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The call of Jeremiah. Justification through faith of Christ rather than the works of the Law.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah Chapter 1. The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Jehoshiah the son of Ammon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Jehoshiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Jehoshiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. 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.

Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth, see I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land, for behold I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord. And they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah.

And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.

Jeremiah is the largest prophetic book, and one of the three major prophets. Jeremiah, as we learn from the beginning of his prophecy, prophesied from the thirteenth year of Jeziel, which is 627 BC. It was in this year that Asubanopol of Assyria died.

During this period Assyria was in decline, and Babylon was the rising power. Jeremiah continued until a few years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, over forty years later, when he wrote from Egypt. Jeremiah's ministry was in the final decades of the kingdom of Judah, prior to the captivity in Babylon, and he foretold what awaited the nation.

The book shares its final chapter with the book of 2 Kings. The book of Jeremiah is a compilation of material. Jack Lundbaum writes, The character of the book of Jeremiah, as a compilation, has led some to question its literary unity.

However, closer study of the book will reveal ways in which both various parts, and perhaps even the whole, all hang together. It is entirely possible that the logic by which it hangs together may be strange to us as moderns, but we should not dismiss its coherence on that account. The ordering is strongly influenced by chronology, but not determined by it.

Material is placed out of chronological order at several points in the book. As Lundbaum

maintains, Chronology is merely one of several criteria by which the compilation of such a book would proceed. At some points material of a specific genre is clustered together.

At others, thematic considerations seem to be more determinative of the order. And at yet others, material is ordered according to the audience to whom it is addressed. The division of the material addressed to different nations in the later part of the book is an instance of this principle dominating the ordering.

Lundbaum notes the importance of catchwords, key repeated words or phrases, which can also serve as connective tissue between adjacent units of material, especially in the first twenty chapters. The material of the book is very diverse in character. Much of the material first took an oral form, but was already written down in Jeremiah's lifetime according to divine instruction and dictated by Jeremiah himself to Baruch the son of Neriah.

This is something recorded in the book itself. The fourth year of Jehoiakim, 605 BC is a key date in the prophecy. In chapter 36 we learn that in that year Jeremiah gave up his past prophecies and dictated them to Baruch.

The writing down of Jeremiah's prophecy is part of the story recorded in the book and the book, in its various parts and in later editions as its collection grew, wasn't just a sort of cold storage to preserve the past words of the prophet, but is, as it were, an active player in the story itself, serving as a testimony. There are differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint Hebrew and Greek versions of the text. The Septuagint version is significantly shorter, having a greater difference in length than any other Old Testament book.

The versions diverge at chapter 25 verse 13 and in the Masoretic text there is verse 14 as a bridge to the material that follows. It is followed by oracles against the foreign nations in the Septuagint, which are situated in chapters 46-51 in the Masoretic text. The oracles against the nations are differently ordered in the Septuagint version as well.

The Septuagint misses various superscriptions for prophecies. The Masoretic text contains various clarifying single words or phrases. There are some duplicated passages in the Masoretic text which accounts for some of the discrepancy in the length of the books.

The shorter Septuagint version was rejected by the rabbis in favour of the longer Masoretic text and there are good reasons for their judgement on this point. Lumbombe suggests that chapters 1-20 were the initial edition of the book of Jeremiah from which the collection later grew. These are followed by a collection addressed to the royal house of Judah and to the prophets.

Much of the heart of the book of Jeremiah from chapter 24-45 is narrative material

concerning Jeremiah. Near its heart is a body of material that has been called the book of restoration or the book of comfort or the book of consolation from chapters 30-33. From chapter 46-51 there are a series of oracles of judgement against foreign nations culminating in the declaration of judgement upon Babylon in chapters 50-51.

The book ends with a historical appendix taken from 2 Kings. It seems likely that two versions of the book were formed, one in Egypt and the other in Babylon. The opening three verses of the book are the superscription for the book, likely from the hand of Baruch the scribe, although it is possible that it does not cover the entirety of the material in the book as there is some material that was produced after the captivity.

