

A New Perspective on Galatians

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Galatians 3:10-14; 3:23-4:7 RSV

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, “Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree” — that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. . . .

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; 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 neither male nor 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.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; [but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe.

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

I enjoy listening to Rob or Shawn when they preach, because they always have a little story to tell about something that’s happened in their life that introduces or illustrates their topic. Unfortunately, nothing much has ever happened to me — at least nothing much that I’d care to include in a sermon — so I’ll just have to go straight to the Book of Galatians, which we’ve been following for the past several weeks. This could be a stiff ride, so fasten your seat belts. If you’re planning on going to sleep, I must warn you that Dan Robinson was talking about bringing some fireworks up from Missouri.

Before I get into Galatians as such, though, I want to mention some interesting background about what’s been going on with the study of the Apostle Paul in general. The last several decades have seen the development, among evangelical scholars, of what is being called the “new perspective” on Paul. This “new perspective” is associated with the work of several writers, most notably E. P. Sanders, James Dunn and N. T. Wright. In brief, the “new perspective” takes a different look at what we might call the traditional understandings of Paul’s teaching, especially when it comes to the question of what faith in Christ really means in the New Testament.

It’s easy, you know, to imagine that the Bible just dropped out of the sky into our twenty-first century situation, but if you do that you’re in danger of understanding the Bible in terms of a cultural environment different from that into which the inspired Word was first uttered. I don’t know how you feel about it, but for me the meaning of Scripture is primarily what it meant to those to whom it was first given. The application of that ancient understanding to our contemporary life is, of course, important and that’s why we need teachers and preachers of the Word today. But I believe that before we can take that second step of hearing the Word for today we need to hear what the Word really said to the people of Bible times. If we don’t do that, we might find ourselves inventing some understandings that were never central to what the Lord was getting across to His people. We need the attitude of the Jews that Paul and Silas met in Berea, in Acts 17:11, who were “noble” because “they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” I call that effort “cutting the unbiblical cord.” Correcting a potential misunderstanding of Scripture is part of what the “new perspective” on Paul is about. There’s time to mention only a few areas in which the “new perspective” offers a refreshing light on what Paul was saying in the Letter to the Galatians.

First, on the question of faith, traditional understanding puts the emphasis on *our* faith as the critical factor in our deliverance from sin. The “new perspective” recognizes that, as often as not, the Greek expression translated “faith *in* Christ” is more correctly translated “the faith *of* Christ” — that is, *the*

faithfulness of Jesus, the Messiah, to God's purpose in the redemption of his people. It's not our faith but *Jesus' faithfulness* that is the critical factor in our being rescued. Take, for example, Galatians 2:20, a familiar verse usually translated like this: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." But the phrase "by faith in the Son of God," in the Greek, is literally, "by the faith of the Son of God." In other words, Paul says, having been *co-crucified* with Christ I now live not by *my own* faith but by the *faithfulness* of the Messiah, in whom I live.

You can understand, can't you, that if we try to live through the *exercise of our faith*, then our faith becomes a work *we* perform — it's really our flesh that is doing the "faithing," if you will, so we're right back where we started, still trying to save ourselves by something we do, even if it's just to work up more faith! It's only by becoming a member of Jesus, the truly *faithful* One, that we can move through His crucifixion into the life God has for us. For Paul, of course — as he explains in Romans 6 — it's by baptism that we enter into Christ's death, so that we can also live in Him. Or, as he states in Galatians 3:27, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

That brings us to a second emphasis of the "new perspective," a reassessment of what it means to be justified by faith. Traditionally, it's often said that to be justified means *to be made righteous*, in order to be acceptable to the holy God. Being sinful human beings, we can't be righteous on our own. But because Jesus, as the righteous One, pays the penalty for our sin by dying on the cross, His righteousness can be transferred to us if we have faith. So we're justified, or made righteous — the Greek words are the same — by our faith.

I think you can already see an issue here. If our righteousness, or even Jesus' righteousness, is a condition or state *a person has* that's necessary for God's acceptance, aren't we in danger of falling right back into legalism and salvation by works? Or, if we're getting into that state of *being* righteous by the transfer of Christ's righteousness, which satisfies God, to us, doesn't that make Jesus the greatest legalist of all time? So the "new perspective" looks at justification a little differently. It recognizes that justification is not a change in our condition — a being "made righteous" — but is rather a change in our *status*. We're not *made* righteous, we are *declared* righteous. And that righteousness is not something we have in ourselves, but describes a *relationship* we have with God our Father. To be righteous, or to be justified, means to be recognized as a member of God's family, His chosen people.

