



CFI Study Notes – Bukuru, Jos

Studies in Galatians

A review of Paul's first century context, followed by an overview of Galatians.

Paul's vision of the post-exilic promises of God to Israel, is fulfilled in the gospel of Christ, in a new Jew/ gentile community, bringing merciful justice to a world in division.

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Paul's Context

Before looking at Galatians, it is good to look at the background of Paul's letters. What was going on at that time? What were the pressing issues that Paul was addressing?

We have traditionally read Paul according to the view of Martin Luther. Luther was struggling with "works righteousness," the practice of trying to earn merit with God through good works. This weighed Luther down, and he was earnestly looking for relief and assurance that God had accepted him. Luther found this assurance in the "justification by faith" teachings of Paul.

This has been the major way that Paul has been interpreted in Reformed Faith since that time. Paul has been speaking to us as individuals, about our personal faith. We have also believed that Paul was taking a stand against his Jewishness, or the traditions of his Jewish faith. This is how we have read his comment in Galatians, "If any man preaches any other gospel, that that which we have preached, let him be accused."

We have taken this to mean that if anyone adheres to traditions of faith, such as circumcision in Paul's day, or the traditions of the Catholic church in Luther's day, then they are accused of God. This has led us to a series of separations within the Protestant faith. First, we separated from the Catholics, and then from each other, whenever our faith traditions varied even slightly.

We have taken away from Paul's teaching an individualism, and a political life, in which we have separated from Jewish people, and then from all others we have seen a difference with. This way of looking at faith was around long before Luther. This may be the reason why the Reformed movement fell into this view so easily.

This view of faith began to develop after Constantine and others began to politicise the church. Faith began to be seen on an overly individualist level, removed from Paul's initial context. Augustine spoke of faith in this way. In his writing, faith was predominately about his personal struggles.

This has become the main view of faith in Western culture since that time, especially in the Reformation. It masks a political purpose. If faith is primarily about our personal walk, then we can separate from those we feel are wrong, fail to care for those people in their suffering, and even dispossess their lands and riches in times of war.

This is really a self-serving faith, leaving Protestantism's children, today's Evangelical groups, largely without a true Pauline identity in how to respond to the divisions, wars and poverty in our world. The early church wasn't like this in character. Its faith brought them into bridge building redemptive lives with all those around them, from whatever political, racial, or faith tradition background. They saw faith as a community building issue.

Today, we can read Paul's letters from our own Reformed view, or from the context of Paul's own objectives when he wrote the letters. What was Paul doing when he wrote his letters? What was the problem Paul was addressing? Galatians is one of the clearest letters for us to see the issues Paul was writing to rectify in the churches.

The Book of Acts

Let's start with the book of Acts, which describes what the Holy Spirit was doing in Paul's day. We begin in Acts two, the Day of Pentecost. Pilgrim Jews from all over the Roman Empire had come to Jerusalem for the annual feast. When the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, these pilgrims

gathered around to hear the miracle. They heard the disciples speaking in all the native languages of their home regions.

This is part of what we call the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit. The obvious question is, what is the message that these signs point to? What was the Holy Spirit saying through these signs and miracles? We need to put ourselves in the context of that time to answer this.

Up until that time the salvation plan of God had been largely for the Jewish people. If gentiles wanted to become part of God's plan, then they had to become Jews first. They had to be circumcised and follow the other ritual traditions of the Jewish laws in Moses. The Jewish nation had control over the faith. Gentiles were free to join, but they could only join by becoming Jews in custom and practice, and by being part of their hierarchical system of worship.

This was the issue the Holy Spirit addressed immediately on the Day of Pentecost. By opening the faith to all these languages, throughout all the known gentile nations, the Holy Spirit was saying that the way was free for gentiles to become part of the people of God. They were to be included, on no other basis than by receiving the Spirit alone. The Spirit, not the traditional customs, made up the body of God's people.

We see straight away what people like Paul meant when they spoke of the Spirit. We have applied terms like this to our own private lives. But when Paul spoke of the Spirit, he meant the uniting and love centred call of the Spirit, to build a common community of faith. We will see this when we get to look at Paul's letters. This view makes an enormous difference to our Christian lives.

We see this in each place in Acts where these signs of the Holy Spirit appear. In Acts eight, Philip goes to preach the gospel in Samaria. There, the Holy Spirit confirms that these people are included in to the family of God, on no other basis than by receiving the Spirit. In Acts 10, Cornelius is brought into the family of God, once again, only because he received the Spirit. The Spirit confirmed this with the signs of tongues. In Acts 19, we see the same thing in Ephesus.

In each case, the Spirit is pushing more and more outward from Jerusalem, and showing that all humanity is included in the new community by faith. Faith, here, means that which includes us as one. Faith is a community term, that means that by faith God bridges our traditions to make us one new family.

All of this was surely controversial in Paul's day. That is why the signs were needed. Unless these signs were present, no one would have believed that this was God's purpose. For so long, the traditions of Moses had become the identity markers for God's family people. If this was to change, there must be powerful signs that this was God's new purpose. Acts is about these signs, that insisted upon the transition of God's family, from its former Mosaic markers, to the new markers of Spirit, grace and faith.

Paul's Questions

This was the pressing issue of Paul's day. Again, the pressing issue of Paul's day was not the issue of Augustine, or of Luther, about their private struggles for justification before God. The pressing issue was one about identifying who God's people were, who the family included. This was the controversy Paul was thinking of and addressing in his letters.

Another way of thinking of Paul's question is this. Paul was addressing who the people of God were, who would bring about the eschatological promises of God. God had promised Israel that he would

use them to renew the world, to restore the creation. Who would be the people who would bring this pass, and how would they do it?

This was Paul's context. As a Pharisee, Paul answered these question through the Torah, the law of Moses. He believed the people of God were the people who kept Torah. By this, Paul meant especially the outward markers of Torah, like circumcision, food laws, hand washing and sabbaths. To Paul, this marked out who the family of God was, who was included in this family.

Paul also believed that this family was the people whom God was using to fulfil his end-times purposes. The last-days people, who would transform the world and fulfil the promises of God's kingdom coming to our world, would be the people who kept Torah and who also forced Torah upon the world around them.

This is what Paul was doing before he knew Jesus. He was subjecting the world around him to Torah, and arresting believers in Jesus who lived by the Spirit. Paul's issue, or his controversy, that weighed upon him so heavily in the first century, was not the issue Luther was wrestling with.

Paul's Answers

When we turn to Paul's letters, we see his answers to these questions. His view has been totally changed, now that he has received the Spirit of Christ. But he is essentially writing about the same thing. He is outlining who God's people are, who is included in God's family, and what the mark of identity is that these people show. He is also outlining Torah in his new refreshed understanding. And now he has a fresh view of how God's people are bringing about the kingdom promises of God in the world.

Paul isn't writing about faith, grace, justification, Spirit, from the viewpoint of our personal salvation. They include our personal salvation. But Paul's point is what we are being saved into. Faith, grace, Spirit, justification, are used by Paul to mark out the new family of God. And the terms are used to show how God's world renewal promises are being fulfilled through his family. And Paul is showing that faith and grace are the Torah. He uses faith (Greek, *pistis*) to mean faithfulness, which is the *agape* love of living Torah, written on renewed hearts. This, Paul says, fulfils the whole law.

It will help to look briefly at a couple of Paul's other letters. When we see what Paul is doing in Romans and Ephesians, for example, it gives us a clue for understanding his message in Galatians. The situation in most of Paul's churches was the same. He was facing the same pressing issue in each of these centres, namely, the acceptance of Jews and gentiles into one new body, based on the Spirit alone, and what that meant for their fellowship together.

A Review of Romans

Romans appears mainly addressed to the Jewish believers in the church. All believers are included, but the gospel is a Jewish gospel and the issues on how their Jewish nationalism now crossed over into a global message and global fellowship had to be keenly worked out and explained. There were strong interests working against this wider inclusion, as we would expect with any group taking in so many new and strange members, even today.

The opening chapters of Romans seem to address Jewish superiority. This isn't peculiar to Jews. Any of us have the same sense of superiority today, when it comes to mixing at various levels with other people. God had to break through the idea that he elected the Jews for their own sake, rather than for the sake of us all, for the entire world. This is common to all people. We all think that our privilege is for us, or for our group, the ones who are for some reason worthier.

Paul addresses the idolatry and sin of the gentiles. But this wasn't so that we, the people of God, could quickly point out the sin of others in the world. Paul quickly turns to the Jews, the people of God, just like us today, and showed that their lives were not really any better. They had turned against Jesus, the perfect outcast, instead of doing what the Torah said, about bringing in the outcast. Before we accuse the Jews, we should realise we do the same every day, when we turn away from the refugee, the homeless or the sinner. When we turn away from the last of these, we turn away from Christ in his hour of trial.

So, if the Jews are no better than the gentiles, and if we are no better than others in our world today, then Paul's point is that our group, traditions, faith and law don't commend us to God. Rather they serve even more to condemn us. They point out what we have done wrong even more.

This puts the Jews and gentiles in Rome on an equal footing. They are both guilty before God and both in need of grace. This grace is provided freely to us both, and shown to us fully in the gospel of Christ.

Paul makes sure that there is no exclusion of anyone. He also speaks to the gentile believers and tells them not be proud against the Jews, who suffered for us all in their election. They were elected for the world, and served the world in their fall. We all should be grateful, compassionate and serving of the Jews in love in return.

There Is No Difference

In chapters three and four, when Paul comes to speak of our justification and our faith, he does so in terms of our unitedness in one body. He speaks of justification, not to teach doctrine on our individual salvation, though that is part of the gospel, but to show that we must accept each other based on the Spirit alone. The topic Paul is addressing in Romans three and four is the body's unity.

Paul repeatedly states that "to all who believe, for there is no difference," "then what becomes of boasting," "or is God the God of the Jews only, is he not the God of the gentiles also, yes of gentiles also... who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised by faith."

The terms here of "boasting," "justify" and "faith" are not used by Paul to explain our personal salvation, but to explain that we are called to receive each other in one new body, without boasting against, excluding or putting conditions upon the other group of people. The concept of "boasting" here isn't used to explain our personal response to God, though of course it would include that, but to show that we as one group should not boast against any other group in our inclusion of each other in Christ.

