

## GALATIANS

### I. Introduction:

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians seems to be a rather simple document, but much wisdom is needed to understand what it is all about. The typical problem that was urgent in Paul's day is no longer relevant for us. For us circumcision is not of any importance in connection with the Gospel message. In some churches or groups where infant baptism is considered to have taken the place of circumcision the same problem may come up in a different form. Throughout the ages the truth of Galatians, that "the gospel is not something that man made up" (1:11 – the Greek literally states: *ouk éstin katá ántrhopon*; "is not after man") has remained valid and relevant. For the person who has never surrendered to God, the Gospel of God's grace remains a threat. Man may change the tactics of his resistance against the message, but opposition of the twenty-first century man is the same as the first century person's. The fact remains the same that the person who has not been renewed by God's grace cannot accept God's grace. That is the fact we have to face when we study conditions of the first century and compare them with our present age. This is, in a nutshell, the topic of our study.

The one phrase that sums up the message of Galatians is "the gospel is not something that man made up." The Apostle intones that theme in his opening statement: "Paul, an apostle — sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father." The contrast between fallen man and God the Father is the leading theme of this epistle.

It is difficult to understand the content of this epistle without some knowledge of the historic background that we find in *The Book of Acts*, particularly in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter. We must also keep in mind the connection between this epistle and Paul's letter to the Romans. Luke mentions rather tersely how some Jews from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch with the message that the gentiles who did not keep the rituals of the Mosaic Law could not be saved. Circumcision stood symbolically for the intent to keep the law. We must bear in mind that the topic was not the moral law which is summed up in the words: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>1</sup> What was meant was the details in the Levitical Law that purified a person ritually so that he could appear before God without incurring the wrath of God upon himself. Circumcision was part of this, as were certain instructions about foods, washings and keeping the Sabbath. The question was never whether a child of God would be allowed to service idols, steal, lie, commit adultery, kill or covet. Those rituals had no moral value but symbolized a spiritual reality that formed the basis upon which a human being became acceptable to God. The subtle danger is that one would consider the observation of the rituals to be acts for which God would be obliged to pay a person. The unspoken supposition is that payment would consist in the gift of eternal life. Few people realize that this would be a high price for such little labor.

Although Luke only mentions the issue in passing, it is clear that it became a cause for great disagreement and violent quarrel. When the question first arises in the church of Antioch, we read that it brought Paul and Barnabas "into sharp dispute and debate."<sup>2</sup> During the debate in the Synod, the Christians among the Pharisees stood up and explained their point of view,<sup>3</sup> which

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1. Matt. 22:37-39

2. Acts 15:2

3. Acts 15:5

caused “much discussion.” The first great church gathering was in danger of ending in great disagreement and conflict. It was only the Holy Spirit who preserved a spirit of unity. The Synod’s conclusions sound rather opportunistic to us. The delegates made a distinction between principle and practice. The principle is that all of the ritual law was a pointer to the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was a shadow of the reality. As that reality emerged the shadow lost its importance. Jesus Christ is the real circumcision, the real bloody sacrifice, the real cleansing. The opportunistic part is found in the closing remarks of James in which he states that the gentiles ought to refrain “from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”<sup>1</sup> The reason given is “For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that most cities harbored Jewish colonies, account for that phrase. The Apostles were concerned that the free attitude of the gentiles who had converted to Christianity would damage the testimony of the Gospel for the Jews.

We tend to see sexual immorality as a sin against the moral law, not the ritual law. Eating of meat of strangled animals and eating of blood were trespasses against the ritual law. James added fornication to the list because the idol worship of that time was carried out in the context of temple prostitution. The great problem the young Christian church faced was that a person who wanted to fulfill his religious obligations had to go to an idol temple and have sex with a temple prostitute. It needs no explanation to understand how demonically inspired was this combination of spirit and flesh. The sexual immorality in James’ comment was not about marital unfaithfulness, which is a moral sin, but idolatry as a ritual. It may have been difficult to differentiate between one and the other in that period of time. What concerned the brothers in Jerusalem was that there were throughout the Roman Empire Jewish enclaves that ought to be reached by the Gospel. The Jews there were as strongly attached to the Law of Moses as the Jews in Israel. If those Jews would see the behavior of the Gentiles who had converted to Christianity, who proclaimed to be followers of a Judean sect, they would be repelled by this new lifestyle which went straight against the Mosaic tradition. That would close the door to evangelizing those people. The Synod in Jerusalem decided that the testimony of the Kingdom of Heaven ought to have priority over personal Christian liberty.

