

Saint Paul: His Life, Letters, and Legacy

Dr. Bruce Beck, Fall 2018

Reflection Paper 2: Paul's Letter to the Galatians

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Personal Engagement

I have mixed feelings about Galatians. The letter is now inseparably associated with Martin Luther, a theologian who argued that "justification" was central to Paul, a position with which I feel considerable discomfort. Galatians is no doubt rich and complex, yet subject to gross oversimplifications and notorious soundbites, in my opinion. Those assumptions tend to be: People are "works-oriented" by nature; Judaism made, and makes, the problem worse; God is never satisfied by incomplete obedience; God requires infinite suffering to exhaust His sense of punitive satisfaction before He pours out His blessing of the Spirit; which suggests God tricked Israel into the covenant to demonstrate their human sinfulness; Christian ministry is not and yet still is quite obviously "legalistic" or "moralistic" because it "must" talk about "justification" before "sanctification" in order to cultivate heart motivations in its hearers of guilt, anxiety, fear for survival, relief, and debt-obligation.

Pastorally, I have preferred Colossians to Galatians for most purposes that I could imagine. Even if I were to warn against the dangers of "personal legalism," as many construe Paul to be warning against in Galatians, I would probably do so from the cosmic christology of Colossians. Entering the textual world of the Sinai covenant in Galatians 3 is thorny and slow-going.

However, I would like to suggest how Paul's argument in Galatians about not re-entering the Sinai covenant has significance for the American Puritan view that they were "covenanted" with God. According to evangelical American historian Mark Noll, America's God, the Puritans believed their colonial endeavor took the form of a "national covenant" as they, too, fled persecution across a wide body of water, emerging at an abundant land inhabited by natives which they, sadly, felt divine authorization to dispossess and exterminate. The modern resurgence of "Christian nationalism," especially when used as a vehicle of "traditionalism" and patriarchy and exclusion, also deserves to feel the sting of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Paul's Introduction and Conclusion

Paul's introduction is "striking, perhaps shocking" (as Donald Hagner says) because he does not offer "a single word of thanks for the Galatians or a good wish," which was customary in Hellenistic letter writing. The Galatians are being drawn to "a different gospel" (1:6) which is not a "gospel" at all (1:7). Paul's opponents ostensibly lay claim to being approved by the same leaders of the Jerusalem church that Paul knows (1:11 – 2:10). They appear to preach the necessity of circumcision (2:3, 7 – 8; 5:2 – 12; 6:12 – 15) and perhaps other "works of the Law" (2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). Given the events Paul recalls, "works of the Law" includes keeping a kosher diet and eating with a circumcised community of believers (2:11 – 14) which would identify believers in Jesus as part of the community of Judaism. Whatever moral or psychological weight this adoption of "Jewish identity markers" might have had to a Gentile person entering the Christian church can be debated, in my opinion. Politically, however, this identification was unquestionably useful.

The Roman Empire exempted Jews from compulsory military service and emperor worship. If believers in Jesus could be categorized legally as part of "Judaism," then the Christians would fit into a relatively comfortable and well-marked category, with significant social and legal benefits. However, for Christians to emerge from both Jewish and Gentile segments of society, and yet fit into neither, would surely jeopardize this arrangement. The Roman Empire would pressure and perhaps crush this upstart sect with needless (it might be argued) deaths and compromises. Situating Scripture, Jesus, and Paul against "empire" has yielded fruitful scholarly and practical insights.

Paul responds to the Galatians, and those in the circumcision camp, whom he considers to be not Christians at all, with very punchy retorts, much like his encounter with Simon Peter (2:11 – 14). For Paul, the issues were quite clear, and quite stark. What, then, is Paul's response? And why?

Paul frames his letter to the Galatians, in his introduction and concluding appeal, with a cluster of interwoven themes and motifs. He introduces himself, or re-introduces himself as the case may be, by reminding them of Jesus' resurrection: he was appointed to be an apostle by Jesus Christ and God the Father, "who raised him from the dead"

(1:1). He concludes by saying that “new creation” and not circumcision or uncircumcision in themselves, matters (6:15). The meaning and conceptual horizon of the phrase “new creation” come into view through Jesus’ resurrection, and will occupy a good deal of Paul’s letter.

For Paul, “new creation” takes shape in the form of the true “people of God.” Paul names himself as a singular apostle when describing his appointment as such, but strategically mentions “all the brethren who are with me” (1:2). An unspecified but presumably large and significant number of fellow Christians come into view with Paul, surely meant to oppose in both number and importance those who are trying to draw off the Galatians to “a different gospel” (1:6). Paul’s conclusion complements his introduction in this regard as well. There, Paul finishes talking about the relational life of the people of Christ (Gal.5:16 – 6:10) and appears to label the people of Christ as “the Israel of God” (6:16). This categorical label, while surprising in some regards given that Paul endeavors to differentiate the Christians from Jews under the Law of the Sinai covenant, serves as Paul’s claim that the meaning of what it means to “be Israel” has been reconfigured and reconstituted by Jesus himself.