And the reason why Paul brings Abraham into the argument, in Romans four, isn't just as a proof text about how one is justified by faith, but also to show Abraham's foresight, that the gentiles also would be justified in this way. The gospel is precisely the fulfillment of what Abraham believed, that the kingdom of God would break out from the Jewish people, to invite and include all people from all nations, based on the work of the Spirit alone. The point here is about a faith that is common, that makes us one family. Paul is speaking about the one family of God in Abraham.

In the Spirit

And there is another point here we see in passing, that aligns exactly with Paul's argument we will see later in Galatians. "Do we make void the law by faith? No rather, we establish it." By insisting upon circumcision, we make the real part of the law void. By dividing from our brothers and sisters

who are uncircumcised, we do not fulfil the Torah of loving neighbour as our self. So, division is a work of the flesh. It is self-centeredness, it is against neighbourly care. It is not love.

As we see in Galatians, to be in the flesh means to draw back into division from others. To be in the Spirit means to draw towards others in caring love. This is what the Spirit is doing in our lives. The terms “in the flesh” and “in the Spirit,” aren’t terms just about our personal lives, but about how we relate in self-centredness or in loving care towards others. The Spirit is a community building Spirit. The Spirit is a people and world restorer. We are in the Spirit when we embrace his inclusive movement, outward from ourselves towards others, just as God moved towards us in Christ.

God’s End-Times People

We can see that Paul was answering his questions. Who are the people of God in Christ? They are those who have the Spirit. What is their mark of faith? It is faithfulness, or the love they have for one another. In what way are these people the eschatological, end-times people of God? These are the ones who are light and salt to their localities, living out mercy and enemy love amid brute empire, renewing the powers and nations.

We can see how important it is to read Paul correctly. If we read Paul as writing about our personal salvation by faith alone, then it leaves us more open to a self-centred faith. If we are reading the letters of Paul this way during the Middle Ages, then we will likely react against the Jews and against their traditions. Our faith becomes divisive and an excuse for negative reactions against others. This is exactly what has happened in church history.

Paul wasn’t condemning circumcision. He wasn’t saying the Jewish believers in Christ shouldn’t live in their traditions. Paul wasn’t saying that he himself had stopped being a Jew when he believed in Christ. He was saying that Jewish believers shouldn’t take their traditions as the basis of their fellowship with other believers. He was saying they aren’t justified by their traditions, so they should accept and love other believers in Christ, even if the others don’t adhere to the Jewish traditions.

Today, the problem often isn’t between us and the Jewish traditions of circumcision, but between us and those of other Christian denominations. It is common to say other groups are wrong because of their different practices, and the Catholics, because of their traditions. We say that Paul was encouraging faith for us to renounce the traditions of others, rather than to bring Christian believers of different traditions together. When we take our stand on a separate faith, and think that Paul was encouraging this, we see our division as “the will of God.”

But these divisions are fleshly, not spiritual in their origin, no matter the texts we use to justify them. They expose an individualistic character in us, that leads us to think we are better than others, and to withdraw from equal and loving fellowship with them.

This equips the church very poorly for the world we live in today. If we build walls within our own Christian family, how much more will we build walls between us and others outside our faith who are in need today. This means when the world is suffering and breaking apart in division, hatred and selfishness, the church has a limited healing witness of care and love within this world. We instead stand off in judgment.

Our individualistic way of interpreting our faith becomes self-serving, really a crime, in a world that needs people like Jesus walking through it, bringing the hope of a different kind of kingdom, in which we care for our neighbours and bring the light of selflessness to a world in sin.

Restoring One Another

We should instead see that Paul calls us to love one another from across our different Christian backgrounds. This nurturing fellowship then equips us to serve the world like Jesus served it. This is the Torah. This is being faithful to the covenant.

Then, if any of us is in error about our faith in some way, we try to correct/ restore each other in love, knowing that we also have errors. This was the conclusion to Paul's letter to the Galatians, and this is how we apply Galatians six today, seeking to build community between those of different Christian traditions, rather than divide. If we can't do this, then how can we call Jesus Lord, who commands us to love our brother and sister.

Saying they aren't our brother and sister is a false escape. That would be to no longer live in the Spirit, the way Acts and Paul spoke of the Spirit's purpose and action in our lives, but in the flesh, driven by our divisions and arguments. Paul was clear about this in Galatians five. We are no longer loving our brother and sister, which love is the Spirit working in God's eschatological people.

A New Community

Before we leave Romans, we will have a brief look at Romans ten. There is a well known gospel passage here, about the way we are saved, through believing in our heart that God has raised Christ from the dead, and confessing with our mouth that he is Lord.

This is another passage we have taken to be about our personal faith, but that isn't the point Paul was making. The confession that Jesus is Lord, means, of the whole body. His Lordship is pointing to our love for each other in Christ. We won't go into chapter ten in detail, where Paul is speaking about Israel's historical salvation from Babylon. He is saying that the church is God's eschatological people, coming out of darkness to build new community and renew the world, as Isaiah depicted the new creation. This is the salvation Paul is speaking about.

Romans ten brings Paul's teaching into context for us. Paul's point about salvation is the same as it was in Romans three and four. Paul is speaking about the whole church community, "everyone who believes," "there is no distinction between Jew and gentile (with our different traditions, because of faith), for the same Lord is Lord of all (of the whole body), giving grace to all who call on him." And then Paul quotes Joel, "All who call on the Lord shall be saved." The point from Joel is that Jews and gentiles are grafted into one body by faith, just as the Spirit was showing in the book of Acts.

Paul's Ecclesiology

The point Paul is making isn't soteriological, from an individualistic view. Paul's soteriology is about the church. Soteriology means the doctrine of our salvation. Paul discusses this issue from the perspective of ecclesiology, which means the doctrine of the church. To Paul, ecclesiology comes first, whereby in most of our bible studies, it comes last. Most of our teaching is about salvation from our individualistic perspective. This is not at all biblical.

Paul is speaking about a new ecclesia, a new community, to bring about a new eschatology, a new world. Soteriology is only brought in as the subject serves Paul's wider purpose, about the kingdom for God, how God has been faithful to his promises to Israel, through Jesus Christ, who now renews our hearts and fellowship. In fact, this is what soteriology is to Paul, a church that renews the outcast.

This is salvation, the Torah of love for neighbour written on our hearts, fulfilling Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. Salvation isn't being saved and going to heaven. It is renewal of our hearts, from self to God and to his people/ creation.

Our look at Romans helps give us a context for understanding Galatians. Let's look next at Ephesians. By the time we have scanned through Paul's message in this letter, we should be ready to tackle the same issues with Paul in Galatians.

A Review of Ephesians

We see that Ephesians is all about the church, and our unity of faith in Christ, and it only brings in salvation-faith in this context. Ephesians is the book of Acts explained in letter form. It is explaining what the Spirit is doing, in building a new unified church of Jew and gentile, or today, between ourselves, from all our different traditions and backgrounds.

Once again in Ephesians, soteriology is set well within the context of Paul's eschatological, ecclesiological vision. God is uniting all things in Christ, in his church, to bring about a renewal of his creation. This renewal happens from within our fellowship, in our lives or care for each other, which Paul explains in Ephesians four and five. This life spills over into the world, transforming our cultures and powers. When the powers strike against the church, trying to profit from divisions, we stand in the faith of neighbourly love. Ephesians one to six are about the Holy Spirit working this new creation witness out in our lives.

The Role of the Spirit

Paul opens Ephesians by explaining the mystery of God's will, to bring all things in heaven and earth together in Christ. This is a Hebrew figure of speech, which means the Jews and gentiles are becoming one in Christ, and all the powers in heaven (in control over humanity) and on earth (in our various forms of earthly rule and culture) will not be able to prevent this from coming to pass and renewing the creation.

Then Paul moves to the Holy Spirit, showing he is bringing this inheritance to pass in our lives. This is what the Spirit was doing in Acts, "giving us faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (rather than divisions), and love for one another." This is the Spirit's work, drawing us into united loving fellowship. This is the baptism in the Spirit. This is new life, even love for our enemies, the inheritance of caring family, which the Spirit grows us into. It is not natural, but requires the Holy Spirit in a new heart.

In Ephesians two, Jews and gentiles are "made alive together in Christ." This is what grace and faith are about. Paul isn't speaking here of our personal salvation, but that which unites us as one, calling us out of a reliance on our former traditions of separation and division, to instead love and care for one another.

This is the context in which Paul speaks again of our "boasting." It isn't boasting on a personal level, though this also isn't good, but regarding the traditions of our group, which have separated us. Instead, we "are his workmanship," united by grace and faith.

Paul's Point About Faith

It is funny that we have taken this passage to argue either for Calvinism or Arminianism, which has nothing to do with Paul's point. "Faith is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God... not of works (of our traditions)." The point Paul is making is our traditions, that we allow to divide us. We are not saved by our traditions, but by grace, and this then makes us one body. To argue about Calvinism/ Arminianism, is to break down the unity that Paul said God has given us faith for.

Paul's statements in Ephesians about the Spirit, about grace and about faith, are not about our individual lives, but about the things that make us one people of love. This is the way we should take this soteriology, as Paul's ecclesiology.

One New Humanity

Paul goes on to explain what he is speaking about, the mystery, which is that Jews and gentiles are being drawn together by the Spirit into one new body. The rest of Ephesians two and three explain this new humanity, this new creation, that is brought together in love and not divided by our older religious traditions. This is what the Spirit is doing in the book of Acts.

It was a mystery, because Israel's call is being revealed in this new way, and the Torah's full light is now being brought out into the open, which is neighbour love. The Spirit now equips us to follow this light in a way that the law could not do. The Spirit frees our hearts from condemnation, and allows us to pass this same grace and faithfulness, which we have received from Christ, onto our neighbour and even to our enemy. Whole new communities become possible in our fallen world.

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of this new family. He is head of principalities and powers, which includes traditions, such as circumcision and washings. Christ has fulfilled the cleansing that these traditions pointed to, therefore he has removed them as divisive powers over our communities. Now Jesus, his love and faithfulness, is the cornerstone of community, not our slavish traditions.

This brings our unity, by his Spirit working love. These are the "good works we are created for." Paul meant our works of love between Jew and gentile, between us today and others in the body of Christ, no matter their background. Paul mentioned these good works in the context of our coming together to serve each other freely. This loving unity is the works, and what we have been created for in Christ. This loving community is true Torah (good works), not our private works of the law.

Ephesians is permeated with calls to unity. This is the wisdom we are revealing to the powers of the world, that build walls of division between us. Even Paul's prayer in Ephesians three is addressed to the Father, who is "head over all the families of the world." Paul's purpose is, that through the new Spirit led love of the church, these families and nations, will continue to be drawn together in the gospel, so the mission of the Spirit in Acts, may spread through the entire world in our time.

