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Galatians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Paul introduces his epistle to the Galatians in a manner that immediately alerts the reader to one of its most prominent themes. He declares himself to be an apostle, but is concerned to distinguish the source of that apostleship. Paul's apostleship is grounded not in some human commission, nor does it arise from some human authority, but it comes from Christ and God the Father who raised Christ from the dead.

Paul, at the very outset, is defending his apostleship from misunderstanding. Something that will be crucial for the argument of his letter. Paul writes with the brothers with him, presumably fellow missionaries who are alongside him.

He addresses the churches of Galatia. Galatians is unusual in being addressed to the churches of a region, not just a specific city. The question of what region is a live one.

There are conflicting theories over where the Galatians were situated. The Roman province of Galatia was large. It covered a significant region of Central Asia Minor.

What we would now call Turkey. North and South Galatian hypotheses have both been advanced. So the ethnic Galatian people live largely in the north of the province, while the Roman province included areas to the south, including cities like Iconium, Lystra and Derby, which Paul and Barnabas visited on Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 14, verses 1 to 23.

The hypotheses will weigh in, but without deciding, questions of dating the letter, as Paul visited the region of Galatia in Acts 16, verses 6 and 18, verses 23, and may have planted the churches then. However, if the southern Galatian churches are in mind, then it might give weight to those theses that would argue for a much earlier date for the book, perhaps even before the Jerusalem Council. Having declared his identity and his credentials and identified his addressees, Paul blesses the Galatians as an emissary of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace is a characteristic greeting of Pauline epistles, and here it comes from the source of the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As in his opening declaration of his apostolic vocation, with its reference to the resurrection of Christ, there is again a core theological claim in Paul's reference to the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ here. As in the statement concerning the resurrection, the unity of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in the work of redemption is focused upon.

The work of Jesus is the work of God. God raised him from the dead, and Jesus gave himself for our sins according to the will of God. And the work of God is the work of Jesus, who was raised from the dead and gave himself for our sins.

This decisive, gracious act of God occurs in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, as the action of the Father, this act will be, as we will later see, one that leads to adoption as sons. This act was for the purpose of delivering the Galatians, alongside whom Paul joins himself and his fellow missionaries in the pronoun us, from the present evil age.

If we focus merely upon the statement that Christ gave himself for our sins, we might think of this merely in terms of an individual salvation system. However, Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. There is something more apocalyptic going on here.

Christ giving himself for our sins delivers us from a doomed world order and age. This all occurs in accordance with the will of the Father, who achieves his purpose in and through history. Paul uncharacteristically ends his opening salutation on a doxological note, To whom be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. Having begun in this sort of manner, Paul immediately launches into rebuking the Galatians for their failure to hold firm to the gospel. Unlike in other epistles, where Paul speaks of his pleasure in his knowledge of his recipients' growth in their faith and their witness, and his confidence in their continued development, there is no such encouragement here.

The Galatian churches are turning away from the one true gospel to a message that isn't a gospel at all. There is only one message of good news, and they are compromising it. The language of gospel seems to be a way of summing up the message of Christ.

In the gospels, the word gospel tends to be used in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 40 verses 9 to 11. Isaiah chapter 52 verses 7 to 10.

The voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice. Together they sing for joy. For eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem. For the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations.

And all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. The gospel here is a message about an event in history, about the Lord returning to Zion to deliver it, and to be present in the midst of his people for blessing once more. It's a statement of the establishment of the reign of God.

Gospel, then, is not a timeless message of salvation. It's a message of the work of God in the fullness of time in Jesus Christ. The gospel can be summed up in statements about the reign of God, which is why the gospel can be termed the gospel of the kingdom.

Its more particular realisation in the ministry of Christ can be expressed in the statement, Jesus is Lord. That's the shape that the kingdom of God, the reign of God takes. However, the gospel can also be fleshed out considerably.

In the gospels, not only does the term gospel refer to the message of God's coming reign, or to the particular form that this takes in Christ's lordship, but it can also refer to the larger story of the coming of the kingdom in the ministry of Christ. This can be witnessed in Matthew 26, verse 13, where Jesus says of the woman who anoints him with the costly ointment, Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. There, gospel seems to refer to the broader story that is told of Christ and his work in bringing the kingdom of

God.

I don't see any reason to suppose that Paul uses the terminology of gospel in a fundamentally different manner, although there are clearly different emphases. He is not talking about general and timeless truths about God, but about a historical event of epochal importance, in terms of which all social reality must be renegotiated. However, whereas Matthew 26 uses the term gospel to refer to the expanded narrative of the coming of the reign of Christ, Paul can use the term gospel to refer to the reality of the reign of God in Christ, as it is expounded in its character and form and implications.

This is founded on the narrative, of course, but the accent lies at a somewhat different point. His concern is to show that the message of the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ – we should always remember that Christ means Messiah – necessarily entails realities denied by the false teachers whose influence he is seeking to counteract. They have exchanged the glorious message of the reign established by Christ for a petty message of Jewish exclusivism.

Paul, as a master of rhetorical argument, steps back for a moment from the argument to make the point that his intent is not to gain human approval, but God's. His concern is God's approval over man-pleasing. This not only has the effect of giving greater weight to his words, it also transitions to his next point.

His concern for the approval of God over all men is appropriate to the character of the gospel that he is presenting, which isn't a human gospel. He didn't receive it from another man, nor was he taught it in some institution of learning. Rather, his message of the reign of Christ came from Christ himself in an act of revelation, presumably a reference to his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Paul gets into his biography at this point. He had been set apart by God from birth for the purpose of preaching to the Gentiles. Here the reader should recall Jeremiah 1, verses 4-5.

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Paul also is a prophet to the nations, a messenger to the Gentiles. Further echoes could be found in Isaiah 49, verses 1-6.

Paul's own life exemplifies the radical grace of Christ. He was a violent persecutor of the church. He was a man of zeal, a man who might remind us of the tradition of zeal represented by characters such as the Levites, Phinehas or Elijah.

However, God had already set him apart for a determined purpose for which he called him in due time by his grace. Paul is called by God's grace much as the Gentile Christians were in verse 6. Paul himself, prior to his call, would seem to have been

utterly disqualified by his persecution of the church. Yet the grace of Christ is manifested in his choice of Paul.

All of the things that formerly represented Paul's standing among his people have been eclipsed by a radical and remarkable act of grace upon which the entire rest of his life must be founded. We might think of characters like Peter and Paul mostly as witnesses to the story, rather than prominent actors in the story. However, I believe we are justified in thinking of Paul's call and mission as something that has redemptive historical significance in itself.

Paul is set apart by God by birth for a decisive mission at the turn of the ages, like John the Baptist had a unique mission in preparing the way for Christ, Peter and Paul especially have unique missions in laying the foundations of the age of the church. They are uniquely set apart for these purposes. Indeed, Paul's mission is not just to declare a message of good news to the Gentiles, but to realise the meaning of the message he is bringing in calling Gentiles into submission to the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here Paul is concerned to make clear that the gospel he preaches came directly from God, not from a human source. And to make this clear, he gives a brief sketch of his life after God's revelation of his son to him on the road to Damascus. He makes the point that the message of the gospel did not come from Jerusalem and its authorities, rather it was a direct prophetic revelation from God in Christ himself.

