ.

⁵² This is not an argument about whether or not it is a good idea to go to a night club, play bingo or whatever but rather a question of whose judgement we are submitting ourselves to.

Keep on running

The 3000 metres race at the 1984 Olympics is famous for what happened to the two favourites, both of whom failed to win. Zola Budd and Mary Decker were out in front, when they ended up colliding and getting tangled up with each other. Decker was injured and failed to finish. Budd, limped on but trailed in a long way back from the medal positions.

A look at the Text (Read Galatians 5:7-12)

Paul moves from the inclusive “we” of verses 5-6 back to “you” as he addresses the Galatians directly again. He uses an athletics image. The Galatians were like an athlete who was competing well in the race but another runner had cut into their lane, shunting them off of the track and out of the race. The irony is that the agitators by demanding obedience to Torah rituals were actually leading the Galatians into disobedience because they were failing to live by the truth of the Gospel (v7). He reminds them that the circumcision requirement was not from Christ, the one who had called them (v8). He warns them that this may seem like a minor point but in fact, like a small amount of yeast, it will have far reaching consequences for each of them individually and for the church together (v9).

Whilst Paul expresses concern in strongly worded warnings, he also expresses confidence. He is confident that the Galatians will see through the lies and deception. This is not so much about confidence in their ability, intelligence or insight but in the power of the truth to shine through and of the work of the Holy Spirit. They will see through the lies. Those seeking to lead them astray will be caught out and have to pay the penalty for their serious sin (v10).

Paul offers further evidence of the truth of the Gospel and the falsehood of the agitators lies. He is not being persecuted. The Gospel was such a stumbling block, an offence to its opponents within Judaism that preaching it led to imprisonment and the threat of death. Paul would experience death threats, attempted stoning and prison. There was one easy way out for him, to compromise his message. He had not taken that. There could be a double rhetorical affect here. It could be that some of the agitators were claiming Paul’s support for their position. His ongoing persecution showed that this wasn’t true. The other rhetorical affect is to emphasise how serious the dividing line is. To renounce circumcision and justification by Torah observance was a costly, life and death decision. Paul had not taken it lightly (v11). Then we have some cutting humour. Paul says that if the agitators are so concerned for circumcision, they should go all the way and get castrated. I think his point is easy to get (v12).

Digging Deeper

Why would Paul need to defend himself against the charge that he was preaching circumcision. It is possible that he was speaking hypothetically to show that there was a way out of persecution should he want to take it. However, it seems likely that he was being accused of this. It is possible that he had favoured circumcision earlier in his early ministry.⁵³ It may be that people had picked up on him circumcising people for pragmatic reasons as he did later with Timothy. However, Paul may simply be distinguishing his preaching pre conversion and post conversion.⁵⁴ In any case, Paul is clear that he no longer preaches circumcision, and this is exactly why he is being persecuted.

A look at ourselves

⁵³ C.f. Keener, *Galatians*, 467-468.

⁵⁴ C.f. Moo, *Galatians*, 336 -337.

The Gospel is about grace but this grace is free, not cheap. Christians who seek to follow Christ and remain faithful to the good news can expect their discipleship to be costly. The enemy wants to disrupt the growth of God's kingdom and so will use any strategy. Whether, through persecution or more subtle means we may be tempted to add or subtract from grace. Paul encourages us to persevere in grace and not to be knocked off track.

28. Free for what?

If a Christian is free from the law and legalism, does this mean that they can do what they please?

A look at the text (Galatians 5:13-18)

Christians have been rescued from slavery to freedom but we need to understand what this freedom is about and make sure that we do not abuse or exploit it for our own gain. This is described by Paul as “to indulge the flesh”, in other words to prioritise the gratification of our own sinful human nature. This is something that we are meant to have left behind (v13).

We are helped in this by understanding that the Law itself was really about something good, it was about Love. So, just as Jesus argued, the Law can be summed up as “Love your neighbour (v14).” We still have an obligation to do this. Causing one another harm, biting and devouring, or hurting through harsh words and through exclusion is the opposite of love. Ironically, this means that those siding with the agitators in shaming others and causing division are in fact breaking not keeping God’s Law (v15).

Paul often tends to distinguish “the flesh” from “The Spirit”. In other words, we can either submit to our own sinful desires and habits or we can allow the Holy Spirit to fill and control us. We are to walk or live our lives in line with the Holy Spirit, allowing him to change shape and direct us (v16-17). Flesh and Spirit are contrasted but so too are Spirit and Law. If I’m living under the Spirit’s rule then I’m not obligated or condemned by the Law (v18).