Not Salvation Mystery

So then, after a quick run through parts of Romans and Ephesians, what do we see? We don't see people consumed with the question of works righteousness, from the point of view of their private salvation. We don't see Paul writing to solve these mysteries of personal salvation doctrine, whether by faith, or by works, whether Calvinist or Arminian. These are not the questions Paul is asking.

What we do see is Paul writing in the context of the first century, with the major shift of salvation history. That is, the sudden and large influx of gentiles into the promises of God to the Jewish people. How was this to be understood? How was the church to assimilate these new people? How were the Jews to associate with them, considering their previous traditions?

Summary of Paul's Questions

We see in Paul's letters, that the questions Paul is facing are ecclesiological and eschatological. They are to do with the church community. And they are to do with the end-times, the promise to the Jewish people that they would reshape the world. How was this to happen? Would it be through a fellowship based around the Old Testament laws of Torah? Or would it be through a new fulfilment of the Torah written upon our hearts? Would it be by the love of God, working through a new

community, in which people from all backgrounds are free to receive and serve one another, bringing a new mercy and justice to our world's societies?

Today's Questions?

And what do these new questions mean to our faith today? Now that we understand the questions that Paul faced, what is the call of God for us? If God is inviting us into a new community, based on grace, and faithful service to others, what does this mean for how we work out our differences in our fellowships? How do we build communities of unity, rather than divide through our individualistic perspectives?

And what about the things this new kind of church learns through our reconciling and redemptive fellowship together? How can these lessons spill over into the world around us, and help bring healing to a race and class torn society? How can the church point to a better future in a world of poverty and war? How can the church point us all away from self-centred lives, in a world that needs the love of God?

Can we bring lessons from a new church life, in which people from different classes and racial groups, live in love and service of each other, notwithstanding their diverse backgrounds and perspectives on life, and even sometimes on doctrinal views within the Lordship of Christ? How can this church which walks in humility, care and respect for its different members, provide a witness for a broken, divided world in crisis?

The lessons we bring may include service, rather than withdrawal, seeking to mend division, rather than retreating in self-preservation. Taking up our cross in Christian communion, teaches us to show a world the difference taking up our cross means, and the healing power it has for our nations.

This is the new eschatological, world renewing kingdom, God has called us into, together.

Galatians

Chapter One – No Other Gospel

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Delivered from Present Evil

Paul means something very different by this, to what we may have become accustomed to thinking. First, he isn't speaking of going to heaven when we die. He isn't even speaking of our personal salvation. His vision of salvation does include our personal salvation, but is much more than that.

It is personal salvation that leads us to the main issue. Salvation changes our heart, and this brings us to the salvation program that Paul is speaking about. The present evil age is characterised first by idolatry, then its effects: sin, self-centredness, violence, immorality, dishonesty, divisions, and the destruction that these bring to our communities.

The good news of being delivered from this evil age starts in our new hearts. It starts on a personal level. But from there, the rest of the work is about our new communities together. This evil age is characterised by nationalism, racism, wars, the strong overcoming the weak, riches and poverty, and lack of care for those left behind. These are all the same things the Prophets dealt with in the Old Testament.

The good news is that God changes our hearts and begins to bring us together, to become one people, caring for each other, repairing the destructions the evil age has brought into our lives. God delivers us from this evil age, by bringing our new hearts together to serve. Of course, the final deliverance is at his coming, at the resurrection, in the full new heavens and new earth, but this has started now, because of the gospel working in our nations.

Central to this deliverance, in the mind of Paul, is the new salvation that has been manifested in the gospel, which is the union between Jews and gentiles by faith. This gives the opportunity for whole new loving communities, bringing deliverance from evil to many, by forging new redemptive relationships.

Paul is thinking of the evil age that divides us. It is this division that promotes destruction, and that thwarts healing among us. This division works deeply in our minds and cultures, producing all forms of scapegoating and prejudice and is the cause of much of the suffering of humanity. Overcoming this division by the love and acceptance in the gospel, that comes to us through the cross, and makes us one, is the major theme in Paul's mind, when he speaks about our new deliverance from the evil of this age.

This statement of Paul, of us being delivered from this evil age, is a perfect introduction to Paul's message in Galatians: the unity between Jew and gentile, the overcoming of the violent deadly relations between their communities, by a new community of love and service. Some people have tried to hinder this unity and this deliverance in Galatia. Paul is writing to defend it.

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”

The Cause of Paul's Writing

What was happening in Galatia? Why is Paul writing to Galatia? The issue here isn't a works righteousness versus faith righteousness. The issue here wasn't one that we often debate today, about how we might be saved personally, or sanctified in our personal lives. That was the issue in Martin Luther's day, about whether one needed to observe the Catholic traditions to be righteous in God's sight. That was entirely a personal issue. This wasn't why Paul was writing to the Galatians.

The gospel they had deserted in Galatia, was the gospel about their open fellowship between Jewish and gentile believers. The issue was one of fellowship. This is where they had gone wrong, and this is the reason Paul was writing. The issues are much more community related, and much less individualistic. This is important for us to see. When we read the bible, we need to see what it is saying about our community, not read it on an "this is about me" level.

The grace that the people in Galatia were forsaking was the grace that joined them together in one free fellowship, to accept each other. The false gospel they were embracing was one where the Jews and gentiles couldn't eat together, without observing the Jewish laws.

No Other Gospel

Paul goes on to explain that there is no other gospel, other than the gospel that brings us together as one in Christ. When he said that anyone who made a false gospel is accursed, he meant anyone who divided what God has joined together, anyone who forbids free table fellowship between believers.

It's funny that we often used this passage to say the opposite to what Paul was saying. We have used it to say that anyone who observes traditions, like the Jews, or like the Catholics, or even like other Evangelicals we disagree with, is accursed and that we should separate from them in fellowship. We have used the "no other gospel," "let him be accursed" statements of Paul to justify our divisions.

Paul had the opposite meaning in mind when using these statements. Paul meant that we must not allow these differences, these traditions, these different persuasions in our faith, to divide us. Paul said we are to accept and receive each other at one table of fellowship, regardless of our differences and convictions in these areas. We are to observe our unity, love and care for each other, because we are justified by faith and the blood and love of Christ makes us one.

This is the gospel Paul said we are to preserve. The gospel of unity. Not the "gospel" of division.

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

Men Pleasers

Paul moves on to show that the people who are sowing division in the Galatian community and men pleasers. They are doing it to gain merit with certain political factions, maybe with some parties in Jerusalem.

In contrast, Paul is showing that he doesn't belong to any party. He doesn't owe any allegiance to a human organisation, or benefit by reward from any human group, after persuading the Galatians towards any belief or practice. Paul says his call is from God, and it is only God that he seeks to please.

Many people may say this, but Paul backs it up with his sufferings. He is persecuted. He isn't seeking an easy walk. He stands by the truth of God. He gets nothing personally from it, but to love the Galatian people, for no reward from man.

Paul continues, saying his understanding of the gospel came to him from God. Paul's point here is that he hasn't been sent by any man, to profit by advancing the objectives of any group. He includes in this, even the apostles at Jerusalem, Peter, James and John. They haven't sent Paul. He isn't even trying to please them. The Galatians can trust that Paul isn't passing onto them a human perspective, for some selfish reason of Paul's. Paul is being sincere, and has only the interest of the Galatians at heart.

This doesn't mean Paul thinks lowly of the apostles in Jerusalem. That isn't Paul's point. Paul's point is just about his own allegiances and his fidelity to the Galatian believers. They can know Paul has no vested interest in the gospel he is sharing with them. He shared at the cost of his own blood, just because he loves them. The ministry must be based on love, not a religious ladder we are climbing, not human ambition.

Chapter Two - Not a Party Gospel

In chapter two Paul outlines some of his early brief meetings with the apostles at Jerusalem. He goes to Jerusalem with Titus, a believer from a Greek background. The apostles in Jerusalem fellowship freely with Paul and Titus, and don't compel Titus to be circumcised. This is significant. The apostles see no need for the gentile believers to keep the Jewish customs in order to have free fellowship with Jewish believers in one church and at one table.

Notice, the question isn't about the Jewish customs themselves. The apostles and other Jews at Jerusalem still maintain the Jewish customs for themselves. They still maintain the Jewish cleansing ceremonies and still observe the temple laws. That isn't what is at stake. Paul has no problem with that. He doesn't even raise it as an issue.

What is at issue, is whether Jewish believers in Christ will receive gentile believers, without forcing them to observe the Jewish customs. Paul points out the apostles at Jerusalem had no mind to force Titus to observe their traditions, but accepted him freely in Christ. The apostles did not behave in any superior way towards Titus, a gentile believer.

Apostles Added Nothing

Then Paul states the consequence of his meetings with the apostles. After sharing about the work of the gospel and churches among the gentiles, the apostles added nothing to what Paul was doing. This means that they added no requirements to the gentiles, for them to be saved, other than the things that Paul was already preaching, about faith and following the life of Jesus in new community. The apostles made no further requirements, such as adding any of the customs of the Jewish way of life, for the gentiles to follow. None of this was required of the gentile believers.

In Acts 15 we see the council of Jerusalem, which considered the question of whether gentile believers should be required to follow the customs of the Jews. We won't go into a discussion on the date of this council, whether it was before or after Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians. That doesn't matter, for the purposes of these notes. What matters here, is that the council added nothing to the gentiles either, in terms of requirements about the customs.

But the council did ask the gentile believers to follow some customs, only as a matter of courtesy to the Jewish populations they lived alongside. This also was in line with Paul's teachings, we see in Corinthians and in Romans, that we don't use our freedom to cause our neighbours to stumble, but act in the way of love. If what we eat offends our neighbour, then restrain, not for our own sake, but for the sake of love towards the neighbour, whose conscience may not be free in that matter.

So, apostolic tradition is consistent in the New Testament. They did not require the gentiles to follow the Jewish practices to be united with the Jews in Christ and in open and free table fellowship. They could eat together from house to house and celebrate Christ as one people, with no superiority between them based on the Jewish customs. This is the issue that Paul is addressing in Galatians.