After his conversion, Paul went away into Arabia for a time. This is a mysterious detail of his biography and it's not entirely clear where the Arabia in question is. As Paul declares that Mount Sinai is in Arabia, in chapter 4 verse 25 N.T. Wright has suggested that Paul might be retreading the path of Elijah from 1 Kings chapter 9, where Elijah went to Mount Sinai to meet with God before being sent back to Damascus.

Later, after three years, Paul has a brief trip to Jerusalem, during which time he meets with Peter, whom he calls Cephas, as he does most times when he refers to the apostle Peter. This, it seems to me, refers to Acts chapter 9 verses 26 to 28. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. It seems that Paul visited Peter at this time.

Presumably that's the reference to Barnabas bringing him to meet the apostles. He didn't meet any of the other apostles, though, except for James, the brother of Jesus, presuming we are using the word apostle in a more expansive sense. He then went to the region of Syria and Cilicia, described in the verses that immediately follow in Acts

chapter 9 verses 29 to 30.

And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Paul came from Tarsus and was based in the church at Antioch for a number of years early on.

At this point the churches in Judea still only knew him by reputation, but they were heartened by an approving of the reports that they heard, glorifying God on his account. Paul was described as preaching the faith, which suggests that the term faith can carry a more objective sense, as the message to which faith properly responds. A question to consider.

What are some of the most important implications of the fact that Paul's gospel is not from man, but directly from God? Why does Paul so stress this point? In Galatians chapter 2 Paul continues to recount his biography. He's continuing to emphasize the divine source of his message and the confirmatory recognition of the Jerusalem apostles to its veracity. Various proposals have been advanced for how to tally this with the narrative of Acts.

Many believe that the visit to Jerusalem after 14 years occurs in Acts chapter 15 at the Jerusalem council. I'm far more inclined to believe that it occurred in Acts chapter 11 verses 27 to 30. Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.

This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

This fits far more neatly with Paul's claim that he went up because of a revelation. However it does present challenges in other respects because if this was 14 years after Paul's conversion it presses the date of that event back to around 30 AD which, while not impossible, is extremely early. I still think it's a much neater fit though.

While in Jerusalem for the purpose of bringing relief to the saints there during the famine, Paul privately presented the gospel he had been preaching before certain leading figures there. 14 years after his conversion and many years since he had started preaching, he was confirming his message with the leaders there ensuring that he had not preached in vain. Now Paul clearly knew that he had received his gospel by direct revelation, as he made clear in chapter 1. However confirmation that he was on the same page as the leaders in Jerusalem was very important.

Disagreement at this point would be a most serious matter. Indeed if Paul and Jerusalem

were not in agreement, Paul's ministry would struggle to affect the union of Jews and Gentiles that he believed was inherent in the gospel message. The Jews would follow the Jerusalem leaders and the Gentiles would look to Paul.

So the agreement that occurred at that meeting, a meeting that's not recorded at all in the Book of Acts, where we are simply told of Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem and then returning from Jerusalem, was of truly immense significance. In principle it established the fact that the church was defined not by the exclusive marks of Judaism but by the death and resurrection of Christ and that Gentiles could be members of this community no less than Jews. While he was in Jerusalem, Paul's companion Titus, although an uncircumcised Greek, was not expected to be circumcised and the Jerusalem leaders recognised the calling of Paul and did not call for him to change anything of his message.

Indeed the leaders also recognised, quite remarkably, a symmetry between Paul and Peter. In verse 7, they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised. Paul represents to the Gentiles what Peter represents to the Jews, their counterparts.

Peter was clearly the leading apostle which is why he is singled out as the one to whom this ministry is committed. In Matthew chapter 16 verses 17 to 18, Peter was a pillar and interestingly it is only in the context of speaking of Peter's apostolic vocation that Paul speaks of him as Peter. Everywhere else he is always cephas.

Peter, like Paul, received his understanding not from flesh and blood but directly from God. The leaders of Jerusalem give Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship and they tell them to go to the Gentiles while they will go to the circumcised and this suggestion that Paul and Peter are counterparts implies that the uncircumcised Gentiles are not second class members of the kingdom of God. The Jerusalem leaders ask Paul and Barnabas to remember the Paul, which might seem to be a strange detail at this point.

However it is not an extraneous detail and it makes a lot of sense in the context of Acts chapter 11 and 12. The Paul here are likely not the Paul in general but more specifically the Paul's saints in Jerusalem. Paul had just been sent with Barnabas on a mission to bring aid to the Paul in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem leaders are asking him to make sure that he does not forget them.

And throughout Paul's epistles we see his concern to gather funds for the saints in Jerusalem. The collection for the Paul-Judean saints is a task with a theological impulse to it. It expresses the concern of the Gentiles for the Jews and is a very powerful manifestation of the unity of the church as a single body of mutual concern.

Gathering for the Paul in Jerusalem became a central element of Paul's apostolic

practice. He describes the reasons for this in Romans chapter 15 verses 25 to 27. At present however I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the Paul among the saints at Jerusalem for they were pleased to do it and indeed they owe it to them for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

We learn in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1 to 4 that the Galatians had also participated in this gathering for the saints in Jerusalem. However in Antioch Paul has a confrontation with Cephas. This I believe occurs at the beginning of Acts chapter 15 after Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch at the end of Acts 14.

Acts 15 verses 1 to 2 describes the conflict. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

The details here tally with details of Paul's description of the events in Galatians 2 that it occurred in Antioch, that it was sparked by men coming up from Judea and that there was considerable debate and division as a result. Cephas presumably arrived in Antioch just before the events of Acts chapter 15 and when the men from Judea, from the church that James oversaw, came on the scene he changed his practice of eating with the Gentiles so as not to get into conflict with a powerful group in the Jerusalem church. This change in his practice immediately created a practical breach between apparently first class Jewish Christians and second class Gentile Christians.

And this breach would have been most powerfully felt in the context of the Lord's Supper where Jews and Gentiles would not be able to eat together. It is not entirely clear who the circumcision party are here. Are they Jews more generally or are they Christians from Judea requiring circumcision of Gentiles? It seems to me it's more likely the latter.

Paul saw Peter and other Jews like Barnabas who went along with the circumcision party as hypocrites. They weren't acting according to their personal convictions or in a consistent manner but through fear in a manner calculated to keep the peace. More seriously they were compromising the gospel in which Jews and Gentiles were now to constitute a single body.

The outcome of this incident is described in Acts chapter 15 verses 3 to 11. So being sent on their way by the church they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders and they declared all that God had done with them.

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said it is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter and after there had been much debate Peter stood up and said to them Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe and God who knows the heart bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us and he made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear but we believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.