We must remind ourselves that eating meat of strangled animals and eating blood has no intrinsic significance for our entering into the Kingdom. What is important is our testimony towards those who are outside the Kingdom. We could say that it is not important what we do, but what people see us do is. It is their interpretation of our acts that can be a stumbling block or a positive testimony.

We would get stuck in a lopsided interpretation of the *Epistle to the Galatians* if we would not put Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* next to Acts 15. Paul states: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”<sup>3</sup> God’s righteousness is revealed in His attitude toward sin and the sinner. God punished sin once for all in Jesus Christ. He does not punish us twice, once in Christ and once in us. Those who were punished in Jesus

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1. Acts 15:20

2. Acts 15:21

3. Rom. 1:16,17

Christ are set free. That is why God is justified when He justifies those who believe in Christ.<sup>1</sup> This act of righteousness satisfies the demands of the law for those who live by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The law demands moral rectitude. God expects us to be as morally pure as He is Himself. We must be as holy as He is. The ritual law existed to teach man that he was not living up to the demands of the law. The Israelites lived with the misunderstanding that a precise observance of the ritual prescripts would result in moral perfection. This kept the Jews from achieving the required righteousness. But Gentiles who believed that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the ritual requirements of the law in His death on the cross, who consequently had received the Holy Spirit, and who experienced a slow but sure moral change in their lives, began to answer God's demand for righteousness. Simple faith turned out to be a power of God for righteousness.<sup>3</sup>

Recognition of the difference between the ritual demands of the law and the moral demands on the one hand, and the relationship between the two on the other is of the greatest importance for understanding the message of Galatians. God's moral demands for us can only be met by the Holy Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit works only in those who accept the fact that Jesus Christ fulfilled all the demands of the ritual law in their behalf. Without that basis there is no power and without the power of the Holy Spirit man is doomed. The mistake the Galatians made was that they wanted to remove the foundation that was laid for them. They wanted to take some credit for what they had not done themselves. The Gospel is not manmade.

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1. Rom. 3:26

2. Rom. 8:1-4

3. Rom. 9:30-10:2

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## I. The Gospel of Grace Defended

1:1—2:21

### A. Introduction

1:1-9

*1 Paul, an apostle — sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—*

*2 and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia:*

*3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,*

*4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,*

*5 to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

*6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—*

*7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

*8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*

*9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

Unlike in any of his other epistles, the Apostle Paul uses no introductory compliments or remarks. He goes straight to the business at hand. We see here, as in most books of the Bible that the key to understanding the message hangs at the door. The very first words tell us what the message is about. The theme of the epistle is the contrast between God and fallen man.

The Gospel is not “according to man” and Paul’s call to apostleship was not either. No one had suggested to Paul that he ought to become an apostle of Jesus Christ, because everything in Paul’s life pointed in the opposite direction. We will come back to this in the second half of the first chapter. Paul only mentions his call in passing, but, in doing so, he yet sets the tone for the whole epistle.

Paul’s appeal to his apostolic authority is of great importance for the rest of this letter. The appeal is actually paradoxical. On the one hand man had nothing to do with it. On the other hand, being an apostle is not merely a function, it pertains to a person. Paul does not say, “Don’t look at me, look at my office.” He does differentiate between the old human nature and the new, but not between the new nature and the office. Paul throws the full weight of his person, which all the Holy Spirit has done in him and through him, into the following argument. It is God’s direct and immediate intervention in his life, comparable to a resurrection from the dead. The mention of Jesus’ resurrection is not incidental and it is not disconnected to the context of the phrase. Paul’s call and Christ’s resurrection belong to the same category. That which happened to Jesus Christ happened to Paul also. Paul’s call consisted of the application of Jesus’ resurrection upon his life. That defines Paul’s call as an apostle.

The greeting “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” is literally the same as in all his other epistles written to churches, with only a slight variation in *Colossians* and *I Thessalonians*. The Greek *charis* and the Hebrew *shalom* bind Old and New Testament together and express the diversity of the church. Exceptional in Galatians, and very fitting in the argumentation, is the auxiliary phrase “who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age...” Thus the whole Gospel is contained in a nutshell in this greeting. Jesus’ pay-

ment for our sins is meant to free us from the power of sin by the application of His resurrection, which makes us into new creatures. That is God's plan for every human being.