Paul brings the cross of Christ into view in his introduction (1:4), as he does in his conclusion (6:12, 14). He declares the effect of the cross in 1:4 as “for our sins” and to effect God’s purpose “to rescue us from this present evil age.” As I will show below, for Paul, a theological interpretation of time periodization is connected to our being “in sin” or “in Christ.” This touches on one of the major issues in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the nature and purpose of “the Law.” He will explain the centrality of Christ Jesus in relation to “the Law” throughout the body of Galatians.

Paul’s Biblical-Theological Interpretation of the Sinai Covenant

The Spirit, Paul says, who has indisputably come into both Jews and Gentiles, could not possibly have come to human beings through their human obedience to the Sinai commandments (3:1 – 5). The Spirit signals for Paul the sign of the eschaton and new creation. The Spirit was implicitly promised to Abraham (Gal.3:6 – 9; cf. Gen.15, 17) and also announced by the Prophets (Isa.59:21; 61:1 – 2; 66:18 – 21; Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.36 – 37; Joel 2:28 – 29; etc.).

If you want to enter the Sinai covenant, Paul says, know this: No one lives up to God’s commandments perfectly (3:10; 6:13; cf. Rom.7:14 – 25). For, in fact, all who try to live under the Law fail, and then bear a curse (3:11 – 12; Dt.21:22 – 23; 27:1 – 29:29): They live in exile from the garden; they experience death; and to wit, Israel was in captivity to foreign powers besides. Therefore, Paul argues, the Spirit must have come through the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus, who bore Israel’s curse yet emerged on the other side of it (3:13 – 14), to those who live by faith (3:11 – 12) in the faithfulness of Jesus (2:20).

The Sinai covenant, then, was an additional experience of God’s people built upon God’s promise to Abraham (3:15 – 18). Why did God give the Sinai covenant, then? Because of Israel’s sin (i.e. to contain it, hedge it in), and to shut up everyone under sin (3:19 – 22) (i.e. to diagnose it as being within human nature), only to point towards Christ (3:3:23 – 25), through whom is open to us true sonship of God, true unity of humanity, as God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham through the seed of Abraham, Christ Jesus (3:26 – 29)

The so-called “New Perspective(s) on Paul” which positions Paul as if he were speaking of sociological and communal bodies (Judaism vs. church), and “the Law” as an ethnic possession, compared to the “traditional Protestant” view of Paul which positions him as speaking of individual moral effort, and “the Law” as any and all commandments of God (Luther) where “works of the Law” never satisfy or please God, can surely be meaningfully connected, but with certain qualifications. Indisputably, Paul warns against attempting to “live” by “the Law” on the grounds that no one can do so. However, neither Paul nor the Galatians would have interpreted “the Law” as simply being about “individual moral performance.” One must admit, after all, that circumcision is not a matter of “individual moral performance” especially when “received” by an infant boy. Significantly, Paul uses the passive voice – “receive circumcision” – in 5:2 – 3. There is merit, then, to the “New Perspective” when it speaks of “the Law” as something that was treated as a “possession.”

Paul’s Understanding of Christ, the Cross, and the Spirit

But how did Jesus redeem Israel from the curse of the Sinai covenant? This vexing question is answered in a very short-handed form in Galatians 4. In the fullness of time, he says, God sent forth His Son to be “born of a woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those who are under the Law” (4:4). These are terms denoting the

participation of the Son in our human condition, and additionally in the Israelite condition. The phrase “born of woman” has echoes (a la Richard B. Hays’ *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*) from Job. To be “born of woman” is to be “full of turmoil” (Job.14:1) and to prompt the question, “Who [among men] can make the clean out of the unclean? No one!” (Job 14:4). It is to ask, “How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?” (Job 25:4). But for Jesus to simultaneously share in our unclean humanity and yet be the source of the eschatological Spirit who shares with us a cleansed human nature (Dt.30:6; Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 36; Ps.51:9 – 10; etc.) means that Jesus’ faithfulness (2:20) throughout the course of his human life is in view and assumed by both Paul and his Galatian audience.