Paul however does not record the Jerusalem council, the event of Acts chapter 15 at which Peter's speech suggests that Paul's argument won the day. Rather in verses 15 to 21 Paul presents the argument that he made to Peter at the time in Antioch an argument that presents the message of the rest of the book of Galatians in outline. By withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles Peter had re-established Jewish law as the framework over that of the new people established and defined by the rule of the Messiah.

The point here is not ethnic exclusivism but a practical denial and overturning of the reality brought in by the gospel. A single Jew-Gentile people under the reign of the Messiah defined by Christ not by the Jewish law. Paul argues that while he and Peter would once have regarded themselves chiefly in terms of their Jewish birth with Gentiles being thought of as outsiders and sinners, they now know otherwise.

People are not ultimately shown to be in right standing with God on the basis of things like circumcision through the dietary laws, through temple sacrifice and Jewish rituals, through Sabbaths and feasts. These practices were the markers of Jewish identity, the signs of covenant status. This is what Paul primarily means by the expression the works of the law.

The works of the law that Paul speaks of here are not the actions required by the moral law so much as they are Torah observance in a more specific sense, the practice of the more distinctive practices characteristic of Jewish identity. Many have read Paul's statements here as a denial of what has been called works righteousness, the attempt to earn salvation through good deeds, something that was very rightly and importantly challenged in the Reformation. Now that point is true enough and it's an exceedingly important one that's taught elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments.

However much of Paul's theology isn't making this point, it's making a slightly different one. His focus is not on moral deeds done to merit our standing before God but on something more subtle. It's about the practice of the Torah in the belief that observant Jewish covenant identity is what marks people out as being in right standing with God.

The point is not earning salvation in such a manner but receiving it in this way. But Paul makes it clear that this is not the way that the grace of Christ is received. Recognising this truth Peter, like Paul, had believed in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, so that they could enjoy right standing with God on that basis, not through Jewish covenant identity and Torah observance but through the faith of Christ.

Now what does this expression faith of Christ mean? Typically it has been taken to mean faith in Christ and most translations of the Bible have faith in Christ at this point. What has been called the objective genitive reading. A few decades ago the work of Richard Hayes and others reignited the case for what has been called the subjective genitive reading.

That it refers to the faith of Christ, generally understood as Christ's faithfulness in going to the cross for us. Others have ventured mediating suggestions such as a genitive of quality, an example being speaking of Christ faith, a faith exercised by believers independence upon and defined by Christ. And I believe that something along these lines is probably to be preferred over the other options.

Although at points I would lean slightly more to some of the senses highlighted by the subjective genitive without believing that the subjective genitive is the best way to translate it. The expression is I believe similar to that of the faith of Abraham in places like Romans chapter 4 verse 16. The faith of Abraham is Abraham faith.

It's both the faith of Abraham personally and the faith of the sons and daughters of Abraham who walk in his footsteps. In verse 16 it's juxtaposed with the works of the law. The works of the law are ordered around the reality of the law, while our faith is ordered around the reality and work of Christ.

In verse 17 Paul's argument proceeds. If Paul and Peter in their commitment to enjoying right standing with God on the basis of Christ seemed like those they formally categorised as sinners, Gentile outsiders to the covenant, as they lived like Gentiles and fraternised with Gentile Christians, does this make Christ someone creating a sinful and unclean body of people? Certainly not. However, if they re-erect the division between Jews and Gentiles established by Torah observance, that division that they had just dismantled, this is exactly what would appear to be the case.

Paul ends the passage with a startling and beautiful declaration of how his existence is now entirely defined by Christ, no longer by the Torah. The Torah, the Jewish law, hasn't ceased to exist, but it no longer plays the normative role in Paul's life. He has died to the Torah, through the Torah.

There's a sort of paradox here, as the Torah plays a role in its own destruction. I take this to refer to the fact that the Torah was always designed to serve a limited purpose, and that as it fulfills its purpose through the cross of Christ, it releases us from itself. Paul's

old existence, defined by the Torah, ended at Christ's cross, and now he has a new existence, defined by Christ and his life.

Paul has died, and risen again. The old Paul, the Torah observant Paul, zealous for the traditions of his fathers that he describes in chapter 1, verses 13-14, he's died, and the new Paul lives his life out of the life of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christ is living in him by his spirit.

To turn back to Torah observance, as that which defines those in right standing with God, would be to nullify the death of Christ, and the immeasurable grace of God that is expressed in that event. A question to consider. In verses 18-21, Paul switches from the more general we statements that he has been making earlier, to some of the most powerful I statements in the entirety of the scriptures.

Why might this shift be so important and illuminating? In the previous chapter, Paul continued to emphasize the divine origin of his message, a point that he had introduced at the opening chapter of the book of Galatians. In chapter 2, he had described his confrontation with Cephas at Antioch, when he and others withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles on account of the circumcision party. Having recounted the argument that he made against Cephas at that time, at the beginning of chapter 3, he now turns to the Galatians, to bring its full force to bear upon them.

He has already expressed his dismay at them in chapter 1, but now he is even more impassioned. The fact of the cross, the great truth whose force Paul has been at such pains to drive home to the Galatians when he was with them, seems to have been forgotten by them. It is in the event of the cross that the grace of God is made known, and it is in that event that lives like Paul's are completely refounded.

Out of the work of the cross flows the gift of the Spirit, yet the Galatians, having received the Spirit apart from the law, by simply hearing and believing the message of the cross, now seem to be turning away from the cross to the law. They are turning back from the new age of the Spirit to the old age of the flesh, and Paul wants to know from them whether, in their experience, God gives the gift of the Spirit by Torah observance or by hearing the message of the cross by faith. If the blessing of the Spirit was received entirely apart from living as observant Jews, why do they think that they now need to live in this way? The gift of the Spirit is not given, according to Torah observance, but to faith, whether from Jews or Gentiles.

The apostle Peter and the other leaders had learned this lesson back in the book of Acts, in Acts 10, verses 44-48. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, And then in Acts 11, verses 17-18, And finally in Acts 15, verses 8-11, The

leaders of the apostolic church discovered that God wasn't accepting Gentiles on the basis of their becoming proselytes and living as Jews, but as Gentiles, marked out not by Torah observance, but by faith.

Now it's important for us to understand that living as a Jew wasn't something so much that people did to earn salvation. It was rather a status that they enjoyed. Part of the scandal of the cross, though, was that God's grace cut directly across the presumed status that the Jews enjoyed, and brought grace to the Gentiles on an equal footing.

And the rest of the chapter explains the logic of all of this. One can imagine the Judaizers, Paul's opponents, emphasising the importance of the law in the Old Testament narrative. They could talk about statements that Jesus had made about not abolishing the law, but fulfilling it.

They could present Torah observance as the proper shape of Christian obedience. The gift of the Torah at Sinai was the establishment of a covenant bond with the nation, and teasing covenant apart from the Torah would seem nigh impossible. It shouldn't be difficult to feel the persuasive force that such an argument might have had.