Digging Deeper

Paul is opposed to legalism. This is fairly obvious from his teaching so far but his solution is not licence, the idea we can do what we please. He sees this as just as dangerous as Law because it is another way of being enslaved. I can either be a slave, legalistically to commands and with them the approval or condemnation of others or to my desires and habits. Christians are called to freedom from both law and flesh, from legalism and licence and instead are adopted into God’s family as sons and daughters of the King. This means that we are now under the rule and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are free to be filled and led by him.

A Look at ourselves

We often fall into one of two traps, either imposing harsh rules or saying that grace means that we should never challenge or correct. Paul offers a better alternative here by encouraging life in the Spirit. How do we speak to others, counsel, advise or challenge? In other words, how are they pastored? Do we avoid saying anything at all for fear of being harsh or legalistic? The better option, is that we encourage people to think about what it means for the Holy spirit to change them and how they act in a loving way to others.

29. Fleshly

Paul has set up a contrast between Flesh/human sinful nature and The Spirit/Life in the Spirit. He now spells out in detail what those types of life look like.

A look at the text (Galatians 5:19-21)

Paul says that “the works of the flesh/human sinful nature are obvious”. It doesn’t take too much to work out what you shouldn’t be doing and what the consequences of a sinful life are like. He lists sexual immorality, impurity, and licentiousness first.⁵⁵ These seem to be closely linked around sexual morality but each word places a different emphasis showing that it isn’t just about adultery nor even about our sinful actions (sexual immorality) but also our thought life (impurity)⁵⁶ and our appetites/desires (licentiousness).⁵⁷ All of these are out workings of our fallen nature (v19).

Paul then talks about things that reflect false worship and religion, idolatry and sorcery. He goes on to talk about selfish ambition, division and quarrels with the implication that there is a link. Perhaps the focus there is on what happens when God’s people come together (c.f. 1 Corinthians 11), what are the things that distract us from worship of the true and living God? These can be literal idols and the overt pursuit of demonic encounters but also our jostling for position arises out of heart idolatry, we seek our own prominence and is an opening to demonic influence in the church (v20).

He then lists “envy, drunkenness, carousing.” Envy links to the theme of ambition and quarrels in v20 but I think it also links forward because the final examples might be considered to do with a lack of self-control and the way that this shows a lack of love and concern for others. There is a prominent selfishness to these behaviours. Now, if the works here are comparable to the fruit of the Spirit to come, then they are the fruit of the flesh, or the result of life in our sinful human nature. The fruit shows the roots and someone displaying these qualities does not appear to belong to the Spirit. So, Paul concludes that they are not heirs of God’s kingdom. In other words, they are still slaves, they are not sons (v21).

Digging Deeper

The way that Paul sets up this list is to take his readers away from a focus on external rituals such as circumcision to what is going on in the heart. Whilst specific practices, condemned by the Law are mentioned, notice that a lot of what he describes goes beyond that and focuses on relationships and attitudes. Whilst he does not use the language at this stage, I believe that he is pointing away from circumcision to heart circumcision.

A look at ourselves

One of the dangers with legalism is that it focuses on one or two headline sins. Do we give as much attention to addressing all of the issues listed here, whether in our public comment and debates or in our preaching, teaching and discipleship? How are you doing personally in these matters?

⁵⁵ Some manuscripts list adultery and sexual immorality separately.

⁵⁶ The word used to do with uncleanness, the ceremonial category found in the Law. The inclusion in the context of sexual sin reminds us that uncleanness is not in fact about failure to keep ceremonies or observe food laws but the affect of the heart and thought life on our status. C.f. Moo, *Galatians*, 359. See also Keener, *Galatians*, 510-511.

⁵⁷ The word means “lack of self constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable” or “an open and reckless contempt of propriety.” BDAG, 141. Moo, *Galatians*, 359.

30. Fruitfulness

So, if Christians are to be godly and to say no to sinful desires and temptation? How are we meant to go about that? Paul has been clear throughout that it isn't by legalistic means or ritual that we pursue godliness. Is there a better way?

A look at the text (Galatians 5:22-25)

Paul contrasts "works of the flesh" with "fruit of the Spirit" both terms "works" and "fruit" are, I believe, intended to indicate the natural outworking of things. If the works described in v 19-21 were the consequences of a life orientated towards selfish and sinful human nature, then a life lived in the Spirit will have a different outworking (v22a).