Remember the Poor

Paul says that James added no requirements to Paul's gospel to the gentiles, but only added one thing, that he remember the poor. This is very significant. This coincides closely with James' letter in the New Testament. His focus on the poor and our caring fellowship is the main issue in that letter. This is his main concern also for the churches Paul is starting. James, like Paul, desires that the fellowship be caring for the weak and outcast, for the poor amongst them, healing the ravages of selfish empire and cultures.

This is Paul's gospel, as Paul said: that he was already focused on the poor, as James asked. So, James and Paul are in exact agreement about the gospel, about what is not important in the fellowship, and what is important, as Christ is reflected in our churches and societies.

Peter in Antioch

But after Paul had met the apostles in Jerusalem, Peter came to Antioch. It seems the history goes like the following. Paul and Barnabas used Antioch as their missions base. The churches at Antioch had a rich mixture of Jewish and gentile believers. They all ate freely together and there was no question among them about the gentile believers being required to practice the Jewish customs. There was no hierarchy between Jewish and gentile believers. They were one in Christ.

When Peter came to Antioch he joined with the fellowship in this free manner. He also ate freely with gentile believers, just as the other Jewish believers did. This was going on for some time, until something happened that threatened this free fellowship.

Paul said certain people came from James. This doesn't mean that James sent them. It doesn't mean that they preached the ideas of James. It may mean they falsely claimed to be from James, or simply that they had come from the Christian community in Jerusalem.

Paul also says there was a "circumcision party." The men who came from James may have been members of this party. The party seemed to preach that Jewish believers must withdraw from fellowship with gentile believers, unless the gentile believers were circumcised and followed the other Jewish customs.

These people were persuasive and intimidating. Peter then withdrew from fellowship with the non-circumcised gentile believers. From that time on, Peter would no longer eat with them at one table. He placed a hierarchy into the fellowship. Paul said that even Barnabas was drawn away by this hypocrisy.

The fickleness of Peter is noted here. As he was intimidated to deny Christ, Peter repeats his denial of the gospel in the face of intimidation at Antioch. It is remarkable to see, especially since Peter had seen such grace in the gospel and was a pillar in the church. Peter apparently took Paul's correction, as we see later in the New Testament, no rift developed between Peter and Paul.

Why Paul Teaches on Salvation

But it is at this point in the letter to the Galatians that Paul starts teaching doctrine about salvation. This shows us that what he is really teaching about is ecclesiology, our fellowship together. It's the context that leads us naturally through the discussion.

Notice the reason why this doctrinal teaching starts. It isn't because people are enquiring into their personal struggle with works verses faith, as Luther was. No one was asking questions about their salvation, sanctification, or personal struggles with the law. There is no mention of that struggle at all in Paul's historical treatment of the problem in Galatia, about which he was writing.

Paul starts teaching salvation doctrine, only for the purpose of strengthening the unity and fellowship of the church. This unity and fellowship is precisely what Paul's teaching is about. As we have seen, it is the same case in Paul's other letters. In many of Paul's churches, Paul is either dealing with the same problem concerning fellowship and unity, or anticipating the problem. This was the primary problem in the early church period.

And it is the primary problem today. If division arises in the body of Christ, as it is rife today, then the witness and the purpose of the church in the world is seriously harmed. This is the thing that requires the most rigorous and continued attention today, if we are to heal the divisions of years.

Why have we read Galatians with such a Lutheran bias for so long? Why don't we see this? I think a part of the reason is because of our ethnicity, just as this ethnicity was the problem Paul was dealing with then. The Reformed nations were largely the northern European and Teutonic peoples, very different from culture and race of the southern Europeans. The Reformed/ Catholic question broke us into a largely ethnic division. We are mostly unable to see this about ourselves and we justify it, just as they did in Paul's day. But we allow it to divide the body.

This doesn't mean that there aren't problems with Catholic worship, just as we also have problems. But we will look at this, as Paul did, when we treat Galatians six.

"But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter 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?"

Peter's Hypocrisy - Judgementalism

He was lenient upon himself, but not applying the same standard to the gentile believers. As Jews, they had come to know, that even though they had striven to keep the law, they were still filled with all kinds of malice, greed and contention in their relationships with others. Their heart motives were wrong, which had been shown by the harsh legalism of the Pharisees in the Gospels.

They had come to realise that the law couldn't deliver them from their heart problem. They needed the grace of God, to know that God had accepted them freely, and forgiven them without the law, so that they could then pass that grace on freely to others in new relationships. "Freely you have received, freely give."

They needed now to live by Jesus' parable of the forgiven debtor. He was forgiven all his debts, and this forgiveness became the basis of his relationships with those around him. He was moved to forgive others, just as he was forgiven. This is to be the way we are to accept each other in our fellowships, without adding any requirements.

But having known this, Peter and some of the other Jews with him, were now insisting that the gentiles keep the law, "pay their debt," in order to enjoy fellowship as one community. There must be something wrong here. Those insisting on this couldn't be doing so because they believed it was necessary to build loving community. They knew the law didn't work in that way, because of man's fallen hearts. They must have been insisting on this for other reasons, like nationalistic reasons, to keep the profits of the religion well within the control of the Jerusalem powers.

They were being driven by greed, and Paul knew this. Greed was always the thing that divided communities and caused suffering. This is the reason why Paul insists so much on a unified community, where service and healing, rather than corruption, could become the dominate characteristic of our lives.

Jews Going Back to Law

Paul continues speaking to those Jews in Galatia who had moved into error, saying that if they required the gentiles to come under the law, then they were bringing themselves back under the law as well. The Jews who had become free from the law, would be rebuilding it as a requirement for righteous living and fellowship.

This does not mean that the Jews had previously stopped observing the Jewish customs. They still observed them, but with a new liberty attached. They weren't strict about them and looked to the more critical issues of fellowship, such as mercy and justice, in their communities. They did not insist on the laws being observed. But they still often followed them in a free attitude, as they were part of their cultural heritage and still had some value to them. This was not a problem.

But it was their renewed insistence on these laws for fellowship that Paul was now speaking against. Paul said that if they insisted on the law, then they were bringing themselves as a community back under the letter of the law. It is the insistence on the customs, that invokes the letter of the law, that kills. The customs are fine, if mixed with grace, because it is grace that gives us the life that fulfills the law in love.

I would think that it is the same with, say, Catholic traditions today. Again, we will speak of this more later in these notes, but if these traditions reflect on the gospel truths of Christ, and encourage worship, then that is good. So long as they are voluntary. But if there are insisted upon and forced upon others in a sense of arrogance, legalism and supremacy, then they are against the gospel of Christ, who received us all in love, freely, without any traditions attached. The life is in the person of Christ, not in the traditions that point to him.

So, Paul tells the erring Jews, that if they insisted upon the gentiles being circumcised, they were bringing the whole community back under the law. They would be rebuilding what they had destroyed earlier through the grace of God. In rebuilding the law, the law would once again be a source of condemnation for the community.

Instead of ministering life to the community, the law would minister death. It would make the community slaves to falling, and to rejecting each other, bringing hostility and destruction into their lives. As Christians, they would be joining Christ to this condemnation and destruction, joining his name to this their former way of life, to an unloving and intimidating community.

Cornerstone of Community

Paul completes Galatians two by restating the Jew's new liberty in Christ, in which they must stand. They are free from the law. This doesn't mean they must renounce the customs, but they are free from their legalism. In his death, Christ fulfilled what these customs point to, so that makes us all free from the religious traditions that point to our guilt and need of cleansing. Instead, God has made us clean by his free grace. If our conscience is clean, we do not need to observe traditions.

So, Paul's admonition is, don't rebuild the law by insisting upon the observance of its traditions for fellowship with other believers in Christ. Learn to accept others with the same grace by which God has accepted us. This is the cornerstone of our community. Any other cornerstone brings death, division, and puts the worldly powers of greed and destruction back in control over our lives. Instead, God is looking for new creation in our communities.

Galatians is not directing us to reject people who keep customs we are unfamiliar with. It is calling us rather to accept fellowship with those people. Galatians is calling us not to insist that the customs which we accept or reject become the basis of our acceptance of other believers. Instead, we should stand in liberty, which means stand in unity and service.

Post Exilic Gospel

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

Paul writes in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. We tend to separate the New Testament writers from this Old Testament tradition, but we shouldn't. They are Hebrew Prophets, just as much as Jeremiah, Isaiah and the others.

As such, Hebrew themes permeate the background to Paul's writings, just as they did all the Jewish authors of his time. There are often Adam, Exodus and Exile themes that form the context in which Paul is sharing about the gospel fulfillment. Today, we might not readily notice this background, but to a Jewish audience in Paul's time, Hebrew nuances would have been immediately picked up.

This "being crucified with Christ" is one statement that speaks to Israel's exile in Babylon. Ezekiel spoke a lot on this theme. Israel were dead in their sins in Babylon, and their return to God's favour was depicted as a resurrection from the grave.

So, when Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ, he is speaking of Israel, being buried with Christ in exile, and being returned to favour with God in Christ's resurrection. Christ identifies with Israel's exile, and redeems them from exile.

The exilic texts, and by this, I mean Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, for example, all speak of the return of God's favour and presence to Israel in the post-exile salvation. They depict this period in terms of a glorious new creation, that impacts the universe, setting it free from the curse. And central to all these texts is the influx of the gentiles. The new creation comes about because Israel has peace with her enemies, and builds a new reconciled community with the gentiles.

This is the background in which Paul is writing. His letter to the Galatians invokes these exilic promises. He is saying that the believers in Galatia, being Jews and gentiles living together in the Spirit, are the fulfillment of these new creation promises. Paul is not teaching or debating about personal salvation, but is contending for the post-exilic vision of God, regarding Jews and gentiles forging a new world-reorienting life together.

Paul speaks on behalf of Israel in the first person. "I am crucified with Christ..." This means all Israel. In Christ, their exile has its return. If they don't stand in Christ, but stand in the Old Covenant, they have no return from exile. They are still in exile, under the judgement of the law. But the way they come out of exile, is to come out by faith, which means receiving the gentiles as part of a new faith community. Failure to receive the gentiles means they are not in faith, and they are still in exile.

It was common for Old Testament prophets to speak in the first person on the behalf of Israel. Paul did this in Romans seven as well, showing Israel's captivity under the law, which was part of their calling, in eventually bringing the gospel to the world.

Jeremiah is one example of Jewish literature that spoke in this way, speaking for Israel in the first persons: "My sins have been bound into a yoke; by his hands they were woven together. They have been hung on my neck, and the Lord has sapped my strength. He has given me into the hands of those I cannot withstand." (Lamentations 1:14)

This, "I am crucified with Christ" statement shows us what we are reading in Galatians. It means the letter to the Galatians is about the Jews return from captivity, in which time their nationalism gives over to a new world order, of unification with the gentiles in faith. It shows us that the letter is about united community.