And Paul's response is to show how the grace of God in Christ, apart from the law, is fitting, not simply dispensing with the earlier story, but bringing it to an appropriate climax. Paul makes his case by providing a reading of the story, the story from Abraham onwards, one that presents his reading of the Gospel as a fitting denouement. Paul doesn't give a complete answer to the questions that might be raised here, but he does give a response that clarifies a very great deal.

He takes his starting point with the way that Abraham, the father of Israel, was marked out by faith, as one in good covenant standing with God, an event that occurred prior to circumcision or the advent of the law, way back in Genesis chapter 15 verses 4-6. And he brought him outside and said, It wasn't through Torah observance that Abraham was in good standing with God, but through belief in a promise that was given to him. Those defined by faith, rather than by Torah observance, are defined by the very same thing as defined the father of the Jews, Abraham.

And indeed, the blessing of the Gentiles was announced in advance to Abraham, when, at his call, he was told that all of the nations would be blessed in him. Paul goes so far as to describe this as The Gospel is the declaration of the reign of Christ, a declaration of which an international people is an intrinsic element. Those who are defined by faith are not just like Abraham, they are the sons of Abraham, the man of faith, and they are blessed along with him.

However, by contrast with those marked out by Abraham-like faith, those who depend upon Torah observance for their standing with God are under a curse. The law held out a curse over the unfaithful. The point of the Torah wasn't perfect spotless obedience, it

made provision for atonement, but the Torah did require observance, and Israel had failed in that observance.

The law considered in and of itself was never the foundation of right standing before God. Habakkuk 2, verse 4 declared that The logic of right standing with God is one of promise and trust. But the law, however, operated according to the principle of receipt of the law and observance of it.

The law had not brought Israel into the blessing of right standing with God at all. Quite the opposite, it had brought Israel under the curse. Right standing with God had always depended upon a logic extrinsic to the law.

Throughout the Old Testament itself we can see this. Whether in sacrifice, which is a sort of enacted prayer, or in prophecy, Israel looked to something beyond the law to deliver them from the judgment that the law itself placed them under. In books like Deuteronomy, after laying out the law, Moses makes clear that the law will end up bringing its devastating curse upon Israel.

It will only be through the promised intervention of God, an intervention received by faith, that Israel would be delivered from the predicament that the law brought them into. For Paul, the cross of Christ is that which deals with the crisis of the curse of the law. It was by the cross that the Lord had redeemed Israel, not by or according to Israel's own Torah observance.

Having dealt decisively with the curse of the cross, the blessing of Abraham could be given to the Gentiles, and the promise of Abraham could be received by faith. To understand part of what Paul has in mind here, we should probably think back to the call of Abraham, and what lay in the backdrop of it, the story of Babel. The building of Babel, this great city and a tower, was an attempt to make people's name great.

It was an attempt to forge a great and a powerful human solidarity, so that people would not be scattered abroad. It was an attempt to build a tower uniting heaven and earth. But as a result of this, the nations are divided by a curse.

But then God calls this man called Abraham in the next chapter, and he promises to make Abraham's name great. As we work through the story of Abraham, we see an alternative to the tower of Babel. There is a ladder leading from heaven to earth, a ladder that Jacob sees at Bethel.

There's also the promise of a new human solidarity, a solidarity that's formed through blessing. If the nations were formed through a curse, there is going to be the blessing of the nations through Abraham. God is going to provide an alternative to Babel.

This is the implicit promise of Abraham, and this is fulfilled by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. That's why Paul connects the gift of the Spirit and the promise given to

Abraham, because these two things belong together in a proper understanding of the story. At Pentecost, there is a conduit forged between heaven and earth.

Christ ascends and the Spirit comes down, and there's this union between heaven and earth forged. There's a union of people from every tribe, people, tongue and nation, as people declare in many different tongues the glorious works of God. Languages once divided at Babel are now brought together in a unified testimony to the glory of God.

All of this fulfills the promise to Abraham, and the fact that this occurs, as it clearly does in the book of Acts, without people being circumcised and observing the law, reveals that Torah observance is not the basis upon which we stand in right relationship with God. One does not need to be a Jew to be a member of God's new people. This purpose and promise, right there at the beginning of the history of Israel, in the call of Abraham, cannot be annulled or undermined by anything that comes later.

The promise was always made to Abraham and his seed, seed being singular. The promise wasn't to a number of different families of Abraham, but to one people of Abraham, a single seed. The envisaged seed was always a Jew and Gentile reality, one in which there was no division between the two.

God gave this inheritance in the form of a promise. If God had later given the law in a way that added lots of terms and conditions and small print to the promise, it would have hollowed out and denied and negated the promise. The question then naturally arises though, what was the purpose of the law then? And Paul turns to this question in verses 19-20.

For Paul, the law plays a subsidiary and temporary role. He foregrounds the parts played by the angels and the intermediary Moses, and this downplays its finality and its character as direct divine gift. The role of the angels at Sinai is also discussed elsewhere in the New Testament.

In Acts 7-53, You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. And in Hebrews 2-3, For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It doesn't bring about the unity that was awaited. For Paul, this is a unity mysteriously witnessed to in the core confession of Israel's faith, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6-4, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The law didn't bring the oneness of a united seed, a seed united in fellowship with each other and in fellowship with God. Rather, the law was characterized by intermediation, which brings parties together while holding them apart. It did not bring about the communion with God characterized as sonship, and it also served to divide Jews from Gentiles.

And there's something unfitting about a God who is one and yet has divided peoples. The law, then, was more provisional. It wasn't there to set terms upon the promise.

It was added because of transgressions, Paul says, an expression whose meaning is not immediately clear. This is a statement whose meaning will probably need to be discerned from a broader acquaintance with Paul's theology. Perhaps it means that the law served to bring sin to light, to smoke it out into the open.

And it achieved this by bringing righteousness to light, by silhouetting in prohibitions the form of life characteristic of the spirit. It mostly revealed life negatively by exposing the death and the judgment that it outlined in its prohibitions. The law never could bring about the life that it revealed, and it ended up dealing curse and death to a people who could not live within its strictures.

Within the tabernacle, the temple and the sacrificial system, the law did provide a structure within which God was present in a highly bounded way in the midst of a sinful people. And it presented some way of approach, but in the process it revealed the scale of the gulf, and it could not overcome this gulf. The judgment that the law brought Israel under placed all humanity on a sort of equal footing.

Even as Israel enjoyed a privileged proximity to the Lord, and unique benefits as a nation formed through blessing, it ended up under the curse, like the Gentiles. In the end, one way or another, everyone found themselves ending up under the power of sin, so that when the promise came, it could be received on equal terms too. For Israel, the law was like a guardian for a child during the period of its minority.

It placed some bounds upon their sin, and it also served a teaching function. The law came with blessings and curses, much as a child needs to be taught by external rewards or punishments. For those who meditated upon the law, and delighted in it, the law served to direct them to the way of faith and love.