The fruit is described in terms of "love, joy, gentleness, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Notice that these seem to contrast strongly with the list of fleshly works. These behaviours and characteristics are the antidote for our sinful behaviours, thoughts and appetites. Notice that like the fleshly works, the spiritual fruit overlap so that the words are closely related but tease out the detail (v22b-23a).

Paul sums them up with the fascinating phrase "against such things there is no law." The implication here seems to be that the law is framed in terms of restrictions on what not to do. However there are no constraints or restrictions on life in the Spirit (v23b).

This is no "let go and let God" approach. The believer still has responsibilities when it comes to sanctification. The flesh is to be "put to death" (c.f. Romans 8), suggesting there is work, struggle and cost involved as daily we say no to our sinful desires (v24). We are to "keep in step with the Spirit", observing, learning, following and obeying are required (v25). This requires humility and an avoidance of complacency which would produce the very bad fruit warned about previously (v26).

Digging Deeper

Paul does not promote cheap grace or licentiousness. Life in the Spirit is about costly obedience. However, where he sees the Law as dealing with externals and setting boundaries through restrictions, he sees keeping in step with the Spirit as focusing less on what you shouldn't be doing and more on what you should. The Law and the Spirit both have the same concern, helping us to love God and love our neighbour. The Law says "love your neighbour by not doing unloving things like stealing, killing, lusting etc". The Spirit says "love your neighbour by being patient, kind and generous with them".

A look at ourselves

Notice that these things are communal. It is quite easy to feel peaceful and self-controlled sat in my room in isolation. However, true fruitfulness means that I need to live those things out in community with God's people. Is our church characterised by the fruit of the Spirit?

31. Filled with the Spirit

Paul's solution to the question of Christian obedience and holiness is not to impose laws and rituals (legalism), nor to say that grace means we can do what we please. Instead, he sees our true hope being the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of The Trinity. Jesus promised that when he ascended to heaven, the Father would send another comforter or counsellor, one like Jesus who is God with us. This is what happened on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to indwell believers.

Life in the Spirit is central therefore to Paul's understanding of what the Christian life should be like. In Ephesians 5, he instructs us to say no to drunkenness (the influence of wine) and instead be filled with the Spirit. This will lead to and be expressed as praise, singing and thanksgiving as well as a life of submission to and serving one another. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul focus on gifts that the Spirit gives. These gifts are to help us worship, serve, build up and encourage each other.

I am tempted to suggest therefore that whether we are talking about singing and praise, spiritual gifts such as prophecy and tongues or characteristics like love, peace, joy and kindness that we are not talking about three different things. All three are expressions or results of the Holy Spirit filling our lives. In other words, all three lists are telling us about the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, all three amount to the same thing, they are expressing the truth that spiritual fruit is all about our whole hearted love for God which leads to love for each other.

32. Misrepresentation

In Galatians 2, Paul talks about the circumcision party who had previously caused trouble in Antioch as those who “came from James.” The implication there may have been that James himself was endorsing their position. However, that isn’t necessarily the case. In 5:11, Paul is himself compelled, to deny and refute that he was a supporter of circumcision for Gentile believers. It seems that his name had been taken in vain and it is possible that the agitators had also claimed untruthfully to act on James’ authority.

I suspect it would not have been too hard to rely falsely on another’s reputation and attribute views to them. News travelled more slowly in a pre-technology world but rumours could be spread more quickly. This wouldn’t be the only time that a false rumour would get Paul into trouble. It would also be possible to misrepresent words and actions, taking them out of context. For example, Paul did circumcise occasionally for missional reasons.

Whilst the internet means that news travels quicker, this hasn’t prevented rumours from circulating even more quickly. Nor does it prevent people from taking words and actions out of context either. The result is that sadly, Christian leaders do find themselves misquoted, misrepresented or have rumours spread about them.

Sometimes this happens by accident or carelessness but sometimes it can happen through deliberate agendas. It might be that it suits someone’s purpose to rely on the authority of prominent leader to add weight to their own argument. Sometimes the aim is to cause trouble, to malign the leader in question, to turn people against them.

As well as happening on the larger stage, such misrepresentation can happen in the local church too. We should be careful about relying on the supposed authority of others and wary of those who seem to make a habit of it. It’s always a good idea to double check sources and to seek truth. Most importantly, it helps when we rely on the authority of God’s Word and not the say so of preferred others.