Chapter Three - One Family

“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

This description coincides with the book of Acts. How did the people there receive the Spirit? Was it by faith or by the Jewish laws, like circumcision? Looking back to people like Cornelius, it was by faith.

The question here is about who are the eschatological people that God is calling to fulfil his promises of renewal in the world? This is the question Galatians three is addressing. The Spirit marks out these people as the end-times people of God. How did he mark them out in Acts and in the Galatian church, even when Paul did miracles among them?

It wasn't because of circumcision. When Paul preached in Galatia, the Spirit was given to all, whether Jew or gentile, regardless of the ceremonial laws of the Jews. The Spirit was given simply because they believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Spirit brought them together in a unity of faith. This is the point: the unity of faith.

Family Promises Fulfilled

“Having begun in by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” What does this mean? What was the perfection they were seeking? Perfection is about fulfillment. How are the promises of God to Abraham, about a world renewing family, going to be fulfilled? Was this going to happen through the Jewish law, or by them continuing as one family by faith? God was going to continue with them as a family, the same way he started, by faith. Only faith can make them a family.

The perfection they are speaking of here isn't a question of our personal sanctification. Paul isn't asking, “Having begun by faith, are you now sanctified in your personal lives by observing laws?” Sanctification is important in our lives, but this isn't the issue at the front in Galatians. Paul wasn't addressing personal sanctification at this point, but who the believers should eat with.

The question, from the Jewish perspective is, how can they move on to fulfil God's promises about his kingdom coming to this world? Is it by the Jewish law forming our community, or is it by God's free acceptance through the unity of faith? How are they going to be one body, reflecting Christ to the world? This is the question Paul is answering.

“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

Abraham's Family

Next, Paul brings in Abraham. This isn't just a proof text showing how we are saved on an individual level. The text is about the gentiles being included in the family of God. It is about God's promises to Abraham, about a world renewing people that would come from him. Paul is asking in Galatians three, who was this family. Who does this family come together? How was God fulfilling this promise to Abraham about one family, eating together and serving each other?

The Curse

Paul starts to answer, showing that it isn't by the law. He said, when we rely on the works of the law, as the community were then seeking to withdraw towards, we come under a curse. Let's explain this curse. Like in Genesis three, when Adam and Eve sinned, they came under a curse. It wasn't that God

punished them, it was the consequence of their slavery they had chosen, about which God had warned them earlier.

To understand the curse, we need to look at the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This father wasn't angry or offended at the son. He only cared for the son's welfare and forgave him freely. The curse was what the son brought on himself by his own attitude and actions.

This is like the curse of the law. It is something we put ourselves under. Adam and Eve put themselves under it. Israel, when they came out of Egypt, also put themselves under it. Mankind all chose the law, because in it we accused others and justified ourselves. We thought the law made us look better than others.

God worked within this context, with our human condition, when he called Israel and gave them the law through Moses. He really called them to Sinai to worship him, not to give them law.

Now, the Jews at Galatia were choosing the law once again. They were wanting to revert to what their fathers had chosen, again to justify themselves against others, rather than serve them. This is the reason we chose the law in the Garden of Eden, and used it at first to accuse God. We thought the law, accusing others, would make us free to serve ourselves. This is where the curse came from and how it entered our lives.

What we are dealing with here isn't religious matters. Paul uses religious terms, because this was what the people knew. They explained everything in religious terms, about sacrifice and scapegoats, and the curse of the law, which a substitute would carry, because this is what man was happy with. The religious terms gave us a kind of canopy to hide behind, like Adam and Eve hid behind the bush and covered themselves in leaves. Religion is a cover. God even accommodated this in the Old Testament tabernacle system as well.

The Prophets of the Old Testament showed this. The people spoke of religious things and the Prophets rebuked them and spoke of social things, or serving their neighbour and helping people who suffer. We don't want to do this, so we revert to a religious cover. We have said things like the curse of the law is God punishing us, but it is not. It is something that happens within our own thinking and then behavioural patterns.

When we seek to live by law, as a way of shielding us from community and from helping others, we find that the law does the opposite to what we hoped. Instead of justifying us, and giving us a sense of comfort, it accuses us within our hearts. That which we seek to do to others through the law, accuse them, we end up doing to ourselves. When we set others free from the law, we set ourselves free from it. This is the curse Paul is speaking about. In plain human terms, it is the voice of judgment within our own conscience.

This voice is a burden. It is too much for us to bear within our hearts. So, we try to relieve ourselves of this condemnation. One way is to pass it on to others. This is where scapegoating comes from. By scapegoating, we can blame others, and serve the punishment of the law upon them. Then we have a sense of righteousness in ourselves. But this relief doesn't last. Because we have lived by the law, we will die by it. It will come back to bite our own hearts even more.

This is what tears community apart. We flee to the law, thinking it will give our community definition and refuge, but it ends up becoming a curse within our relationships. We end up living in hostile relationships, as we continue to pass on our sense of inner disquiet to those around us. We are always seeking to pass on blame. This is the curse that ends up ruining community. Paul was warning the Galatians about the law for this reason. It promotes destruction, not righteousness.

Free from the Curse

But thank God there is relief for us finally. The law that we look to for relief provides it. It says, "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." This means we can find relief in Christ. Our heavy conscience can have relief, because we can transfer the guilt of the law from our conscience onto Christ.

It wasn't God who did this, but we ourselves, when we turned on him, like we did with the woman caught in adultery. Christ stepped in and took the place of the sinner, against our own human wrath, our inner wrath of the law. This becomes the wrath of God to us, the punishment of sin upon the sacrifice. God did it to himself, in the sense that he allowed it, as his gift to us.

God came in Christ to bear our guilt, in the sense of to give us an escape. He took our grief and our sense of estrangement from God. He carried it for us. This was God's rescue mission, his ransom that he paid to free our conscience from sin. This was God's self-giving service, that he calls us to follow in our grace relationships with others, setting them free from debt, as God did for us freely. Only this grace builds family and community in love. It's death to the accuser, and then the community can learn to love and live in God's gift.

Spirit Renewed Motive

This doesn't mean the law is bad. It is our inner motive that is bad. The law, in as far as it represents God's heart, and not his allowance of our own hardness, is good. Especially those parts that speak of God's heart for the weak, the Jubilee and other laws for the poor.

These are the laws, the love of neighbour, that God seeks to fulfil in the new community, as we live out service towards each other, filled and motivated now by the Holy Spirit, instead of by our own righteousness. This now gives community hope of becoming a light to a divided and oppressive world, which still labours under the law in their conscience, longing for the liberty that the sons of God may reveal through community.

As we look down through church history and see how the church has divided, from the Nestorians, from the Orthodox, in the Reformation and then continually within Evangelicalism, we see the reason. It isn't because of righteousness, because righteousness is serving. We have used the law, what we call gospel law, as a pretext for going our own ways. Instead, we should be working to sort out our differences in the context of love and service, even when we are wronged, as Paul later explains in Galatians six.

It's something like the case in some nations when a man dies. The man's family are supposed to look after the widow. But if they can claim she was a witch and somehow was responsible for the husband's death, then they can carry away the husband's assets and leave the widow destitute. They can claim they did it justly. This is the reason we accuse and withdraw from fellowship with others. This is what we use the law for. If we can be more righteous than the gentiles, we can shun them, and keep the loot to ourselves. But we rarely know that this is what is motivating us.

Just to bring this home to ourselves today: this is what we do to refugees and to other people made destitute by this world.

In Paul's time, Jews were expelling gentiles from the church because they didn't keep the traditions of the law, to maintain a nationalist control over the faith of Yahweh. But the faith of Yahweh isn't a nationalist faith. It's for all the world, through the promises to Abraham. This is how the faith of

Yahweh has its fulfillment in the world, not through Jewish nationalism. But church history often tells the same story of political divisions.

And because we have chosen our divisions, we have turned Galatians into a message about our “personal faith and private sanctification,” instead of seeing it for what it is, depicting a renewed community including us all. We have all followed the path of the Rich Young Ruler Jesus spoke to, who used the law to establish his own credentials, rather than use what he had to feed the poor.

Wall of Partition

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

Christ has set us free from the curse that we brought upon our relationships. Since Christ has set us free from the law, the middle wall of partition between Jew and gentile, the principalities and powers that formerly controlled us, the traditions of the law, are no longer a determinative factor in our relationships. The gentiles are admitted into the family by faith and the Spirit alone.

When Acts and Paul speak of faith and the Spirit, they mean a new life, characterised by faithfulness to one another in the body, no matter our background. The way of the Spirit means the way of love, as distinct from the way of traditions that separated us in self-centredness. This new way fulfils the law, by drawing us into an agape/ love family of care and service. This is what Paul means in Galatians three, by being made perfect through faith. Paul means that the Spirit brings us into maturity as one family in love.

Family not Marked by Law

“The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.”

Paul explains the family of God is not marked out by the traditions of the law. The family promise was made to Abraham before the law was given. The seed that would fulfil the promise isn't the Hebrew nation in the flesh, but one seed of Israel, who is Christ, and all who are in him by faith. The law came by a mediator, but the promise was from God himself. The law is inferior to what the Spirit is doing in Acts, marking the true family of God from both Jews and gentiles, by faith/fulness.

Just to reiterate what faith means to Paul. It isn't just believing something. It is a grace that ushers us into transformed hearts, whereby we love each other in service. It is a faith that means faithfulness, to fulfil the law of love in community, receiving those of all backgrounds in care.

Insisting on the traditions of the law doesn't lead us into this faithfulness of service, but leads us away from it, into division and destruction. The full sense of faith in the Greek – *pistis* – means to trust, to believe, to be faithful. It is faithfulness to the *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the law of love written on our new hearts of faith. When Paul uses the term faith, he means faith that works through love. The faith has works, it is active in love, enlivened through grace by the Spirit.

Paul explains that the letter of the law was given to Israel because they lacked faith/fulness. They lacked faithfulness because their hearts were hard, they had shut themselves up under the law in self-righteousness. It took God coming in the flesh, and his death and resurrection to expose this hardheartedness, not just in Israel, but in all humanity.