Paul says that this is the will of God. If we subject our own will to God's will we bring glory to Him. Our obedience honors God. That point is very important in Paul's argumentation. Do we want salvation on our terms, according to our own will, or on God's terms? That is the question on which this epistle hangs. Who is at the center, God or man? Paul's greeting gains in importance as the content of the epistle unfolds. Amazing that a mere greeting can have so much substance!

Vv.6-9, actually including v.10, explain the reason for Paul's writing. Paul is not so much astonished that Christians in Galatia are exposed to temptation in the realm of doctrine, but he is amazed that they turn out to be such an easy prey. Paul had probably told them what he also told the elders of the Ephesian church: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."<sup>1</sup> What had happened in the church in Antioch,<sup>2</sup> also happened in the churches in Galatia. People had come and told the Gentile Christians: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

What is striking is that Paul does not contrast the message he preached with the message of the Judaisers, but that he identifies the preacher with the message. Evidently, the Galatians were still in the stage in which they related their faith in the truth of the message to their faith in the reliability of the messenger. The fact that Paul takes this approach seems to indicate that the church was still rather immature.

That is the psychological approach a father would take toward his under-age child. That is the reason Paul puts so much emphasis on his own reliability. That approach has its obvious dangers. The apostle plays a dangerous game. It seems that it would have been safer to keep the messenger and the message separate. On the other hand, the circumstances under which the Galatians had heard the message from Paul had been so much connected to Paul's personal condition,<sup>3</sup> that it would have been unnatural to keep the two separate. In reality, it ought to be that messenger and message are united closely. "The medium is the message." Dedication and fidelity to the person of Paul ought to have protected the young Christians from this false doctrine. Just as the church in Antioch referred the matter immediately to the apostles in Jerusalem, so the church in Galatia ought to have turned to Paul with their problem. Paul did not expect mature spiritual insight from these young Christians, but he did expect sufficient love for himself that they would have asked for his opinion. That makes this epistle an expression of personal pain. As the remainder of the letter shows, Paul did not expect them to copy him uncritically and rashly either.

There are stages in life in which it is profitable to focus upon a spiritually mature person as a model. What the Galatians did then was unnatural and not a sign of maturity, although they may have thought it to be so. Paul purposely sets himself up as a role model by the grace of Christ. In contrast to this we see this confidential relationship developed between the Galatians and the Judaisers. In that relationship the message stands out, more than the messenger. There is a suggestion in this that the falseness of the message makes a bond of confidence impossible. Confidence is not built by psychological factors. A vague humanistic love for mankind is insufficient. The truth of the Gospel and the love of God always go hand in hand. Therein is the blessing. Separation of the two opens the door to a curse. Paul stresses the point that the loving relationship

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1. Acts 20:29,30

2. See Acts 15:1.

3. See Gal. 4:13-15.

between the church and him does not imply that they swallow everything Paul says line, hook and sinker. He places himself under the curse as the first one, if he deviates from the truth of the Gospel. In doing so, he puts the reliability of his ministry in the right perspective. The bond of confidence is created by the truth of the message. On the other hand, Paul's personal love and warmth open the door to the acceptance of the truth. It is true that people are often convinced by the wrong factors. But that does not change this truth.

Our first impression is that Paul overreacts to those who have a different opinion. Isn't Paul too fast in tying millstones around his opponents' necks in pronouncing his *anathema*?

Truth sometimes inhabits grey areas. It is often difficult to define. Added to this, our human horizon is quite limited. No one can say he possesses the whole truth. We cannot reproach Paul that he curses his opponents because their concept of the truth is incomplete. He could hardly have been that wrong himself. The point in view is the application of eternal truth to one particular issue in time and space. God did not condemn Adam and Eve because they did not know the complete truth, but because they did not apply that part of the truth that had been revealed to them upon the problem they faced. The fundamental fault was that these people did not consult the Word of God but their own understanding in regard to the question of the salvation of mankind.

In our search for the truth, our focus ought to be on God alone. He who loves God and surrenders his life to the Lord, always knows the difference between good and evil.