The superscription's dating, by terminating with the captivity of Jerusalem, highlights the importance of the captivity as a sort of event horizon for Jeremiah's ministry. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been removed by the Assyrians about a century earlier. While Josiah's reforms initially held out hope for the nation of Judah, following Josiah's tragic death, Judah was under the dominance of first Egypt and then Babylon.

Jerusalem surrendered to Babylon in 597 BC with Zedekiah being installed as king by Nebuchadnezzar. After a second rebellion against Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed and there was a mass deportation in 586 BC. Jeremiah prophesied in dark days and his ministry was marked by personal sorrow and suffering.

Jeremiah came from the village of Anathoth in the hill country of Benjamin, about 2-3 miles north of Jerusalem. He is the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests. Although the high priest at that time was called Hilkiah, he was likely not Jeremiah's father.

The fact that Jeremiah had a priestly background is not mentioned elsewhere. It may not be an especially relevant fact for the story of Jeremiah in this book but, as Lumbom notes, it serves as a corrective to flat interpretations of a life which, in reality, was dynamic and complex. Jeremiah was a historical figure whose identity, character, story and background exceed that which is recorded in the book of his name.

We have several prophetic call narratives of various kinds in scripture. The Lord appears to and commissions Moses at the burning bush at Horeb. Isaiah chapter 6 describes a temple vision given to Isaiah where he was sent as a prophet to a nation that would not hear.

Ezekiel chapters 1-3 relate Ezekiel's theophanic chariot vision of the Lord and his vocation as a watchman for the nation. Jeremiah's call is recounted in this first chapter. This section opens the book proper and the smaller body of it from chapter 1 to chapter 20.

As Lumbom observes, the material of this section is bracketed by the opening words of the Lord in verse 5 and the closing words of Jeremiah in chapter 20 verses 14-18. Verse

5 of this chapter reads, 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. Jeremiah's words in chapter 20 verses 14-18 read, Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me.

Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, a son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity.

Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? The final verse of chapter 20 serves as an inclusio or bookend for the entire section of the book. The Lord declares to Jeremiah that he appointed him as a prophet from the very womb of his mother.

The setting apart of Jeremiah for his ministry is presented in three parallel expressions in verse 5. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. A similar claim is made by the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 1 verses 15-16. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.

However such claims are not that common. Beyond Paul and Jeremiah the setting apart of prophets from the womb is not usually mentioned. However we do see something similar in the story of John the Baptist who leapt in his mother's womb when visited by Mary who was bearing Jesus in her womb.

Samuel and Moses are also both set apart from their earliest days. Isaiah talks about the servant of the Lord being formed in the womb by the Lord. Jeremiah's election from the womb as the Lord describes it is an intimate matter.

He was known before he was formed and by implication formed accordingly, prepared for the task for which the Lord had for him. He was consecrated in the womb, set apart for the Lord's mission. His appointment of the prophet to the nations preceded the Lord's informing him of that fact.

The Lord's purpose for Jeremiah, as we can see in Jeremiah's words that end this initial part of the book, exceeds Jeremiah's own grasp. A parallel between Jeremiah and Samuel can be drawn in this chapter. As the Lord declares to Jeremiah that he has been appointed in this manner, Jeremiah is keenly aware of his youth and he questions his call, describing himself as a boy or a lad.

It is likely that we should consider Jeremiah as being in his teens, possibly his early teens, at the time of his call. Jeremiah's sense of his own inadequacy is answered by the Lord's assurance of his equipping of him. This sense of inadequacy, specifically in the area of speech, is a common complaint of prophets at the time of their commission.

Moses complains about his speech difficulties and Isaiah of his unclean lips. Jeremiah also feels in his youth his inability to stand before the authorities and rulers. He is just a lad, not a mature man.

The Lord assures him of his commission. Jeremiah will be operating under and with the authority of the Lord's message, which sets him over the nations to whom he is sent. He has no reason to be afraid of them.

The Lord has sent him to them and the Lord can deliver him from them. The Lord, to assure him of this fact, touches his mouth. Jeremiah's mouth is directly empowered and commissioned by the Lord.