Paul didn't mean that God kept them under the law by his own will, and that Israel wasn't responsible for this. Israel kept themselves under the law and kept their hearts hard, which is why the Prophets rebuked them for their blindness and sin. If it was God who did it to them, then the Prophets would have had no basis to rebuke them.

Now Faith Has Come

But in the fulness of time, God came in the flesh to reveal our hardness, after years of the Israelite's experiment, showing their failure. God gives humanity a chance to prove their ways and wisdom, before we are ready for him to show his cure to those who want it.

As Paul uses the traditional sacramental language of Israel, it may sound like Israel had no choice. Israel were kept under the law, till faith came. Then they were cursed for breaking the law. It doesn't seem fair. If God hadn't given them faith, why were they being cursed for breaking the law? Did they have a choice before they had faith? How are we to understand this language?

The choices Israel made about faith and law came from their own childishness. As with all human cultures, we cover these choices with religious terms. We invented these terms, long before Moses, but God, and Paul, use them to bring us to a new reality. This reality isn't religious, but human, about a renewed social life from a new heart. This is God's aim and real project. In Christ, we see the slavery we made for ourselves in our religious systems. We felt the traditions made us holy, but when we had perfected them in the Pharisees, we still killed Christ.

This revealed the bankruptcy of our religious practices. We use these practices to shun and scapegoat others, even the innocent. They don't end up renewing our hearts, or building a loving family to renew the world. They don't work. So, God comes in Christ to expose and then strip away our false religions, to bring us to what he really wants, renewed caring relationships

Even the verse below is couched in sacramental language. It simply means God has brought us into a mature view, by showing us his true self in Christ. By believing in and following Christ, we embrace the rest of humanity in the way of love, the way Christ forgave and embraced us, throwing off our former selfish patterns that divided our lives.

"For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized 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."

So Paul ends the chapter, by defining once again how the family of God is made up. We are sons, meaning members united in one family, God's end-times rulers of a transforming world, not by selfish dominion in division, but by agape service. Hierarchy and superiority are broken, and faithful love has taken over. This was the promise made to Abraham.

Chapter Four - Transformed Worship

Our religious sacramentalism, not just of the Jews, but of human religions in general, had become a form of slavery. In as much as these forms shut us off from those around us, they enslave us in a hostility and destructiveness within our wider communities. They lock us into a cycle of scapegoating and violence. Promising a redemptive cover for sins, the ceremonies encourage violence as a form of social healing.

God somehow must invest these religious actions with new meaning. He did this with the Old Testament sacraments. Sacrifice of animals for the benefit of the wrath of the gods, became God's self-giving exercise to free humanity from this cycle of violence. God became our sacrifice to show us our violence, and thereby to put an end to sacrifice.

If these ceremonies are repeated in our gatherings today, invested with these transformed meanings, they are beneficial. There is nothing wrong with these ceremonies in themselves. It is rather the meaning we invest in them. If they point to our self-giving lives, meaning that God brings healing to our communities by loving service, not through the punishment of substitutes, then they serve us well.

Not Against Ceremonies

So, Paul is not on a crusade against ceremonies in our worship. He is not on a crusade against the Jewish forms of worship. He is not saying that today, we should distance ourselves from those among us who worship with a ceremonial form and tradition that we aren't comfortable with. This isn't Paul's point. His point is rather the opposite. The ceremony isn't important. We are called to accept and love each other, with our different forms of worship, and extend grace towards each other, even celebrating our differences as varieties of God's grace.

The point Paul is making is our legalistic use of these ceremonies, when they become markers of our fellowship. And this is common. We commonly use our ceremonies to show us who we include and who we don't include. This is when they are wrong. It isn't the ceremonies that are wrong, but ourselves, the way we use them. It is making the ceremonies the substance, which they are not. It is what they point to, the self-giving love of God, that is the substance. This is the substance we must celebrate together as one people.

Paul isn't making a faith verses ceremonies debate. This is a mindreading of the debate. It is rather a faith/fulness verses withdrawal issue. We are either faithful to our community through service, or we withdraw from others with self-centred motives.

This was the debate Jesus had with the Pharisees. It wasn't their ceremonies Jesus disliked, but the way they used them. They used them to withdraw from the sick on the Sabbath, from the poor at their gates, from those who were hungry but hadn't washed their hands, from their parents who needed support. Ceremonialism became a way of scapegoating all those in their societies who needed care and love. This was the whole point Jesus was making. Jesus had come to expose and overthrow this in our communities, through his example of true religion, self-giving care of the community. This was the law and the prophets Jesus came to fulfil.

Against Slavery

Paul called observing rituals a form of slavery. Slavery means being given to a practice that is of no use. It doesn't free the community. The practice, that we say is a religious form of blessing, becomes something that masters us. Instead, we should be mastered by love, by promoting good, healing

relationships. When we are mastered by ceremonies, these things rob our true inheritance of faith and shalom. A slave is someone who is in bondage to repeated activities, but who reaps no personal benefit from it. This was Israel, locked up under meaningless traditions.

Paul calls these ceremonies the elemental spiritual forces. In Colossians 2:8-11, Paul calls these the principalities and powers that ruled over the people, bringing them into division. I think what Paul means by this is ceremonies are only pointers, they are not the substance of true fellowship. But if we make them the substance, by forming a legalism into them, then they become divisive powers that break lives apart.

Just like Jesus pointed out, if we don't serve the sick and the foreigner because we are observing regulations, then we are destroying their lives. This is a principality and power of destruction, ruling over childish communities, bringing a satanic rule into the world. This is what Paul is writing to overthrow, by allowing true gospel love back into the Galatian church.

In Colossians, Paul says that outward circumcision isn't anything, but circumcision of the heart, which means faith/fulness towards neighbour. He said the same about baptism. It isn't arguments about how we are baptised that help our community, but inward baptism of the heart by faith. This is what Paul said mattered. Arguing about the form means we are being ruled over by destructive powers. If we argue about forms of worship among Christians today, we are being ruled over by satanic powers. We are doing this selfishly, rather than building community. This is slavery.

In Western circles, we have come against all sacramentalism in worship, thinking that this was Paul's message. In the Prophets, I think their point was that sacramentalism is distasteful to God if there comes a disconnect between the religious and the secular life. I think this can happen in any form of worship. In the West, we can rid our churches of ritualism, but still build a largely private faith.

Sacramental language isn't necessarily wrong, so long as the language is interpreted plainly into every day human life. It mustn't remain in the religious sphere, but transform our social world. Even in Western Christianity, we have a kind of dualism in worship, separating the spiritual and the secular, private and public worlds. This dualism is what we come together as one family to work against, to care for each other and for our entire world. God is one, and he makes his people and creation one, to heal. Coming against each other's form of worship breaks down this care.

Breaking Walls

This "God is one" point was made by Paul in Galatians three. It means that he is bringing his creation together, Jew and gentile, in Christ, to heal his entire world. He is bringing all things together in Christ, as Ephesians says, to become God over all, for the shalom of all. And he is doing this through faith/fulness, not through our traditions.

The Jews knew this "God is one" call, as part of their Hebrew *shema* (Deut 6). In the *shema*, one God unites the world in a transformed creation. In the *shema*, the creation of Genesis becomes new, refashioned by the living word/ Torah in our hearts. When Paul uses this "God is one" statement in Galatians, it's a deliberate reference to God's end-times program: one God making one family to bring together one creation. Paul says this is fulfilled in the gospel of love.

Like a friend of ours said, "The gospel gets rid of our dualisms; between heaven and earth; between our spiritual and social lives; between us and our neighbour." The gospel brings us together.

The rituals were invented by mankind, due to our sin consciousness. Temples were around long before God instructed Moses to build a similar styled tabernacle. So was sacrifice, which did not

originate from God's command. The law also was brought in by mankind, which God modified somewhat when giving a better code to Moses.

But the reality of all these things is love. Love is the sign of the covenant of grace: "By this shall all people know you are my disciples, by your love for one another." This is our true sacrament/ sign now. This love neither insists on the traditions of the law for fellowship, nor forbids them.

If we use other peoples' sacramentalism as an excuse not to love and serve them, then we are doing exactly what the Pharisees did in Jesus' time, and what Paul was correcting at Galatia. We are separating ourselves for selfish reasons. It is lack of service, faith/fulness that is the point. It is service of neighbour, sinner and enemy, that the law, the prophets and the gospel mean to bring into our lives.

The Circumcision Party

"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you."

Now Paul is direct with the Galatians. They are following the Jewish believers at Antioch, insisting the gentiles keep the Jewish law. They had gone back to observing the temple rituals. They weren't just observing then in a voluntary sense. They were "scrupulously observing them" (from the Greek.) This suggests an insistence that the gentiles follow their regulations. Just as we see in Acts 15:5, "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

The Jews who were demanding this had gone back "under the law" (verse 21). The same party of the circumcision which infected Antioch had come to Galatia (verse 17). They were insisting upon gentile circumcision (Gal 5:2.) It may have not been a large group at this stage, as Paul remarked, a "little leaven soon spreads through the whole body" (Gal 5:9.) Paul is speaking to the Jews here. By insisting the gentiles do this, the Jews were putting themselves back under the law also.

"I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. Where, then, is your blessing of me now?"

Paul returns to his question at the beginning of Galatians three. "Did they receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or through faith?" When Paul first preached at Galatia, both Jewish and gentile believers received the Spirit by faith. Nobody put any requirements on them about the Jewish traditions of the law.

This is the same argument Paul made about his journey to Jerusalem to see the apostles. They added no requirements to this gospel to the gentiles. The gentiles didn't have to be circumcised and keep the other requirements of the Jewish traditions to believe and join the community of faith.

This is what Paul is saying in Galatians four. When Paul first came to the Galatian area to preach the gospel, they took him as an angel (messenger) of God. They accepted his gospel of faith, and the Jews who believed accepted the gentiles, without adding their law as a condition of faith and

fellowship. Now Paul is asking, why have you turned against me? Why are you now rejecting the gospel I first preached? Why are you now adding something to the gospel?

So, Paul pleads with the Jewish believers to become as he is, “for he himself is as they are” (Literal from the Greek.) The Jewish believers should be free from the law, as Paul is, for Paul is a Jew just like they are. Paul, as a Jew, is free, so they should emulate him, and not emulate the “circumcision party.” He is a Jew, so he knows what he is talking about. So, they should follow him.

Paul still followed the law. He was still “all things to all men.” He was free. He was still a Jew, but he didn’t follow the law in a legalistic sense. He knew what the law pointed to, in its witness to love, and he sought instead to follow this love in his relationships with gentile believers. He called the Jewish believers in Galatia, to live like he does. He wants Christ formed in the Galatian believers, so they would love and accept the gentiles as Christ loved and accepted us all.

