



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Galatians 5 & 6: Faith Working Through Love

Paul's goal in Galatians is to convince his Gentile audience that it is God's plan that they may participate, as Gentiles, in the new reality that God has created for humankind in Christ. He argued in Chapter 3 from scripture that, since God's first promise to Abram, it was the divine plan to bless all nations. Any curse imposed by the Law on disobedience to its commands had been removed by the death of Christ. Gentiles, as well as Jews, were now lead to salvation by that death (Gal 3:6–26). He then argued from the experience of the Galatians themselves that they knew the reality of which he spoke. They had been baptized, an event which introduced them to the new reality of life in Christ and eliminated any former distinctions among them (3:27–29). The Galatians experienced the reality of their relationship to God as his children in their prayers to their heavenly Abba (4:1–7). Paul had encouraged them to act on this conviction (4:8–20). He summarized his appeal with an ironic "allegorical" illustration, using the figures of Hagar and Sarah and their children Ishmael and Isaac, to symbolize two groups of people, the Ishmaelite "slaves" to old earthly ways and the Isaac "children" who were heirs of the promise of freedom. He begins chapter 5 by drawing the hortatory conclusion that his little comparison suggested. His rhetoric is powerful and has been echoed by many throughout Christian history: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal 5:1). But what does this freedom entail? The remainder of the letter, which is largely devoted to ethical exhortation or parenesis, attempts to answer that question.

The Implications for the Debate about Circumcision 5:1-15

In case the point of his argument has been lost in the intricacies of Biblical interpretation and symbolic language, Paul now makes the point clearly and directly: Christ will be of no benefit to the Galatians if they become circumcised (v. 2). Why? Because by doing so they are becoming members of the covenant community bound to obey the Law (v. 3). Some interpreters have wondered whether the argument

here is compatible with the report that, according to Acts 16:3, Paul himself circumcised Timothy, who had a Jewish mother but Gentile father. The historicity of that report in Acts has been questioned, but it is certainly possible. Paul is not opposed to Jews being circumcised; and Timothy, with his Jewish mother, could well have counted as a Jew. Paul's fundamental point is that circumcision is not necessary *for Gentiles*. God has another plan for relating to those outside the chosen people. The Galatians by seeking circumcision are denying that claim. They in fact "cut themselves off from Christ" (v. 4). He then puts the point more positively, and quite forcefully: "In Christ," i.e., in relationship to him in the community of faith, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything." It does not matter whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, whether one observes the requirements of the Law or not. What counts in this new circumstance, this new creation, is "faith working through love" (v. 6).

Paul, like other ancient authors, often structures his arguments and appeals in a kind of circular or "chiastic" fashion, beginning and ending with a theme and sandwiching another theme in the middle. So it is in this section of the epistle. The first appeal to reject the appeal to be circumcised ended with a focus on love and Paul will return to that theme in vv. 13–15. In the middle (vv 7–12) he reflects briefly on himself and his community in Galatia. Why, he groans, do they not obey the truth? (v. 7). Surely it was not something that he said (v. 8), but someone else, a bit of nasty "leaven" in the dough of their community, is to blame (v. 9). Paul must sense that whoever is teaching another line has also been saying things about Paul. His rhetorical question in v. 11 seems to point to the criticism. Someone is apparently claiming that Paul himself has been teaching circumcision. This may be due to reports like the one about the circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16. If that is true, asks Paul, why is he being persecuted? What he has in mind here is probably not persecution from Roman authorities or Gentile opponents, whom he certainly had, but rejection of his message by leaders of Jewish communities, events alluded to in 2 Cor 11:23–25.

If he had been preaching that circumcision was necessary for believers, then "the offence of the cross" would have been removed. Paul's phrasing is condensed, but the basic concept behind the phrase is central to his preaching (see 1 Cor 2). The death of the Messiah on a cross is a scandal, but by that event and vindication of the crucified one in resurrection, God has intervened in human history in a decisive way, making available his gracious love to Gentiles as well as Jews. To insist on circumcision as a condition of being a "child of God" is to deny that truth. In exasperation Paul concludes his reflection with a nasty comment, wishing that those

who were teaching what he deemed false should not stop at cutting off their foreskins; they should “castrate themselves”! (v. 12).

The other half of the “sandwich” returns to the theme of freedom (v. 13), but now with a qualifying warning. By claiming freedom, Paul is not invoking a principle of moral libertinism, as apparently some Christians of the second century were claimed to have done. It is not the case that in Christ “anything goes.” Love remains the norm that guides behavior, and in fact the whole of the Law, the Torah of Moses, may be summarized (v. 14) by one verse from the Holiness Code of Leviticus, Lev 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Disrespectful behavior toward one another is not compatible with such a command (v. 15).