That's where Abraham comes into the picture. Abraham is the one whom God called to begin a new human family through whom God would begin to undo the damage that Adam's disobedience did to God's creation. But Abraham, too, was from a sinful, pagan culture; how could he respond to God's call? Only through *faithing*, through a trusting acceptance of the mission God wanted to give him even if that meant giving up everything that was familiar and secure. So, says Paul, Abraham was "justified by faith," and thus became the founder of God's new family. Our justification means that we're declared to be a member of that same family through Jesus the Messiah, whose faithfulness is restoring the family of Abraham to its original mission. Since that family is built on *faithing* God, accepting His gift of Fatherhood, rather than on earning family status through becoming "better" than we are, then — Paul insists — Gentiles as well as Jews can be "justified," declared to be members of God's family. With that in mind, listen to Galatians 3:8-9: "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.' So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith."

Paul goes on to refer to the Jews, the descendants of Abraham who were given the Law of Moses to govern their life in the Promised Land. The Law, however, was in the form of a covenant, or treaty, between a King and His people, and like any treaty it contained sanctions for violating the agreement, or *curses*. If the Israelites were unfaithful to their King, severe consequences would follow. "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'" (Galatians 3:10). And, indeed, the Israelites were unfaithful because they forgot that the purpose of their calling was to bless all nations. They took the Law to be an expression of their unique identity as the chosen of God, ignoring the fact that God's choice of their forefather Abraham came long before the Law was ever given — 430 years earlier, as Paul notes in Galatians 3:17.

Consequently, Someone had to take upon Himself the curse of the Law and cancel out the disobedience of the Jews so that God's plan to bless all peoples through Abraham could go forward. That Someone had

to represent and embody in Himself all of Israel; therefore that Someone had to be the Anointed King, the Messiah. Paul knows who that Messiah is, because God has raised Jesus from the dead and Paul has met Him. Listen, then, to Galatians 3:13-14: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’ — that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

God’s plan is that all people are to be one family in Christ, as he states in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The Law, which set the Jews apart from all other peoples, was an obstacle to fulfilling this plan. “The law is holy,” Paul said, “and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). But the Law was only supposed to be a temporary measure to keep Israel on track. Now that Messiah has appeared the Law is no longer needed. “Before faith came,” Paul explains, “we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian [pedagogue, trainer] until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:23-24). (One writer compares the Law to a booster rocket that drops off once the space shuttle can make orbit on its own.)

Paul makes a similar point a few verses later: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:4-6). The faithfulness of the Messiah, whose death on the cross cancels out the curse of the Law, makes it possible for both Jew and non-Jew to be declared members of God’s family, the family of Abraham, and called to the same mission.

There is a third facet of the “new perspective” that applies to Galatians, and that understanding is embodied in the expression “Paul and Empire.” We cannot fully appreciate what’s going on in Paul’s letters unless we recognize the church’s position in the Roman world. Today, as we celebrate the independence of our nation, we recognize some of the principles that led to the founding of the United States. Among them were the principles of “no taxation without representation” and “government by consent of the governed.” Sadly, these principles seem to have been laid aside by our current national leadership and it may take another “revolution,” of sorts, to reestablish them.

But we are used to the ebb and flow of political tides. In the ancient Roman world there were no politics, nor were there any politicians, because there were no *polls*. People did not vote; their leaders were imposed on them by force and custom. Nor was there any distinction between “church” and “state,” for the entire Empire was a religious institution devoted to the worship of Caesar. There were many religions — “gods many and lords many,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:5 — but all religions were expected to incorporate reverence for the Emperor’s divinity into their rites and ceremonies. It was part of how the Empire held itself together.

What the “new perspective” reminds us is that words like *Lord* and *Savior* were terms used to express the worship of the Roman Emperor. Christians, however, applied these titles specifically to Jesus Christ; is it any wonder that Roman authorities became alarmed when they heard talk of *another* Lord, *another* Savior? Furthermore, Christians spoke of the coming “appearance” of Jesus Christ, using the same word, *parousia*, that was used for the official visit of a Roman Emperor to a major city in order to announce new public benefits or to judge difficult cases. We can see why the early Christians eventually came under Roman persecution. In New Testament times most attacks came not from the Romans but from the Jews, but eventually the Roman authorities “caught on.” Do we witness, today, the return of the Divine State in which the government inserts itself into all areas of life, demanding that Christians abandon their principles and conform to what is “politically correct”? Recognition of the “Paul and Empire” tension alerts us to what may be happening in our own nation, when our allegiance to Christ as Lord threatens the totalitarianism of the state.

But there’s a further wrinkle here. I said that Caesar demanded that people of all religions worship him as god, in some way. But there was one exception. The Jews, who believed in only one God, were granted exemption from this requirement; they just had to pray for the Emperor and offer sacrifice in his behalf. In New Testament times the pagan world considered Christians to be a subset of the Jews, because they worshiped the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In fact most Christians were Jews at the beginning, but as time went on Gentiles were also attracted to the faith, largely through the work of Paul who considered himself the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. What happens if some of these supposed Jews

begin to abandon the observance of the Law, including the rites and ceremonies associated with praying for the Emperor? That doesn't look good for the Jews as a whole, does it?