Freedom to Serve

“Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.”

Paul turns to Hagar and Sarah, as an allegory of the gospel. Note, this is an allegory only. It does not show God’s view of Hagar or Sarah in a political sense, as many have used it since. If we use this politically, then we are slaves ourselves.

Sarah depicts the new people of faith, redeemed to build an inclusive community with the gentiles (Isaiah 54.) It’s important to see Paul’s background picture in which he is writing. Here, it is the Jewish exile in Babylon, and the liberty they are brought into through God’s gracious return. This is what Paul means by the liberty of the gospel. When we read the narrative about Sarah which Paul quotes, invoking the Servant Song of Isaiah, we see Paul is referring to the new Jewish/ gentile family which renews the creation.

Paul claims those who resist this liberty/ grace of gospel fellowship with gentiles remain in slavery, under their former judgment of the law in Babylon. They are in the flesh. They are in self-righteousness. We need to understand self-righteousness in its first century context. It doesn’t mean the same thing as is often argued by Evangelicals today. Today, the faith/ tradition debate is to do with our personal sanctification.

But this isn’t why the first century Jews sought self-righteousness from the law. For them, the issue wasn’t about a personal struggle with sanctification. They weren’t thinking about this the way Luther expressed it. They were rather thinking about their group and who belonged to it and who didn’t. They said these rules were to show who was in their group.

To Paul, righteousness meant the return from exile in Babylon, fulfilled in the gospel. This was a return to inhabit their land, as a community, to rebuild its waste places. It was a righteousness fulfilled in a new community, renewing the whole land of God’s creation. This community would be built by grace, not by an obsolete covenant. To Paul, righteousness was also about the group, but a group marked by inclusive service.

When we misread Galatians, we end up committing the same error some of the early Jews did. When we say Galatians is about our personal sanctification, which we say is by faith, then we separate from those believers whom we say follow traditional forms of worship. We say they are adding to the faith. Galatians is used today, maybe more than any other portion of the New Testament, as our pretext for separating from other believers

This puts us in the flesh, just as much as Hagar and the Jews who were in error. We need to look past our traditional forms and see their genuine faith in the Lord Jesus, in his cross and resurrection, and then accept and love others, as the one family we are, called by God to restore our habitations. We need to see each other in liberty, not through the eyes of slavery to the powers that divide us.

Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as an allegory for the flesh/ slavery and for freedom/ Spirit. He develops his use of these themes in Galatians five. Freedom is the Spirit, which means love and service. This is how Paul uses the term Spirit, meaning to be inhabited by the person who leads us to serve in freedom.

Liberty means freed from captivity, bringing Christ's fragrant aroma of salvation to the gentiles, through cross-shaped service, sweeping them up into one new community of faith, transforming the new creation.

Chapter Five – Spirit & New Creation

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Again, we have taken this on a personal level, but verse five below, shows what the topic here is, “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” This is a theme from the prophets, like Isaiah, who spoke into Israel’s exile in Babylon. They were to be redeemed, to come out of exile and renew the creation with a Jew and gentile united family. This is the liberty, the hope, we are to stand fast in.

This Hebrew vision of the gospel was expressed by Hannah, when she received news she was pregnant with Samuel. Samuel would judge Israel, bringing justice to a nation where the poor languished. This same vision and prayer was taken up by Mary, expressing the fulfilment of Hannah’s cry and the cry of the Hebrew freedom Beatitudes.

“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:51-53)

To Mary, this was the gospel. It doesn’t seem like our Western vision of the gospel. The hope of righteousness, isn’t our personal salvation and flight to heaven. It is a renewed creation, in which the poor and the outcast receive justice and care, resulting in peace. Mary said this is the Messianic vision.

The Messiah would build a new community, where there is no rich and poor, bond or free, male nor female, Jew nor gentile, but we are all one. This means one family of care. This is the hope, the liberty from exile in Babylonian oppression, that the gospel is bringing to Galatia.

But for them to live in this, they must stand fast in this new freedom of serving each other, and not be entangled in the slavery of division and destruction. If they go back to insist on circumcision, they are rebuilding their divisions, denying their liberty to receive and love each other. They are placing themselves back under the law, back under the curse in exile, back under a Babylonian type oppression, and the gospel will be of no profit to them.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

In Christ, the sign of covenant membership isn’t circumcision, but faith/fulness, which works through love. This is what builds family, builds renewal of our lives and brings us into the liberty of God’s promised return from exile, to his new land. This fulfils Isaiah and Ezekiel, about Israel’s flourishing with the gentiles in a curse free world. This fulfils the hope of the Hebrew gospel.

This stand against nationalism and the politicising of the gospel, is a stand for the liberty of our brothers and sisters, a stand for the care of our wider family. This is the church’s witness in a world where the gentiles and nations rage, and constantly imagine a vain thing about power and riches, a vanity that destroys lives.

The Offense of the Cross

“Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.”

The basis of Paul's persecution was his cutting across the nationalism of the Jews. This was the same reason the Anabaptists were persecuted, both by the Catholics and the Protestants. They had joined with their respective national powers, and the Anabaptists refused to recognize these powers as determinative for their fellowship. They refused the associated nationalism and they refused to fight their wars of national interests.

Paul was calling for the acceptance of Israel's enemies as joint heirs, equal in faith. This would have huge repercussions on the national interests of Israel. At least, this is how fallen man sees it. It would diminish Jewish control over the faith and a huge drop in revenue at the annual Jewish feasts in Jerusalem would be the result.

But the fallen human view is wrong. Their nationalism brought wars and brought their destruction in AD 70. Paul's gospel would have saved them. It would have built them into caring community with their neighbours, which would have enhanced their wellbeing as a wider people. It would have built them into a secure future, but a future they had to share with others.

We face the same security issues today. We can retreat into our nationalism and seek security in separation, in war. Or we can build neighbourliness with others and seek a future security through the wellbeing of us all. The first is the human way, the second is the way of God's new kingdom. Paul preached the second way, as the only hope for Israel and their future. We must share our future with others, seeking justice for everyone. This is the kingdom Isaiah envisions, which is the church Paul is defending at Galatia.

This is the offense of the cross. It calls us all away from law, to grace, to receive each other. It destroys our separations. It destroys our advantages over others and calls us to serve. It destroys our self-righteousness, which we believe is our reason for maintaining a better life than others, and shows us our bankruptcy, calling us to a grace relationship with our neighbours.

Works of the Flesh

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."

You were called to be free. This is the liberty Paul spoke on in the previous chapter, with Sahara, and the new Jew/ gentile united family. Don't go back to indulging the flesh. This is Hagar, by allegory only, going back to the law. It is called flesh, because it is indulging in separatism, for selfish motives.

Instead of going back to the law, know that the whole law is fulfilled in love of neighbour, in the liberty of receiving each other in the Spirit, which we are called to. But if they go back to the law, they will be under a curse, the curse of destroying each other in selfishness. This is what the law does in our hearts. It makes us judge and destroy others, rather than serve and heal. Paul warns that this is what will happen to the church community, if they go back to the law. They will indulge all forms of the flesh, as they become enemies of each other.

"So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

Walk in the Spirit. The Spirit receives us by grace. Receive each other, from our diverse backgrounds, by the same grace. Then we will not be under law. If we place ourselves under the law, then it will stir up all kinds of aggressive behaviour among us, and lead us into “works of the flesh,” meaning a self-justifying aggression towards others.

“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

The acts of the flesh are contrary to what builds God’s kingdom. These things tear apart community. If we put ourselves under law, thinking we are being holy, the law stirs up enmity in our behaviour towards others, which breaks apart community. This isn’t holy. It doesn’t achieve the righteousness of God, which is a renewed community.

When we walk in the Spirit, which means receiving and walking in love towards our neighbour, we don’t indulge in these lusts of the flesh. We seek the other person’s wellbeing and not our own will and good. The party of the circumcision were promoting a self-good, for their group. Seeking our self-interests brings us into the works of the flesh which Paul lists, all of which destroy lives, family, community and the wellbeing of our society. It is putting self interest ahead of the interest of others.

All who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is a cause and effect, sowing and reaping issue. When we sow to the flesh, meaning we sow destruction into the lives of others around us, then we reap that in our own lives. We lose value for God’s kingdom and stop desiring it. We count ourselves out of it.

We don’t inherit God’s kingdom life, whether in this life, or in the life to come, in the resurrection. The kingdom Paul is speaking of is one that begins now in our community, but has its ultimate fulfillment in the resurrection and fully realised new heavens and new earth.

The Fruit of the Spirit

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

This is the freedom the Spirit brings to our community. When we receive each other, based on the cross, where Christ received us, we only seek the graces and good that Christ sought for us. This kind of liberty fulfils the law. It brings us into a faithful love for neighbour, putting their interest ahead of our own, just as Jesus did for us. This is the law.

Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh. They are dead to the law; the demands of the law being put to death in the body of Christ. Being freed from the law, the flesh that is empowered by the curse, by our condemnation, and our resultant self-focus and hostility towards our neighbour, has been crucified.

Now, since we live by the Spirit, that is, we have our acceptance and life freely given us by grace through the Spirit, then let us keep in step with this, let us walk in this way towards those around us. If we don’t receive each other in this same grace, by which God has received us, then we can only go back to a life of “not being received,” in which we live non-reconciled lives with the wider world.

Postexilic Flourishing

So, it is in the Spirit that the exilic prophecies to Israel are fulfilled. "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh..." These are the ones that have come out of exile with Christ, who have returned with Ezekiel into the resurrection life of faith, to build a new creation community with gentiles. This is what Paul's discussion on the fruit of the Spirit is about. Being led by the Spirit binds us together with gentiles in post-exilic flourishing.

Isaiah and Ezekiel spoke of a new Jew/ gentile community bringing liberty to the creation. This is Paul's subject here in Galatians. He said that these promises aren't fulfilled by the Old Covenant, which came under judgment, but by the new covenant, which is given out freely by grace. The Jews had to learn to receive the gentiles by this new way. It was this walk in the Spirit, this reaching out in reconciliation to their neighbour, without the law, that could fulfil the prophetic visions of the law, a new world.

A walk in the Spirit with our neighbour, which means inclusive grace, brings about the fruits of the Spirit, which bring us to peace. This is Isaiah's vision of the kingdom of peace, the Prince of Peace, coming to the world with his victory over the oppressive forces of the world powers, that divide and conquer.