It revealed the limits of its own observance as a basis for standing with God, but also how it would be fulfilled in love for, and faith in, the gracious, promising God. However, for most, it ended up bringing curse, and a sort of imprisonment. It restricted their willfulness, but it also revealed their willfulness, and placed them under punitive measures.

This was all provisional though, precisely in order to prepare people for, and lead to Christ. Now, however, faith has come. Faith is the principle of a new way of life, something that flows from Christ by the work of His Spirit.

By faith we have right standing with God on the foundation of grace. And although Paul does not discuss it at this point, faith also produces a new way of life, a way of life characterised by the law of God written upon our hearts. The gift of the law at Sinai is

juxtaposed with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

One of the principal results of all of this is that we now have unity with God, and unity with others, both of which the law restricted. The law divided Jews from Gentiles, and also held God and man at safe distances from each other. However, now we enjoy sonship and fellowship with God through faith, a standing received as a gracious gift through God's gift of His Son.

The promised seed to Abraham is realised in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. While circumcision divided Jew from Greek, and male from female, baptism is a sign of union. It unites us to Christ, and it unites us to each other.

Baptism is not miraculous, working apart from faith. Rather, just as a wedding formally unites two people in their love, and a wedding with no love is a charade, so baptism brings us into a union that is lived out in, and on the basis of, faith. It's not magic, and it doesn't negate the necessity of faith.

Rather, it presents to our faith the blessings of sonship that have been given to us. It is founded in Christ's own faithfulness in His death and resurrection, and it's lived out in our answering faith. In baptism we formally enter into union with Christ.

We put on Christ, as Paul puts it here. Henceforth, our very bodies, the root of ourselves, our bodies which exist prior to our agency, our volition, or our subjectivity, they're defined by Christ. In baptism we are all buried with Christ so that we might be raised with Him.

Baptism also unites us with all of the other people who have been baptised as a united people in the church that baptism marks out, whatever our background and whatever our identity. In this new people, old divisions, like the divisions the Gentiles were re-erecting by turning to the law, are overcome, and we all become one. Modern readers tend to read verse 28 as a statement about equality, or even in some cases interchangeability, and this does not quite grasp Paul's point.

Paul's point is not the equality of detached individuals with varying characteristics, but a declaration of the unity of formerly opposed or alienated groups in a new solidarity. While there are some clear senses in which a form of equality follows from this, where all recipients of the promised Holy Spirit and stand on the same ground of grace before God, for instance, it is not an axiomatic equality, a radically generalisable equality, nor yet an equality that renders people interchangeable. Paul's point is not that human beings have always been equal, rather his point is relative to this event of God in Christ.

Those things that would once divide us no longer define our existence and have ceased to be the barriers that they once were. The result of all of this is not a lot of detached and equal individuals, but various and differing members of a single and undivided

family. This new family in Christ is the fulfilment of the promise that was made to Abraham.

A question to consider. Paul's argument in this chapter is founded upon an extensive reading of and reflection upon the history of redemption. He isn't making general statements about an abstract way of salvation.

He is rather exploring the way that God has acted in history and expressing the force of the implications that that has for the Galatians at that moment in time. If you were challenged to retell the underlying story that Paul explores in this chapter in your own words, how would you go about doing it? Paul has just described the way in which the law served as a guardian, indeed as a jailer, until Christ came, and now in chapter 4 he develops that image further. Verses 1 to 7 of this chapter are largely a recapitulation of the verses that precede them in chapter 3 verses 23 to 29.

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

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. It can be illuminating to read these verses alongside chapter 4 verses 1 to 7 and see the parallels between statements such as, but now that faith has come, and, but when the fullness of time had come. There are also parallels between verses 3 to 6 of chapter 4 and chapter 3 verses 13 to 14.

Paul gives the illustration of a child who is the heir of a great estate. As long as the child is a minor though, he does not have the management of the estate and can himself be under the supervision of the stewards of his father's estate. This period of subjection involves being under sin, in verse 22 of chapter 3, under the law, in verse 23 of chapter 3, and enslaved to the elementary principles of the world, verse 3 of this chapter.

What the elementary principles of the world are is much debated. Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles or basic teachings. Others that they are elemental spirits.

However, I think the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements. Another reference to these elements is found in Colossians chapter 2, verse 8 and 16 to 23. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast the head, from which the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, and asceticism, and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. In Colossians chapter 2, as in verses 8-10 of this chapter, the elementary principles seem to refer to the physical cosmos. Old covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around, and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rituals, such as circumcision, and the various sacrifices, etc.

These things are not bad in themselves, and properly used, some things like them can still have a place in worship and broader Christian practice. However, they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of clean and unclean, and calendrical feasts. In this respect, faithful Jewish religion had a great deal in common with the religion of the pagans.

This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements. Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, in terms of physical building and its furniture, and the like. This system constructed of the elementary principles, guarded and guided Israel in its childhood.

However, in the new covenant, there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance, which is Christ. We don't come under the rule of a physical temple, but we relate to the body of Christ. We don't have the same physical sacrifices that we perform, but we perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

Our worship still involves symbolic mediation, where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts we are performing. But we no longer act in terms of symbolic intermediation, where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities, so that we relate to the physical elements rather than to the spiritual realities more directly. When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son.

The Son is born of a woman. He is human. He is born as a human being of a human being.

He is also the seed of the woman promised way back in Genesis 3.15. I will put enmity

between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. He is born under the law, born under the old order of the elementary principles, within the sacrificial system, the dietary laws, circumcision, the temple, etc.

He redeems those under the law, delivering them from slavery to the guardianship of the law, so that they can enjoy the status and privilege of full sons entering into their inheritance. Just as God sent the Son, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, so that we might relate to him as full sons and heirs. The period of supervision by the elementary principles was temporary.

It ended when the time came for the child to enter into the inheritance. For Gentiles the situation was different. They too were under the elementary principles, also functioning within society subordinated to physical and cosmic principles in their sacrificial systems, with their idols, their temples, and all these other things.

But they were not as those set apart as the appointed heirs. The way that Paul aligns the status of Gentiles and the status of old covenant Jews, both being under the elementary principles of the world, really should be startling to us. It would have been to his first readers.

Paul is shocked that the Galatian Christians, having been delivered from their subjection to the elements as Gentiles, and brought into the freedom of sonship in Christ, would turn back to the subjection to those elements characteristic of Jews. This is like the son who is no longer a minor, but the heir of all, going back to the stewards as if they were his masters. Or perhaps, to be more precise, it's like someone who's been adopted into a family and given the right to enjoy the full run of the inheritance, seeking to come under the rule of stewards that had ruled his fellow heirs before they had entered into their majority.

While the heir is privileged, even when he hasn't entered into the inheritance, if he turns back from entering into his inheritance and continues to subject himself to the guardians, that privilege becomes meaningless. At this point, Paul expresses some of the more personal character of his dismay. He reminds the Galatians of the bond that they once shared, speaking of himself as if a mother struggling in childbirth for them.