In our study of Galatians we've mentioned the so-called "Judaizers," Jewish Christians who were trying to get Gentile converts to keep the Law of Moses. Since these Jewish Christians also know they're saved by God's grace through Christ, and not through works, why would they want other Christians to observe the Law? In the light of the "Paul and Empire" tension we can understand their possible motives. If these new Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, abandon the practices of Judaism they will lose their exemption from the worship of Caesar. Moreover, they will give all Jews a bad name with the Roman authorities. We can appreciate the dilemma facing these Judaizers. They weren't entirely motivated by the idea that you had to keep the Law in order to be accepted by God. They were also motivated by concern for their own safety and that of their fellow Christians in the light of Roman imperial religious policy.

Paul, however, will have none of it; there can be no compromise with the total lordship of Jesus Christ. And there can be no compromise with the understanding that we're declared to be God's people not by something *we* do or become, but by *faithing* what God has done for us in Christ. Christianity isn't us; *Christianity is Jesus*. To be a Christian is to be *in Christ*, plus nothing! Anything beyond that is adding ourselves to the equation, which is what Paul means in part by "works of the flesh." As he says in Galatians 6:17-18, "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law."

To conclude, I want to go back to what is basic to Paul's entire message of the gospel, as he expresses it in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." It seems odd, doesn't it, that Paul should emphasize Christ crucified, as opposed to Christ risen from the dead. After all, to be raised from the dead is certainly more heroic, more triumphant, than that *excruciating* death inflicted by the Roman torturers. Our culture — like all cultures — values those who achieve victory and success, in whatever form this achievement takes. We don't admire "losers." So when we look at Jesus' resurrection we tend to take it as His *reward* for going to the cross. Or we think of the cross as a sort of lever by which Jesus was able to elevate himself above death and to defeat His enemies. Paul, however, though he speaks of resurrection, centers everything in the cross; in Philippians 3:9-10 he says he wants to be found in Christ, "not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death . . ." Is there something here that we don't understand about the relation of crucifixion to resurrection?

If we stop and think about it, we can see that it's the *world*, or the culture we live in, that so often determines our criteria of power, achievement, or self-fulfillment. Is that what Paul means when he tells the Galatians that "we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe?" (Galatians 4:3). Did the Jews regard the Law as an instrument to make them special, to elevate them above other people? And do we, in the same way, think of our Christianity as a tool that will help us to live a more successful life, as defined by the culture around us? Do we think of the hope of resurrection as the payoff for our heroic efforts to be more faithful, more committed disciples of the Lord than other people we know?

If so, we don't get any reinforcement from the Apostle Paul, because he sees the *death* involved in all attempts to find such self-fulfillment. Meeting the culture's criteria of success is a never-ending quest, because the world always demands more of us; the effort to please it will kill us. In the same vein, Paul calls the Law a "dispensation of death," a "dispensation of condemnation" that will kill us if we stake our hopes on it (2 Corinthians 3:7-9). It is not that we're condemned if we fail within the system; it's the *system itself* that condemns us, whether we call ourselves "winners" or "losers." "The sting of death is sin," Paul says, "and the power of sin is the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56). We can't experience life within the system; to find life we have to *get out of the system*.

Do we see, now, why Paul lays so much stress on Christ crucified, and upon our identification with Christ in his suffering and death? Because, in dying upon the cross, Jesus removed Himself from the system of death. Once He has died, he will never die again; as Paul says, "death no longer has dominion over him; the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God" (Romans 6:9-10). Crucifixion *is* resurrection, for it is deliverance from the system of death. Through *faithing* in Jesus

we enter into His death, and we're set free from the system that condemns us if we fail to perform. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2). Paul chides the Galatians because they have stepped back from this truth: "Having begun with the Spirit," he asks, "are you now ending with the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

In the light of our discussion of Galatians, then, we might ask ourselves several questions. First, am I trying to be the hero, buying into the world's criteria for success and using my Christianity as a means to achieve it? Or am I *faithing* Christ's crucifixion, identifying with Him so that His death delivers me from that system of death?

Second, as someone whom God has declared to be *justified* through Jesus, am I fully aware that my relation to God isn't just a matter between me and Him, but involves being part of a family with a mission to glorify Him *together*? Do I think of myself as a "Lone Ranger" Christian, or — as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:29, am I "discerning the body" in every aspect of my walk with God?

Third, do I recognize and apply the lordship of Christ to every facet of human life — not just my so-called "religious" life but the ways in which I participate in the cultural, economic and political life of community, nation and world? If I claim to have "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," does He then control how I "entertain" myself, how I spend my money, how I vote? These are questions Paul's Letter to the Galatians raises for each of us, and I believe they're well worth our prayerful consideration.

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