33. Bearing burdens

How do we “keep in step with the Spirit” and bear fruit? The first few verses of Galatians 6 begin to apply what it means to patiently love others and to be self-controlled in our own lives.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 6:1-6)

Paul is describing someone here, not so much caught out in their sin (although this is a possible interpretation) as caught by sin, surprised or overtaken by it.⁵⁸ This is not about intentional rebellion by someone who is truly in opposition to Christ but rather what the Old Testament refers to as “sins of wandering”, it’s the person caught off guard by a temptation they are vulnerable to. When this happens, other Christians have a responsibility to watch out for and help by warning, challenging and rebuking those falling into temptation. The other Christians are described as “those who are spiritual”. This isn’t about a distinct class of “more spiritual” believers but distinguishes those who belong to the Spirit from those who belong to “The Flesh” (v1).⁵⁹ This is what it means to “bear one another’s burdens. We look out for each other and help one another in the daily struggle to live a godly life. If we carry the fruit of the Spirit, then the way in which we seek to restore others will not be through harsh rebuke or legalism but with gentleness and humility(v2).⁶⁰

Paul sees this as important because of the danger of pride and false confidence. It’s possible to consider yourself to be someone who you are not. It’s possible to think that you are mature, spiritual, filled with the Holy Spirit but the evidence will be there in our lives that we both are learning to say no to temptation ourselves and also helping others to (v3).

We have one-another responsibility, to watch out for each other but first of all, we are to keep a watch on our own lives. Christians are to be accountable and this begins with self-examination. If we make claims about how well we are doing as believers that turn out not to be true then we are guilty of false boasting. However, there is a legitimate claim to boast but this must be based on a true assessment of one’s own heart and works, not by comparison to others. (v4-5).

This right balance of sharing burdens and personal responsibility concludes with a reminder that we share together, challenges and blessings. Those that benefit from the spiritual care of others should seek to bless those who care for them (v6).

Digging Deeper

Paul’s encouragement to the whole church to look out for each other doesn’t preclude personal responsibility. However, we may be surprised to see the use of the word “boasting” here. We associate boasting with pride. Paul seems to take the word initially more neutrally. A boast based on the truth is not arrogant or puffed up. So, a Christian who can legitimately testify to how they are growing in Christ and putting their sinful desires to death may legitimately boast. Of course, even as we begin to look at growth and sanctification, we recognise that we are always boasting on the basis of someone else, we never accomplish sanctification on our own, it is always the Holy Spirit’s work and so our true boast is in Christ.

A look at ourselves

⁵⁸ C.f. Moo, *Galatians*, 374.

⁵⁹ See Moo, *Galatians*, 374.

⁶⁰ C.f. Stott, *Galatians*, 162.

We have both a corporate responsibility, sometimes referred to as body ministry and individual responsibility. How do we make this happen? First, it starts with personal self-examination and confession. It is helpful to set aside time each day to reflect and pray. Second it means looking out for one another. Our aim is not to compare ourselves to others but to seek their welfare and encourage them in their walk with Christ. Rather than waiting for something to go wrong in a friend's life, we should be taking time to check in on each other. This means asking a brother or sister how they are doing, particularly in terms of those areas where we know they struggle.

Remember that the purpose is to restore, not to condemn (myself or others). This is not about trying harder to follow the rules, or using accountability and the fear of being caught out as a stick to beat others and ourselves with. The solution to temptation is to encourage a greater reliance on the Holy Spirit.

34. Reaping what you sow

This next section reinforces the point that we've seen developed through chapter 5-6, we cannot fix our lives and our relationship to God by making external adjustments to our behaviour through rule keeping and rituals. Instead, our lives will bear fruit in accordance with the roots.

A look at the text (Read Galatians 6:7-10)

An honest assessment of our true condition is important so that we don't deceive ourselves by thinking that we can pull a fast one with God by making surface, external changes such as by circumcision. "A man reaps what he sows", or in other words, the fruit will always reflect the roots. As Samuel learnt before anointing David, God looks on the heart(v7). So, the crucial question is "what are you sowing for?" What's the agenda? Again, Paul distinguishes Spirit and Flesh: life, filled with the Holy Spirit leading to eternal life or a life orientated towards the sinful human nature leading to destruction (v8).

This motivates us to a godly life, seeking the good of others because our love for them flows out of being rooted in Christ through the Holy Spirit and because we are motivated by hope of the harvest to come seen in fruitfulness and eternal reward. This motivation will protect us from charity-fatigue (v9). Paul encourages the believers to focus outwards, using every opportunity to show love, kindness and generosity to others. This begins within the church but should overflow to the community around us (v10).

Digging Deeper

This is really the conclusion to Paul's argument and needs to be read as such. Paul's point is best understood by seeing how he got here. We get a sense for what the agitators were attempting, or claiming to achieve, why it didn't work and what the better option was.