Paul became as the Gentile Christians of the Galatian churches. He ceased living as a Jew and lived as a Gentile. He speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 21.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. He now wants them to become as he is, to live as those who are not under the law. The Gentiles were never under the law in the way that the Jews were, but they should recognize the similarities between the elementary order to which Israel was subject under the law, and

that to which they were subject as pagans.

When Paul first encountered the Galatians, he was suffering from a physical infirmity, perhaps as a result of some cruel punishment that had been inflicted upon him. Later in the epistle he speaks of bearing the marks of Jesus in his body, in chapter 6. We might also think of the thorn in the flesh that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 12. Some have speculated, on the basis of the strange reference to the removal of their eyes in verses 15, and in verse 11 of chapter 6, where Paul refers to the largeness of his writing, that his infirmity might be related to his eyesight.

But I think it's most likely that the expression in verse 15 is just proverbial. The Galatian Christians are being led astray by the Judaizers, resulting in a cooling of their affection for Paul. The Judaizers are zealous to win them over, so that the Galatian churches will be zealous for their Judaizing cause.

Paul is perplexed, feeling that he must begin all over again with them. It's like going through the agony of birth again, even after you thought you brought a child to birth. He concludes the passage with an allegorical argument from Genesis.

The law isn't merely the commandments, but it's also the narrative parts of the Pentateuch. Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar and their two sons is a strange and confusing argument to many people. However, examined more closely, it should make more sense to us.

There is a strong logic to it. It involves a series of contrasts between two sets of sons, between Ishmael and Isaac, and the realities that define them, spoken of as their mothers, Hagar and Sarah respectively. Hagar is associated with slavery, Sarah with freedom.

Hagar with the flesh, Sarah with the promise and the spirit. Hagar with Mount Sinai, Sarah implicitly with the heavenly mountain. Hagar with the old covenant, Sarah with the new covenant.

Hagar with the present Jerusalem, Sarah with the Jerusalem above. Paul's purpose is not to wrench the story of Ishmael and Isaac from its context in Genesis, and use it as an illustration of some general truths. First, the theme of being sons of Abraham was a central one in the preceding chapter, so this isn't something that's chosen as an example at random.

He is drawing a contrast between two different types of sonship of Abraham, already witnessed to in the Old Testament itself. Second, he is revisiting the text of Genesis, and we should see that Paul's use of the story arises from themes that are very much at play there. In Genesis, Isaac is the child of promise and the spirit, while Ishmael is born of the flesh.

In the fullness of time, Gentiles have been brought to birth as the sons and daughters of Abraham, and this is a wonderful event, although it's against the regular course of nature. It's a gracious act of God by His spirit, not an achievement of the flesh. The same God who miraculously opened the womb of Sarah has brought the Gentiles to birth.

Much as Ishmael, the child of the flesh, wasn't the true heir, so true inheritance belongs to the children of promise like Isaac. For the Galatians, this means that their status must rest on something more than fleshly descent from, or fleshly association with, Abraham. They are free children who are no longer minors.

James Jordan describes the analogy in some depth. The reason that Hagar and Ishmael can be used to illustrate the Jews is that they were indeed the first Jews. Every Israelite was like Ishmael in that he started out uncircumcised and then was circumcised on the eighth day, as Ishmael was at the age of thirteen.

Like Ishmael and Abraham, Israel took upon themselves the burden of circumcision after they had lived for a time as uncircumcised. The fact that Ishmael was relieved of that burden when Isaac took it up was a message to Israel that they would be relieved of it when the Messiah took it up. Hagar and Ishmael made an exodus into the wilderness, but came only as far as Paran.

This is the truth also about Israel. Though they entered the promised land in a physical sense, they did not really enter it. As Paul writes in Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 4 Ishmael was delivered from being under the yoke of circumcision and became a God-fearer.

Just so, Israel should accept being delivered from the yoke of the law, considered as a death-dealing burden, and become God-fearers. Now this would raise questions for us about the current state of Israel. Israel descended from Abraham according to the flesh, and indeed Paul takes up those questions later on in the book of Galatians to an extent, but also elsewhere in places like Romans.

Israel's place is not simply negated. Casting out the bondwoman and her son becomes necessary as they persecute and obscure the status of the true heirs, so the Galatians need to recognize what side of the allegory they stand on, and deal with those acting on the side of Hagar accordingly. A question to consider, in what ways might Jesus be compared to Isaac? Galatians chapter 5 begins with a verse summing up the force of the argument of the preceding chapter.

Christ has set us free for freedom, and freedom is of little use if you use it to place yourself in slavery. The Galatian Christians had once been in slavery to idolatry and the physical elements in pagan religion. However, they had been set free by the spirit of sonship.

They ought not to turn to the Jewish law as an alternative master. It may not be as cruel

as the bondage of paganism, but it remains a sort of bondage. Indeed, now that Christ has come, turning to the Torah is much worse, because what was once a guardian, instructing and constraining a sinful people prior to the advent of Christ, actually now functions as a rival to him.

For the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to commit themselves to Torah observance, as the way to enjoy standing with God, would be to cast away Christ and all that he represents. They would have chosen to place their standing with God on a completely different foundation than that which was graciously given to them in Christ. They would have turned to the foundation of observant Judaism, cutting themselves off from Christ.

And they would have committed themselves to observe the commandment, which ultimately would place them under the curse. However, the true heirs wait for the hope of righteousness, they look forward to the vindication of God, and they do so through the Spirit, by faith. The reality that gives us standing before God is not the law or Jewish identity, it's the work of the Spirit.

And the way that we live out this identity is not by Torah observance, but by faith. For those in Christ, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, is ultimately irrelevant. Neither of these are the foundation upon which our standing with God rests.

Paul doesn't condemn Jews for continuing to practice circumcision. However, while circumcision was once the mark of a privileged Jewish status before God, in Christ it no longer functions that way. Both Jews and Greeks, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, stand before God on the same ground of God's grace in Christ.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything in Christ, because God's grace is given without respect to either. The Judaizers have diverted the Galatian churches from the right course that they were on. Their false teaching threatens to corrupt everything, as a little leaven can leaven an entire lump of dough.

And Paul hopes by this point that the Galatians will recognize the danger of the Judaizers and remove them. It seems that some had suggested that Paul himself still advocated circumcision. This was probably because word of the events of Acts 16, verses 1-3 had travelled around.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. The fact that Paul would circumcise Timothy seems strange to us, given all that he has

taught in Galatians to this point. However, his actions can readily be understood as an attempt to avoid placing an unnecessary stumbling block before the people to whom he was ministering.

He had described this missionary policy in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23. Timothy was Paul's son in the Gospel, his close assistant. Like Paul, Timothy was prepared to become like the Jews for the sake of winning them to the Gospel.

