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SUMMARY

Paul offers various arguments to show the Galatians that their temptation to put their trust in keeping the law is irrational and out of step with gospel they received. He argues from their own experience, from the faith of Father Abraham and from the example of a will. In no way can the Galatians claim that trusting in keeping the law will bring them into a relationship with God.

Basic Bible References

Galatians 3:1–18

Luke 3:8b–9

Word List

Determinism

Abraham

Righteous

GALATIANS

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In Favor Of Grace

Don't You Get It?

Read Galatians 3:1–5. Paul lectures the Galatians with a series of rhetorical questions:

- Who bewitched you?
- Did you receive the Spirit by doing works of the law or by believing what you heard?
- Are you so foolish?
- Having started with the Spirit are you now ending with the flesh?
- Did you experience so much for nothing?
- ... does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you have heard?

There is no way the Galatians can answer these questions except as Paul would answer them. Paul is forcing them to remember their own experience and having remembered it, they cannot answer any of those questions “pro law.”

Paul’s frustration with the Galatians is obvious. They seem willing to believe these false teachers, these agitators, in spite of their own experience! Are they really that easily swayed? Have they forgotten how it was they came to faith in Christ? The Galatians did not become Christians by turning to Torah and following it. They became Christians when the preaching and teaching of the gospel message, the good news, by Paul and others opened their hearts and minds to the God of grace. They cannot deny that. How then, asked

Paul, could they now be convinced by these agitators that the path to God comes through their own work of following the law?

The Galatians are not making sense. Good theology makes sense; it is logical. Yet the Galatians were uncritically buying into whatever they were told, sticking contradictory ideas onto their amorphous blob of beliefs. “Are you so irrational?” (Galatians 3:3 CEB) complains Paul. Don’t they see how their response to the good news—an acceptance of God’s grace—is totally at odds with earning God’s love by their own law-keeping abilities? “After you started with the Spirit, are you now finishing up with your own human effort?” (3:3b CEB) Paul wants the Galatians to use reason and common sense. Good theology does not believe contradictory things. Nor does it ignore the experience of the individual or the community.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, whom Paul introduces in 3:5, is the presence of God with the people, making it possible for them to have a relationship with God. Did God become present to them by making them follow the law, or by having them hear the word of grace? It was the word of grace, and that word is that we are already acceptable to God, not because we are good, but because God is good.

In Paul’s theology God’s presence (God’s Spirit) works through the hearing of the gospel and creates the new being. Why would anyone want to go backwards, to depend on “works of the flesh” to bring them close to God? Nothing: no ritual, no religious practices can justify humanity. Only God’s Spirit can initiate us into the new age of grace. The Spirit is free and cannot be controlled by any practice or ritual. A relationship with God is not something that can be manipulated by people’s good works or religious practices. (I’ve been good; why doesn’t God respond?) The Spirit is the gift of God’s grace alone.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is given *to* the community and *in* community. The Christian faith creates a community. And thus, over the course of time, the church has discovered that inspiration comes in a balanced, communal way. It is the community, the church, which discerns the Spirit’s leading.⁴ The Holy Spirit, throughout Galatians, will be highlighted by Paul as the means by which the Christian and the Christian community come into being and

⁴ This discussion of the Spirit is informed by Charles Cousar, *Galatians*, Interpretation Series, 66-69.

thrive. Christianity knows nothing of solitary religion. To encounter the gospel is to be drawn by the Holy Spirit into the community. Reliance on anything or anyone else is folly.

Paul does not use the term “Trinity,” nor does he “line up” the Father, Son and Spirit as a definition of God. But he does intertwine the actions of the three members of the Trinity, much as John does (see John 16 for example). It is Matthew who uses the formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s work is trinitarian without using the word.

In verses 4–5 Paul refers to many experiences of the Spirit and of miracles in the Galatians’ immediate past. In Acts, Paul healed a handicapped man at Lystra (Acts 14:6–10) which was in the province of Galatia. Perhaps Paul is referring to this event. In any case, the Spirit was among the Galatians in a powerful way as their church was forming, helping them to hear the gospel that Paul was proclaiming and changing the way people lived their lives. The true mark of the Spirit’s presence is not in large attendance, healings, speaking in tongues, or any other “proofs.” The Spirit’s presence brings forth “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). These are the calling card of the Spirit. Any congregation that does not have an abundance of examples of this “fruit of the Spirit” needs to take its pulse. It may find that it has died without realizing it! We will look at this fruit more closely in the final chapter. At any rate, the Galatians must have been showing evidence of such spiritual fruit. How then, Paul wonders, could a doctrine of the old age, the age of flesh and of the law have derailed them?

Look at Abraham

Paul changes tactics abruptly and goes to the Scriptures in order to show the Galatians how far they are wandering from the truth. **Read Galatians 3:6–9.** Abraham lived long before the law was given to the Israelites. He was the first to hear the call of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one God. God called Abraham and Abraham followed. (See Genesis 12:1–4.)

Christianity springs from Judaism. Jesus and all of his first disciples were Jews. Paul is quick to identify himself as a Jew (Galatians 2:15). He made no move to separate the church from Judaism. The early Christians in Jerusalem continued to worship in the temple. Judaism counts Abraham as its founding patriarch. (Jesus refers to him as Father Abraham in Luke 16:30.)