We see something similar in Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6-7. Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14 also speaks of this. The connection between the word of the Lord and the prophet is an especially close one.

The prophet does not just relate to the word of the Lord as something outside of himself. The word of the Lord is taken inside of himself. He starts to embody the word.

He is part of the message himself, as we will see in the case of Jeremiah. We see something of this also in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 6 to 3 verse 2. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here, eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the word. And I said to him, O son of man, give me this scroll to eat.

The prophet is more fully identified with the word that he bears. He is not just a messenger boy. He himself is part of the message, as we will see in the biographical and the autobiographical elements of this book, which are both very important.

James Jordan has spoken about the development from the priest to the king to the prophet. The priest is connected with the law, primarily expressed in the do this, don't do that of the commandments. The king is associated with wisdom and insight.

The king is able to look at the world and bring wisdom from the law to bear upon it. The king then has internalized elements of the law. In the character of the prophet, there is an even further development.

The prophet is a sort of embodiment of the word. Here, the authority of the word is something that Jeremiah himself is described as possessing. He is not just a messenger bearing an external word.

The word that will tear down and build up nations is a word that he is part of. The word is not just an authority over against him. The word is an authorizing power that drives him.

The first vision that Jeremiah is given is a surprising one. It's a vision of an almond branch. The reason for it is because the Lord is watching over his word.

The Lord is going to ensure that the words of Jeremiah do not fall to the ground. He will speak with authority and that word will come to pass. The meaning of this vision is difficult for us to perceive in English.

It is based upon a pun. The almond, shorcaid, is connected with the watching from the verb shorcad. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the almond tree's significance is seen in its connection with the lampstand in the tabernacle and also with the high priest who is connected with that.

Aaron's rod budded and it budded with almond blossoms. Jeremiah is given a second vision and this time it's a boiling pot facing away from the north. The pot is on its side, its contents about to spill out.

It's facing towards the south having received a blow from the north. A boiling pot could be seen as a powerful image of a city. All the affairs of life that occur within the city are like this big boiling pot and now it's about to be tipped over.

God is going to bring disaster from the north, judgement against his people. Rulers from other lands are going to be gathered together against them, surrounding the city, besieging it. They're going to be sitting in the gate on thrones.

The city gate is the place of judgement and foreign kings will sit there in that capacity. We see that later on in the prophecy being fulfilled in chapter 39 verse 3. However as we see in verse 16 it will be the Lord who is declaring judgement upon the city when that happens. He will be judging them because they have forsaken him for idols.

Jeremiah needs to prepare himself for action. He must gird up his loins. He must declare what the Lord has commanded him to declare.

He has an incredibly difficult task ahead of him. Jerusalem's walls will be surrounded and ultimately captured by besieging forces. Jeremiah himself would be besieged by the people, all levels of the population and their rulers but would be made like an effectively fortified city by the Lord.

They will all fight against him but they would ultimately be frustrated in their assaults.

We return to this theme in chapter 15 verses 20 to 21. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze.

They will fight against you but they shall not prevail over you. For I am with you to save you and deliver you declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

As Jeremiah will discover one person with God is a majority or as the apostle Paul puts it, if God is for us who can be against us. A question to consider. Can you see any parallels between Jeremiah's call and Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew chapter 16 verses 17 to 19.

Galatians chapter 2. Then after 14 years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them, though privately before those who seemed influential, the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus who was with me was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me, God shows no partiality. Those I say who seemed influential added nothing to me.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles. And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with them, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. 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! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God. For if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. In Galatians chapter 2 Paul continues to recount his biography.

He is continuing to emphasise 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 am far more inclined to believe that it occurred in Acts chapter 11 verses 27-30. 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 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 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 16, verses 17-18, And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

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 cephias. 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 poor, 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 poor here are likely not the poor in general, but more specifically the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul had just been sent with Barnabas on a mission to bring aid to the poor 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 poor 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 poor in Jerusalem became a central element of Paul's apostolic

practice. He describes the reasons for this in Romans chapter 15 verses 25-27. 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 poor 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 1-4 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 1-2 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 in dependence 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 formerly 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 fulfils 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?