However, in getting circumcised, he was not seeking to found his standing with God upon the Torah and Torah observance. Paul's whole point is that circumcision and uncircumcision are ambivalent matters with regard to our standing before God. So if getting circumcised will help you win over a few more to the Gospel, which teaches that standing with God is not on the basis of the Torah, then go right ahead.

There's no problem with it, provided that you aren't putting a stumbling block in the way of uncircumcised persons by doing this. There's no problem whatsoever, because circumcision doesn't matter and uncircumcision doesn't matter. Paul makes clear that, even if he is prepared to have someone like Timothy circumcised, the fact that he is being persecuted on account of his message of the cross is proof that he isn't preaching circumcision.

If he were, he would just be a good observant Jew with a few divergent viewpoints and would be of little threat to anyone. Paul expresses the wish that the Judaizers, so eager to cut off foreskins, would go all the way and completely emasculate themselves. In so doing, they would come under the disqualification from the assembly of Deuteronomy 23.1. No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

Their situation, then, would better testify to their state relative to the people of God. Paul reiterates and sharpens the point with which he opened the chapter. The Galatians were set free for freedom.

Christians have been released from bondage to the elements of the world by the Spirit and need to use that freedom in a loving manner. Indeed, the law, with respect to its moral instruction, a moral instruction designed for a willful and flesh-governed people, is fulfilled in the positive command to love your neighbour as yourself, and it is this love that the Spirit works in us. It should note here that Paul, while declaring the end of the Torah as something that sets Jews apart from Gentiles, is teaching that the Spirit fulfills the Torah in some other respects.

There is a movement from the external law addressed to rebellious flesh to a law written on the hearts that is now lived out as the positive expression of liberty. This is akin to the movement from the restrictions that someone feels when they first learn a musical instrument, where they have to play particular notes and they're given scales to practice

and all these sorts of things, and it feels like an external obstacle, an imposition upon the will. But yet, as that instrument is learned, the freedom of the virtuoso can develop, for whom the logic of the music and the instrument he is playing is a means of freedom itself.

It's a way in which he can willingly express his interiority. The debate about the Torah occurs against the backdrop of the fact that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, a statement with which Paul opened the epistle in chapter 1 verse 4. The whole of the old order, whether lived out under the Torah or far from God in paganism, is lived out in the flesh, under the elementary principles. It's a realm characterized by sin, by death, by the passions, and by the incapacity to bring about life or righteousness.

Christ brings the new age of the spirit, where people can be liberated from the power of the flesh, whether experienced in bondage to the guardian of the Torah or as Gentiles. And the result of this liberty is a new way of life. There are ways, of course, that this is anticipated within the Old Testament.

The law first comes in a primarily prohibitive and prescriptive form, but yet the people are told that they must meditate upon it, that they will learn wisdom from it. And as they do so, a law that was primarily external to them, prohibitive, constraining, and an imposition upon their willfulness, becomes something that is within them. In the Psalms we see this expression of the law from within.

The law is no longer an imposition, but it has become the delight of the heart and is expressed freely from within. In the wisdom literature we see a movement from the law as primarily external commandments to the principles of justice and the insight of those commandments being internalized and now expressed through insight into the way that the world works. In the Prophets we see something even further.

For the Prophet, the word of God can be eaten, digested, taken into themselves, and then expressed like a burning fire from within. What was once words on tablets of stone outside condemning, something that stood opposed to the willfulness of the person, has now become part of the person and a free expression. The Prophets, of course, particularly in places like Jeremiah 31-34, promise that the Lord will one day write his law upon the hearts of his people, that that law will no longer be an external commandment condemning them, but it will be one freely obeyed from within.

And this is what Paul is talking about here. We should also observe the movement in the form of rhetoric between the Old Covenant and the New. Prohibition is the rhetorical form of the law, but the rhetoric of the Spirit is one of persuasion, because the law is being written on our hearts by the Spirit, and persuasion is a form of rhetoric that addresses people who have a strong apprehension of the good within themselves.

Life in the flesh is characterised by rebellion, and by all the impulses of untamed sinful nature. It is driven by our desire to dominate others, for instance. When people live in such a manner, they will bite and devour each other.

However, such people must beware, as those who live by the sword will die by the sword. If they bite and devour others, they are at risk of being consumed themselves. The order of the flesh is a social, not merely an individual order.

It is an order that creates and sustains divisions, whereas the Spirit overcomes and traverses them. It is an order of dissipation and degeneracy, where people are enslaved to their lusts and passions. It is an order of hatred and anger.

As those given the Spirit, Christians must walk in the Spirit, they must starve the flesh. The Spirit and the flesh are two powers to which we must relate, but the Spirit, of course, is the greater of the two. If we follow the Spirit, we will not just do whatever we want, as the Spirit will direct us so that, although we are not under the law, we will be marked by the Spirit's fruit.

The flesh, the animating principle of the evil age from which we have been delivered, whether we were living under the law as Jews or, apart from the law, as Gentiles, has its distinctive and its characteristic works. These are the works that the law constrained, but also, in other ways, provoked and revealed. Many of the works that Paul lists here are works that reveal people's lack of self-control.

People who remain under the rule of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of God. The fruit of the Spirit, by contrast, is completely different. Although we are set free by grace through faith, the liberty that we have received is lived out and demonstrated in a transformed manner of life that comes from the work of the Spirit that we were given apart from any status that gave us claim on God.

There is a movement from unruly passions to self-control. Once again, these are not just about individuals. Communities that operate in the Spirit will be characterised by these virtues, as we will see in the next chapter.

The law has nothing to say to these fruit of the Spirit. They are not produced by the law, but neither are they condemned by the law. Indeed, they live out the life to which the law always testified and pointed and declared, but which it could never achieve or give.

The flesh is decisively dealt with in the death of Christ. Christians should die with Christ, so that, as Paul said of himself, it is no longer they who live, but Christ who lives in them. A question to consider.

Can you think of any ways in which the rite of circumcision itself, rightly understood, anticipated and pointed towards Paul's message in Galatians? In Galatians chapter 6, Paul brings the argument of his epistle to a conclusion. He has just listed the fruit of the

Spirit in verses 22-23 of the preceding chapter. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

As John Berkeley observes, these fruit are given concrete form in the communal maxims that follow. Verses 1-10 discuss the shape that the life of the Christian community must take, and it is one marked by the fruit of the Spirit throughout. As Berkeley remarks, the fruit that springs from the Spirit's life is here identified in the delicate negotiation of communal relations, in behavioural qualities fostered over time.

The love that stands at their head is inherently social. If faith is operative in love, it could never be reduced to an individual relationship to Christ. The chapter begins with counsel for how to restore a sinning brother.

It is addressed to those who are spiritual, to people who are living in the life of the Spirit. Grace, gentleness and humility are the means by which this must be done. We do not wield people's sins against them as means of building ourselves up, but gently and carefully reach out to them as fellow sinners.