Remember that the letter had begun with Paul challenging those who were dividing the church between those who had been circumcised and those who hadn't. It seems that their aim was to create a pure community of God's people so that those, within the community were protected and had assurance and security that they were right with God, now and into eternity.

Paul insists that this approach is not true and does not work. It's wrong because it takes people away from the Gospel which is based on God's grace to them. They are no longer free but become slaves to this world again, to Satan and Sin which use the Law as an instrument to subject, control and condemn. The Law, keeping rules and regulations and following rituals such as circumcision undermined the truth that we are all one in Christ Jesus but it also failed to provide the purity, security and assurance desired.

Instead, Paul insists that those saved by grace, are adopted into God's family and receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in our hearts to change our attitudes and desires so that we love God and this flows out in love for others seen in the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness etc. This proves a better way. The one who has the Spirit, whose life is rooted in the Spirit and who is seeking to pursue the things the Spirit desires will seek to do good, loving their neighbour. This contrasts with the one who still is inwardly, selfishly driven by their sinful human nature.

Indeed if we "sow for the Spirit" or for God's purposes then we are people who are living with the purpose or end "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

A look at ourselves

Here are some questions to consider.

1. What are the primary motives that drive us each day?
2. When we examine our thoughts, words and deeds, can we say that they show us to love God and love our neighbours?
3. How can we practically show love to our brothers and sisters in our church family?
4. How might that love overflow? What can we practically do to love our neighbours in the wider community?

35. This is Paul Signing Off

We are coming to the end of Paul's letter. If he had leapt quite abruptly into the challenging stuff at the beginning without the extended prayers, thanksgiving and commendations we get used to with his other letters, it also finishes fairly abruptly without the personal greetings we find in other letters such as in Romans 16. Instead, Paul makes use of the last few paragraphs and his own handwritten postscript to reinforce the point he has been making throughout.

A look at the text (read Galatians 6:11- 18)

Much of the letter would have been dictated to a scribe but Paul writes a personal footnote, confirmed by his immediately recognisable handwriting. The importance of personal authentication reflects his comments in 5:11 that he was being misrepresented by others. The size of his handwriting probably reflects an eyesight problem and relates to his reminder in 4:13 that it was due to illness that he spent so much time with them (v11).

He uses his concluding remarks to re-emphasise the danger they faced from the agitators. These were people who were motivated by their own desire for status and security against persecution. In other words, their motives were worldly or fleshly. They did not want to be looked down on or persecuted because of their association with the Gospel. The result was that they were attempting to force circumcision on Gentile Galatians (v12).

In contrast to what Paul commands in vers4 4, rather than examining their own hearts and seeking godliness, instead of obeying the law, themselves, they defined their status in relation to the Gentile believers. They were basing their own boast on getting the Gentile believers to observe circumcision. This is a reminder that the agitators were not really acting out of love and concern for the Galatians. They were not to be trusted (v13).

Paul on the other hand doesn't boast about his law keeping and ritual observance. Nor, does he boast about what he has got others to do. Instead, he makes his boast, the Gospel, that in Jesus Christ he is a new creation who has died to his old self and lives his new life in the Spirit.. (v14-15).

In his final greetings, he wishes peace and grace to those who are with him in this, his fellow brothers and sisters who are justified by faith (v16). He responds again to the agitators insisting that they should not trouble him. Far more important than the mark of circumcision were the marks of suffering and persecution that identified him as a follower of Jesus (v17). He closes by blessing them with the grace that comes from Jesus (v18).

Digging Deeper

Boasting may be seen as a form of justification. Paul's justification, his claim to be right with God and with others but also the thing he takes delight in is not his achievements but that through Jesus' death on the Cross, he has died to his old self and become a new creation.

A look at ourselves

It is important for us to think about two things. First, what are the motives and the agenda of others as they seek to lead, influence and teach us? Are they acting in order to honour Christ and love us? Are they trustworthy? Or is their agenda in order to "boast", to justify themselves whether to God or other people?

This perhaps helps us to think through when to follow advice and to obey teaching and when to question and challenge. It helps us to distinguish faithful obedience or fruitfulness from legalism. If I

get the sense that someone is primarily asking me to do something because of how they fear they will be perceived and if I experience it as forced rather than something I'm called to do freely in the power of the Spirit and joyfully, then I'm probably encountering legalism.

At the same time, I need to check my motives. Do I do things or ask things of others out of love for God and for them or to protect and justify myself? This means that before I serve or lead that it is crucial that I get justification by faith right for myself.