Flesh and Spirit 5:16-26

Paul’s exhortation continues by picking up an antithesis between “flesh” and “spirit” that had appeared in his allegory of Hagar and Sarah (e.g., 4:29). This is a pair that Paul uses in other contexts to frame his reflections and exhortations (Romans 7–8; Phil 3:2). He begins by setting up the basic opposition between the two (vv. 16–17). Although the terms recall ancient philosophical discussions of the makeup of a human being, Paul’s use of the terms has a more ethical twist. The “flesh” is not simply the organic body, but the whole realm of human striving and desire. The “spirit” is not simply the spark of “soul” within, but the realm of light and truth over which God rules. Living “in the Spirit,” inspired by and attempting to be in conformity with the principle of love articulated in v. 14, leads to certain kinds of behavior, certain kinds of virtue. Living according to the opposite principle leads to vices and sins. Paul begins with a catalogue of the latter, which are, he says, “obvious.” What he lists is indeed a roster of that which any Jewish teacher and many Gentiles teachers would agree are moral problems, although Greek philosophers probably would not include “idolatry” in their list (vv. 19–21).

The contrasting list (vv. 22–25) is labeled the “fruits of the Spirit” (v. 22), most of which consists of widely recognized forms of virtuous behavior. It is, however, striking that Paul includes “joy” as a fruit of the Spirit. We don’t usually think of “joy” in the same category as we do such behavior traits as “patience” and “kindness,” but Paul clearly put a heavy emphasis on “joy” as a characteristic of life “in Christ” (cf. Phil 4:4–7).

More Implications of Faith Working through Love 6:1-10

The final chapter of Galatians continues the exhortations, with a series of focused recommendations that exemplify the general principles that Paul has pronounced. To live a life guided by love, a life “in the spirit” one should deal charitably with one who has committed a transgression (v. 1). And by the way, avoid the temptation yourself! One should “bear one another’s burdens,” thus fulfilling the “Law of Christ” (v. 2). This is a very general principle that can apply to various kinds of economic, physical, and emotional needs. Paul does seem to have a particular circumstance in mind, at least to judge by his next comment about those who “deceive themselves” with delusions of grandeur. Perhaps he is thinking of those who do not want to bear others’ burdens. They do not want to be involved in poor relief, in visiting the sick or those in prison, they do not want to give to his collection for the poor. Such people in particular must “test their own work” rather than their neighbor’s (v. 4). Racing ahead, Paul says that “everyone must carry their own loads” (v. 5), which seems to stand in tension with the admonition that he has just made to bear one another’s burdens. Given what he has just said about the attitude of some who do not want to “bear others’ burdens,” he really seems to suggest here that to “carry one’s load” is equivalent to taking up one’s share of the common responsibilities for those in need.

The next verse (v. 6) asking pupils to care for those who have taught them sounds like an afterthought, or perhaps an interpolation inserted into the letter at this point by someone who has been in the position of a “teacher.” This is precisely the kind of thing that Paul himself took pride in *not* doing (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 11:7–11).

The final verses (vv. 7–10) in this sequence serve as a general summation of the exhortation, weaving together the contrast of “flesh and spirit” and the common ethical notion of sowing and reaping the fruit of virtue.

Farewell 6:11-18

Paul makes a point of saying that he himself has taken up the pen (v. 11). Presumably he has been dictating up to now. His parting shots include criticism of those who are offering a different teaching (v. 12), a disparaging comment about their ability to obey the law (v. 13), claiming that they just want to “boast” about their Galatian converts. Paul contrasts himself with them, identifying what he boasts in (cf. 2 Cor 11-12), not unexpectedly, the “cross of Christ” (v. 14). He repeats from 5:6, the notion that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything. They fall into the category of what Stoic philosophers call “adiaphora,” ethically neutral

matters. What counts now is (v.15) the “new creation,” the new reality that has been established “in Christ.” That reality, of course, is “faith working through love” (5:6). Paul offers a blessing on those who participate in this reality and on the “Israel of God” (v. 16). Some have read Paul here, like later Christians, redefining “Israel” here as a label for those who are “in Christ.” Instead, it seems likely that Paul, in the reconciling final moments of this letter corrects some of his harsh statements about opponents. His argument, he suggests, is not meant to denigrate those who live according to the Mosaic covenant. They, the Israel of God, deserve peace and mercy, the same peace and mercy that Paul understands God to have offered to all peoples. That same reverence for his heritage and yearning for the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people will mark his lengthy reflection on the place of Israel in God’s plan in Romans 9–11.

Paul concludes with another very personal remark, saying that he carries the “marks of Jesus branded on his body.” Exactly what they were is not clear. They may be the scars from the lashings that he received (2 Cor 11:24–25) or perhaps he refers to the “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7), whatever that was. A final prayer for God’s grace, often echoed in our liturgies, ends the letter (v. 18).

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