Having recognised and sought to remove the logs in our own eyes, we won't be inclined to vaunt ourselves over others, or to believe that we are above or immune to the pull of sin. So often we see the sins of others as fuel for our self-righteous superiority. However, if we are spiritual, our desire will be the building up of the body of Christ and the deliverance and restoration of the sinner.

The flesh pits us against each other, each person living for his own sake and for his own advancement. The condemnation of the law is a weapon that we can wield against each other, seeking to imprison our enemies in guilt and condemnation, so that we might gain social and moral advantage over them. As Paul described it in the preceding chapter, this is biting and devouring each other, and those who practice this form of life will ultimately get consumed themselves.

In a society of individuals competing against each other for honour, sin is an opportunity for competitive advantage, something to be seized upon, often in subtle ways. This perverse desire in us can even infect the way that harmful yet delicious gossip about others is shared under the guise of prayer points. Bringing public dishonour upon others can burnish our reputation by comparison.

Yet a spiritual community responds to such moments with grace and gentleness. They are especially vigilant at such times not to be trapped in the sin of pride, to which we can so easily fall prey at such moments. Recognition of our own vulnerability to sin brings humility, which puts us in a better position to restore others.

The alternative to the competitive pursuit of honour is the willing adoption of the work of slaves. We bear one another's burdens. This is the work of service, but not now of a class

of slaves to their masters, but of each person to his neighbour.

We are all to be slaves of each other in love, a reciprocal form of relationship where no person is ultimately placed over others. We all stand on the same level ground of grace, and everyone willingly places others before themselves. In placing others before ourselves we are simply following the law of Christ Himself, for this is the way that our Master took with us.

He is our Master, yet He ministered to us in love. In this way our lives are lived according to the rule of Christ. But this is also the way in which the moral purpose of the Torah is achieved.

Adopting the way of service is informed by an honest self-appraisal, where we recognise that when it comes to the game of honour, we are all ultimately bankrupts. The game of honour is built around the projection of a false and inflated image of our righteousness in a competitive realm of mutual display, and we reject this way of boasting. Yet we adopt a new boast.

We boast in the cross of Christ, by which we have died to this old world of competitive honour, with its biting and devouring of each other. We now boast in Christ, a boast proclaimed on the basis of our own bankruptcy. Whether circumcision or uncircumcision, we have no status with God that is not ultimately founded upon completely unmerited grace in Christ.

When we minister to others, we must always primarily test our own work. Paul knows that we can so easily take up a moral interest in others in order to deflect from our own moral responsibilities. Ultimately we will all bear our own loads, as we have to give account of ourselves, not our neighbour, before God on the last day.

We should not be so preoccupied with helping out all of our neighbours with the moats in their eyes that we have not dealt with the logs in our own. Under the teaching of bearing one another's burdens, Paul gives the example of teachers and learners. This is a classic asymmetric relationship, a hierarchical relationship that many would think of.

However, Paul wants us to see how it too can be subject to this principle that breaks down the hierarchy. The teacher is not to place themselves over the learner, and the learner is to consider themselves and to act as a minister to those teaching them, as they minister to those ministering to them in prayer, encouragement, financial support, hospitality and all these other things. All stand together under the authority of Christ in the mutual dependence of his body.

We so easily see other people's gifts as threats to our own honour, but in the spirit we each employ our gifts for the service of our neighbours and so overcome the competitive struggle of honour that many labour under. Paul solemnly warns the Galatians against

carelessness in their lives. We either sow to the flesh or we sow to the spirit, and there will be harvests.

God is not mocked. Those who act according to the flesh will ultimately face the consequences and rewards of their way of life. Those, for instance, who have given themselves to biting and devouring others will find that they too are consumed.

However, those who sow to the spirit will end up reaping eternal life. The process of sowing to the spirit is one that takes self-control, takes patience and perseverance, yet sowing to the flesh comes quite naturally. Life has its seasons of sowing, seasons where we are making decisions and developing habits and developing contacts and relationships that will have their consequences many years down the line.

Then we have seasons of reaping, when we receive the consequences of the ways of life to which we have given ourselves. These can be periods of crisis, times when we realise the mistakes that we have made. Such times tend to hit at particular seasons of people's lives.

We talk about the mid-life crisis, for instance. Recognising these times of harvest, we need to be careful what we are sowing. For Paul, it is clear that eternal life will not be received apart from living in the spirit.

We do not receive our standing with God on the basis of anything we are or anything we have done, yet our union with Christ, who alone is the basis of our standing with God, is lived out in the life of the spirit, and those who do not produce the spirit's fruit demonstrate that they have no part in him. It can be so easy to grow weary in doing good. We see the wicked prosper, we see the wicked being honoured, while we can suffer and be shamed.

Yet if we faithfully persevere, we can be assured of a reward, and the wicked for their part will finally receive the harvest of their actions too. The Judaizers are concerned to make a good showing in the realm of competitive mutual display of the flesh. They are very concerned to look good to the unbelieving Jews by downplaying the scandal of the cross, defining themselves primarily by Torah observance.

Indeed, circumcising the Galatian Christians and bringing them over to the way of Torah observance as proselytes is a means by which they can look better to their unbelieving Jewish neighbours. See, we've made some converts! As Christians, it can be so easy to be trapped in the realm of the flesh ourselves, concerned to appear good to unbelievers, for whom we will use our fellow Christians as means to advance ourselves. Perhaps we will broadcast and emphasise their sins to make us look good by comparison.

Or perhaps we will disown them, as the Judaizers might have disowned Paul, in order to appear to be on the right side. Perhaps we will, like the Judaizers, fearfully go down the

way of pursuing conformity with the cultural norms in order to downplay the scandal of the faith. Yet because of the cross of Christ, Paul has been crucified to this old world, this old world of mutual display, competitive honour and seeking the approval of men.

Christ's crucifixion was the ultimate in a dishonourable death, a body stripped and beaten, spat upon and marked, hung, impotent and exposed on a wooden cross as a public shame. This is the absolute negation of the world of the flesh. Yet this is the badge of honour, it's the defining event for the Christian.

When Paul says that he bears in his body the marks of Jesus, he might be referring to the deep welts in his back from whips, the crooked gait of a man whose body has been battered by many cruelties, the signs of a person that the world has spat out, much as it spat out his master at Calvary. For such a person what remains? Not the old structures of honour in the world of the flesh, things like circumcision and the competitive pursuit of social status and advantage and advancement over others, but a new creation. Paul pronounces a blessing upon everyone who has adopted this pattern of Christ, the way of life that is founded upon and defined by him, not by the works of the law, not by the status of the Torah, not by the honour that is given by men, but by the grace of God, an event that overcomes and nullifies all of these status and honour games that we play.

In giving this blessing he particularly mentions the Jews who have adopted this way of life, who have grounded their lives not in the honour given by Torah, in circumcision, or in the status that they have as an exclusive nation, but in the grace of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. They are the Israel of God. A question to consider.

How does the spirit reorient our attitude to doing good to others? How does this way of life differ from that lived in the flesh?