Furthermore, Jesus encountered Israel in the depths of their experience of the Sinai covenant. He was “born under the Law,” which, based on other writings of Paul, means that Jesus, like every other Jew, felt the pressure of “the flesh” (Rom.7:14 – 25). The flesh reacted especially to the tenth, and most internal, commandment – that which forbade the primal Adamic sin involving coveting and jealousy, which was recapitulated by every human being. Yet Jesus, unlike every other Jew, subdued the flesh and condemned sin in the flesh (Rom.8:3 – 4). Only in this way did Jesus, alone among all Israelites, and of course all human beings, “keep the whole Law” (5:2) and produce in himself the “circumcised heart” which God promised Israel after exile and death (Dt.30:6), the heart which he could then share by his Spirit, that we might participate in his very identity as “son of God” (4:5 – 7). Presumably, Jesus also had some spiritual engagement with the “elemental powers” also (4:8 – 11), because we as humans do too, but much about Paul’s language remains uncertain here. By being hung on the tree of the cross, Jesus even identified himself as sharing in the “curse” which Israel was already experiencing (3:13), in order to emerge through it on the other side.

In the context of some remarks about his personal relationship with the Galatians (4:12 – 20), Paul shares his pastoral hope for them: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you” (4:19). Paul’s understanding of the Spirit’s ministry and Christ’s presence surely overlap here, once again in a “new creation” and “participationist” sense. To revisit the motifs of liberation and slavery further, Paul delivers his perplexing allegory of Hagar vs. Sarah, bondwoman vs. freewoman, flesh vs. promise, Sinai and the Jerusalem below vs. the Jerusalem above (4:21 – 5:1). His strategy here, I believe, rests on the sexual unions of Hagar and Sarah with Abraham, and the biological results of their respective unions, interpreted theologically. While several finer points will continue to elude us, we can discern the “participationist” echoes of meaning as they relate to the Galatians themselves being united with “the promise” to Abraham, and Christ being “formed” in the Galatians.

Paul, after providing this allegory, prohibits with fresh force circumcision for Gentiles and re-entering the Sinai covenant (5:2 – 12). He insists that we live by the Spirit of Christ (5:13 – 26) as opposed to being “under the Law” (5:18) not necessarily because the ethical content of Moses’ teaching and Jesus’ are so dramatically different in every way (a topic for another time), but because being “under the Law” was and is to operate without the Spirit of Christ Jesus, as if Jesus had not completed his course under the Law and had not sent his Spirit after his victory. By the Spirit of Jesus, we participate in his victory over the flesh (5:24).

Conclusion

A fuller treatment of many of Paul’s themes begun in Galatians – justification, union with Christ, the Spirit, the Law, the elemental powers – will have to wait for his longer letters. The relationship between Galatians and Romans, in particular, will have to be explored more fully. Donald Hagner may be technically correct in calling Galatians “the rough sketch” where Romans is “the finished painting of a great master.” But proper weight must be given to the fact that Galatians is the mirror image of Romans, not its first draft: In Romans, Paul is not concerned about Gentiles being Judaized, but Jewish Christians being pressured to give up Jewish practices (Rom.14 – 15), Jews being written off as beyond salvation in Christ (Rom.9 – 11), and the historical experience of Israel under the Sinai covenant as irrelevant in defining the righteousness and faithfulness of God (Rom.1 – 8). Ephesians and Colossians, too, arguably present themselves as closer to the “center” of Paul’s thought because Ephesians was not addressed to any particular problem, and Colossians was its twin; so the relationship between this early letter and his most mature, reflective letters, needs to be more clearly understood.

But in a preliminary sense, we can see the basic shape of Paul’s ministry involving Jews and Gentiles in the church. At the center of Paul’s vision for Jews and Gentiles to come together in the one body of Christ requires an understanding of Jesus’ relationship to Israel, and his relation to “the Law” of the Sinai covenant.

Placing one's self and one's community into the story of Israel at the point of Deuteronomy, as the American Puritans did, is self-defeating and draws a curse. In fact, entering into the biblical story anywhere on the biblical timeline between the Exodus to before the life of Christ, is self-defeating. It is to assert occupancy of a "manifest destiny" while undermining one's very claim to that occupancy. It is to carry anticipations of Spirit and cleansing without participating in the reality of the Spirit, or that cleansing. It is to claim an "exceptionalist" identity which, in reality, amputates one's self off from God's people – whether it be German exceptionalism nursed by Martin Luther who wanted to turn his back on the Roman Catholic Church, or the Dutch, British, and American exceptionalism which followed: all Protestant self-concepts that led to colonialism, and not coincidentally. It is to imagine one's community above the elemental powers of the world, while nursing fears and terrors of them. Thus, American evangelicals, in particular, believe they are beyond an enemy invasion on our soil, but are terrified of immigration, or believe capitalist fantasies of being beyond the limits of the natural world, but are terrified by reports of environmental collapse. It is to enter into a narrative of defeat, a story of being "shut up" by one's own sin, from which the only liberation is Jesus, with repentance and renewal in his name. Jesus' new humanity is for all humanity. If we want one, we must receive the other.