Judaism and Christianity are rooted in Abraham. Paul invokes Abraham's name twenty times in his letters. (See Romans 4 for an argument of faith and works based on Abraham.)

The key text associated with Abraham is Genesis 15:6, "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Building on this text, Paul argues that it is not by being descended from Abraham through the flesh that one becomes "righteous," a follower of God's way. It is through holding fast to the faith of Abraham, by walking in trust with God as Abraham did. So implies John the Baptizer in **Luke 3:8b–9. Read that now.** The descendant of Abraham is the one who shares Abraham's faith in God and lives by it.

A large part of the controversy for Reformation theologian Martin Luther when he challenged the Epistle of James centered on this verse. James 2:23–24 reads, "Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God.' You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." This text will be examined in the James study.

Paul brings his argument home to the Galatians by using Genesis 12:3, God's pledge to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." "All the families of the earth" includes the Gentiles. So from the beginning the Galatians have been part of God's promise to Abraham. In them that ancient pledge is being fulfilled, and in this case, it is being fulfilled through their faith. It stands in Torah: the Galatians are part of the promise; the promise that precedes the law!

Who Is Righteous?

Read Galatians 3:10–14. Paul interprets Deuteronomy 27:26a, "Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them" to mean that if one chooses to live by the law, the law will condemn them if they do not live it to the full. James 2:10 also contends that to rely on the law means that one is responsible for all of it.

People need to be brought close to God, but the law cannot do that. It cannot make people "alive" to God. Paul then quotes Habakkuk 2:4b "but the righteous live by their faith." The law is good and it speaks to us of the faithful life: doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly

with God (see Micah 6:8). It calls us to love God with all we have and to treat our neighbors as we would treat ourselves. It calls us to look to the needs of the poor and to acknowledge God's ownership of the planet. The messages of forgiving and celebrating and trusting are here. The New Testament is cut adrift without the Hebrew Scriptures. But keeping the law, relying on one's own abilities and moral fiber in order to be counted righteous is hopeless: "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." (Romans 7:14, 15 and 18b) This is the curse of the law; it shows us what is good, but it has no power to make us righteous. It can only show us that we are condemned. God has acted in Jesus Christ to break the curse by becoming a curse. God's action, not humanity's, is our salvation. Within the gospel the heart of the law endures. By the power of the Spirit of God working in those who trust in God, God's will of love and forgiveness is done.

Paul has developed a consistent argument:

- 1) Abraham, the very father of the faith, was declared "righteous" before God by means of his faith; the law not even existing at the time.
- 2) The true descendants of Abraham are those who share Abraham's faith in God.
- 3) The promise to Abraham includes the Gentiles; hence, it is meant to include the Galatians. Race and nation are no barriers to inclusion.
- 4) The law itself shows that righteousness, justification, and a living relationship with God is not entirely provided by the law, but is a gift of God's grace in those who trust in this gospel.

Not Everyone Agrees

The rabbis of the first century AD interpreted the texts from Genesis differently. In Genesis 15, they said Abraham's faith was a good work, and it was that work which made him righteous. The declaration of righteousness was a reward that Abraham earned. In addition, Abraham had amassed a store of good works which could be drawn on by Jews, but not by Gentile converts. The rabbis ignored the part in Genesis 12 about "all the nations" being blessed. They would not have accepted Paul's argument about Abraham preceding the law, for there was an idea current among the rabbis that the Torah was pre-existent, that it contributed to the creation process! Paul was certainly aware of these interpretations and may have used

this argument in part to oppose their theology.

One Last Time!

Paul's final example is a legal one as he continues his thoughts about Abraham. **Read Galatians 3:15–18.** Paul's use of the text—being able to deduce Christ from the singular “descendant”—seems a stretch to us. It was, however, not an unusual way to argue in rabbinical circles. The true offspring of Abraham's faith was Christ.

Paul does not agree with the rabbis' belief in the pre-existence of the Torah. He sees it as coming into existence in the time of Moses as depicted in the Torah itself (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). That being the case, the promise made to Abraham by God pre-dates the law by four hundred thirty years. A promise (or a will) made and ratified before the law would not be subject to it. The promise would still be in effect. The law cannot nullify the promise to Abraham, a promise made by the grace of God. Paul is using the law itself to show that the law does not rule over the promise. The Galatians will derive no benefit from the law if they choose to rely on it. It is not the agent of their acceptance by God. Whenever the law becomes the ultimate object of trust, it becomes the curse—the demand to do the impossible—and the downfall of humankind.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Galatians 5:22–23.

Research

1. Using a good Bible dictionary, find out more about Abraham.
2. Such concepts as “determinism” and “free will” have been used in different contexts to mean different things. Could they contribute to our discussion of Paul’s views?

Reflection

1. Which of Paul’s arguments do you think you would find most compelling if you were a first century Galatian? (See the bulleted points from “Don’t You Get it?” on page 21.)
Which is most persuasive to a twenty-first century westerner?
2. How would you define “freedom” as used in a discussion of the Christian faith?