"I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will be proved holy through you in the sight of the nations." (Ezekiel 20:41)

This is central to Paul's view of his mission to the gentile people. I mentioned this passage from Ezekiel above. Ezekiel uses the Exodus as a backdrop, as a type of Israel's new return from captivity. In the Exodus, Israel came out of Egypt, to receive the Torah, to be God's renewing people in the nations. It was a new creation.

This is what Ezekiel said the gospel would fulfil. The renewed Israel would be a fragrant incense to God among the nations. Paul referred to this Ezekiel passage in Ephesians 5. He said that Christ was this fragrant incense. He fulfilled Israel's return from captivity. Christ's obedience in the cross, his love in the face of evil, showed the true nature of God to the nations. It showed the contrasting values of his kingdom, his acceptance, forgiveness and peace.

Ezekiel said Israel would go on and display this same grace, this same fragrant incense, in the gentile nations. They would live out this new kingdom life that Christ had revealed and initiated. They would mingle with the gentiles, bringing about a new kingdom. This is Paul's view of his mission to the gentiles and why he insists that the Jews show this grace in their relationships.

The question to the Jewish people in Paul's day, was how are these promises of God going to be fulfilled? How will God's new creation purpose be achieved? How will the life of Torah, the Exodus values of Israel, renew the world? This is Paul's answer. It is the walk in the Spirit, the extension of reconciliation to the gentiles, by their self-giving service, by calling the gentiles to be one with Israel, by the free grace Christ showed to us on the cross. This grace is the Spirit's walk, the fulfillment of the law in love.

The walk in the Spirit in Galatians five above is Paul's new creation. It is our Exodus from Egypt. It is the Torah fulfilled in us. It is Israel's return from exile, to new the creation with an inclusive gentile people, breaking down our oppressive empires and walking in reconciling, restoring lives with their neighbour. This walk in the Spirit with our neighbours from diverse backgrounds, is Paul's answer to how God's promises of a new world will come to pass through the church.

Chapter Six – Cohesive Fellowship

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”

Two Ways of Handling Differences

One is through the Spirit, which means building cohesion. We can apply this to our situation today, say between Protestants and Catholics. Galatians is used most often to divide us from Catholics.

Building cohesive community doesn’t mean we turn a blind eye to what is wrong. Accepting the traditions of others doesn’t mean we accept and build Christian community on things in our lives that are wrong. And when we come to a unified worship with Catholics, there are many things we don’t agree with.

First, what matters is the core of the person’s faith. If it is a genuine trust in the death and resurrection of Christ, then, as Paul claims in Romans 10, the person is a brother or sister, even with their diverse traditions. We must accept them fully as a Christian brother and sister on that basis.

Second, concerning their traditions, most of the time we just don’t understand them. We don’t give them grace. We have been brought up with biases, and we read them differently. We judge too easily. We don’t see the core values of the traditions. For example, we condemn Catholic confession, forgetting that it comes James, “confess your sins to one another and pray for each other.” This is good, if carried out sincerely. It’s true, these things are often corrupted in our systems of religion. But there is often “a baby in this bathwater” of tradition.

So, Paul says, if there are things that concern us, then try to address these things in the Spirit, meaning in the context of brotherly unity.

And then Paul adds, remembering ourselves. That is, we too have traditions that we are blind to. We don’t realise that our traditions can be just as much against Christ as the traditions other people hold. We mightn’t even notice we have traditions. We have traditions of private prosperity and private holiness, in the context of a suffering world, that are wholly against Christ and his teaching. They are often clearly covetous and idolatrous. Yet, we are quick to condemn others for idolatry.

Paul reiterates James, being quick to hear and slow to speak, slow to judge. This is the kind of community Christ calls us to. The problem comes when we get arrogant against each other and we on “both sides” can do this very easily. We have both said that we are the true faith. This arrogance in both our hearts needs to give way to Christ’s love.

So, Paul says, when we notice faults in others, seek to help them as a brother and sister in love. This helps to bear their burden, to serve them, rather than mistreat them. See the person as someone to love and care for, not someone to reject. This fulfils the law of Christ.

The Way of Boasting

“If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own burden.”

The circumcision party however, thought they were something if they could persuade and covert others. This boast in the flesh of others, in making others to be circumcised, wasn’t adding anything

to their own transformation of character. It is a deceptive holiness, counting the scalps of those you have won. Rather, we should be looking to our own character, and whether Christ is being formed in us. This is where our boasting should be, but a boasting in God's grace. We should carry our own burden in this way, rather than busy ourselves with the faults of others.

This is a common misconception. We think that our holiness consists in correcting others. Rather than boasting in that, we should seek the growth of community through manifesting true Christlikeness in our own lives.

"Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh."

This is what we do, whenever we divide with others, and yet we don't keep the law of love ourselves. We demand people keep righteousness, when we aren't. Its like Jesus' sermon about the log in our eye, looking after our own burden of faults first.

Paul sets out two forms of correction. One is in the Spirit, through a communion together. The other is in separation and boasting in our own correctness. This comes back to our misunderstanding of Paul at the outset on this letter. We thought Paul was calling Peter to divide from community, to boast in his correctness about faith. But Paul was calling Peter back to community, to sort out their differences in the love of unity in Christ.

Just Behaviour

"Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor."

This statement comes out of the blue. It isn't connected in any obvious way with the text. Is it a general exhortation to the church? Paul didn't write in this way. What he is saying throughout Galatians is carefully connected to the situation there. There is a background reason why this statement is inserted here.

It may have been something to do with some parties in the church withholding support to elders who didn't conform to their ideas, or maybe withholding support to uncircumcised elders, or to elders who didn't preach circumcision. This might happen today, as committees impose sanctions on some ministers. If this is the case, then this would be wrong treatment of people who have family and needs. They should to be treated in care, not with an unloving political purpose.

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

If we treat people in this uncaring way, withholding support to whom it is due, we are acting in hostility towards others, and this is sowing seeds of aggression and injustice. If we sow seeds like this in our community, then we will reap harvests of ill manner among us. People will break out fighting in various ways. Paul, once again, warns the church about behaving in a caring way towards each other, and not in the divisive way that brings harm to every person.

If we keep doing good as a community then it will produce the good fruit in time. The destructive attitudes will eventually be overcome, if we keep sowing good actions towards each other. If we keep doing justly, our community shall begin to reap the outcome of cohesion and unity, and this

will spill over into the city of Galatia, bringing glory to God, and a caring, loving witness to all around them.

This is what Paul means by “doing good to all people, especially to those of the household of faith.” If the church has infighting, so it doesn’t care for the elders and their children, for those in its own household, then how is it going to reflect Christ’s character to the world? We learn love in our family, so that our family might share that love with the world. If we fight each other, then we have nothing to share with the world. But the purpose is that the church renews the world.

This is the harvest Paul is speaking about: gospel witness by following Christ in our relationships. This gospel witness renews ourselves, and the societies where the church is located. This is the vision of Isaiah about new creation.

This is the reason Paul focuses on getting the church right. Not just so we can be right, but so we can live out the transforming witness to the world. Just like Paul said to the Corinthians, the worldly powers of self-centredness must be defeated in our own fellowship, before God can use us to bring the same powers to nought in the world. This transformation of the gentile world will bring glory to God. This is Paul’s earnest desire.

God’s Postexile Israel

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.”

The Israel of God are all those who are in the eschatological community. This is all those who share in the renewed creation, to be part of God’s global restoration, after Israel’s return from exile in the gospel, launched through the resurrection of Christ. This is the joint Jewish and gentile community, made into one new humanity by faith, as Paul shares in all his letters.

Its purpose is to build restoring togetherness, which undoes the oppression of old humanity, the empires that seek to divide and take over. The church embraces a non-nationalist love, sharing and building others, a counter revolutionary culture in a world of covetousness and self-preservation.

This Israel of God, not an emphasis on our salvation in an individualistic sense, is the topic of all Paul’s letters. He is writing about the church, bringing about God’s end-times program, as depicted in Isaiah and all the prophets, of a restored humanity in peace, finalising in the bodily resurrection and the completed, fully reconciled, new heavens and new earth.

We, Jews and gentiles, in one community of faith, are the Israel of God, returned from exile among the nations, from or past condemnation in sin, to be one family, building God’s future world in his mercy and peace.

Galatians is a letter about God’s post-exilic community. Paul repeatedly evokes the exilic prophecies, which all describe the church as one Jew/ gentile family, living out the way of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, towards each other. This becomes the vision, the way of merciful justice, to the world around us, bringing about God’s transformation of our world.

Its maybe because we are so urbanised, that we don’t appreciate this community in the postexilic vision of the Prophets. We see the vision largely as personal salvation. Missing this community message has led us to the kind of world we live in today, where in our social lives we are divided into denominational, religious, racial, economic and national groups.

The church often is left without a witness to address these divisions, that have the potential of destroying many, if not much of the world today. There is need for a radical re-evaluation of our faith, to get an early faith back, that is relevant to a true Christlike response.

We have also indulged in a separatism, which we have called spirituality. This has disengaged us from the problems of the world, rather than led us to seek practical solutions for the sufferings of the majority. Our faith has become more irrelevant to the real need of others. We haven't reflected God, who came to live with us, breaking down our social dualism, calling Jews and Samaritans to neighbourliness, drawing us together in mutual support.

Following Jesus

Paul's last statement is about his persecutions. Those who seek their own welfare and preach the gospel of self and national agenda, should no longer trouble Paul. His persecutions show he is serving Christ and his church, not himself.

Just one more note on bearing the cross. In Paul's period of history, the Jews had been granted exemption from Emperor worship. Normally, failure to worship the Emperor attracted the death penalty. But the Jews had resisted so much, they were eventually given exemption, with the proviso they would pray for the Emperor, to which the Jews agreed.

The early church was closely associated with the Jews. They were like a division within Judaism. Jewish Christians still attended the synagogue and temple, and kept the sabbath. But the new movement of accepting gentiles into the faith, without "becoming Jews first through circumcision and keeping the laws of the temple," could throw the Jew's special status in the Roman Empire into question. Associating with gentiles in the church, Jewish Christians could risk losing their Jewish identity and exempt status.

So, acting in love towards gentile believers, as Paul was calling for, was to potentially risk your life, and the lives of your family. But this was the early discipleship, the followers of Christ lived. It was love for foreigner, before love of nationalism and love for self.