Not all Bible scholars agree with the above, believing that not Paul, but God was the one who called them. The Greek text allows for both interpretations. Some versions capitalize "Him," other, as *The New Living Translation*, render the verse: "I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ."

It may seem strange to us that Paul suggests the possibility that an angel from heaven would proclaim another Gospel. The fall of Adam and Eve proves that this is not a hypothetical question. Paul's suggestion, however, confirm that fact that the truth of the Gospel is an eternal and unchangeable fact that is rooted in the character of God. Things are not necessarily true because they are supernatural.

## **B. Gospel of Grace Is Given by Divine Revelation1:10-24**

*10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

*11 I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.*

*12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*

*13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.*

*14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.*

*15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man,*

*17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.*

*18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days.*

*19 I saw none of the other apostles — only James, the Lord's brother.*

*20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.*

*21 Later I went to Syria and Cilicia.*

*22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.*

*23 They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."*

*24 And they praised God because of me.*

V.10 has been one of the greatest challenges in the Bible for me personally. My natural tendency is wanting to make a pleasant impression upon people. I feel I need the approval of others for my own happiness. Such is my reaction to the uncertainties and fears of life. The danger in this is that I put pleasant human relationships above fellowship with God. When I read this verse for the first time, it hit me as a brick between the eyes. Jesus' words to the Pharisees apply here: "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?"<sup>1</sup> The tendency to accept praise is not particularly condemned here. We need some praise to be able to function emotionally. It is an important part of our salvation to realize that the love of God fills our emotional needs much more effectively than the vague, non-committed approval of our fellowmen. It is also not true that we always ought to evoke controversy in order to prove that we are on the Lord's side. The fact that God is for us, does not always mean that other must be against us. The important thing is how important we consider people's approval to be. *The Book of Proverbs* states: "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."<sup>2</sup>

Much more is at stake than what people can do to us. Our real enemy is not the one of flesh and blood, but the evil authority in heavenly places. Human alliances do not protect against him. The fear of men can lead to following the majority in doing evil.<sup>3</sup>

Paul places these psychological and spiritual factors in the framework of the preaching of the Gospel. The psychology of those who say that circumcision is a requirement for salvation appeals to the human tendency of wanting to be able to do something and pay for salvation. That lessens man's total bankruptcy before God. It diminishes the severity of death, which can only be overcome by resurrection, to a condition that allows for negotiations and a dialogue with God. That would place us as human beings in a more favorable position before God.

Over against this, Paul places the Gospel that is not "according to man." It is not negotiable. Our human tendency is to resist such ignoble capitulation. Circumcision as a term is much easier to accept.

Our decision to serve Christ means that we do not allow our service to be influenced by human approval or disapproval. The service of Christ also makes us into better slaves. It is because we are no longer slaves of men but slaves of Christ that obedience to human authority becomes an opportunity, because it means obedience to Christ. God demands that we become models of obedience, not because we are afraid of people, but because of the fear of the Lord. In almost every one of his epistles, Paul emphasizes this kind of balance. There is such a thing as serving Christ

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1. John 5:44

2. Prov. 29:25

3. See Ex. 23:2.

and acquire human approval. We read in Romans: “Anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”<sup>1</sup>

There is always the possibility that we are outwardly obedient and revolt inwardly. The important thing is that we surrender our will to the will of God and demonstrate to people the love of Christ by our obedience. Obedience to Christ excludes the option to look to people for their approval because we need to be stroked and patted by them.

Paul’s statement in v. 11 that the Gospel “is not something that man made up” is the main theme of this epistle. *The New Living Translation* renders it: “The gospel message I preach is not based on mere human reasoning.” The Greek text reads literally: “But you, brethren, I certify that the Gospel which was preached of me that is not after man.” The Greek word used is *kata*, which has a broad variety of meanings. We find it in the opening verses of this epistle in v.4 – “who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” There is also a sense of direction in the meaning of the word. Paul suggests that the Gospel does not move in the direction mankind is moving. Man moved away from God to his perdition; the Gospel moves toward God. We have to make a U-turn to follow the direction of the Gospel. If we want to depict this with arrows, we can say that, in the incarnation, God goes in the same direction as fallen man. The change of direction occurred in the resurrection. God caught up with fallen man and if a human being turns around, he is rescued from the present evil age and brought back to God. For the person who refuses the turn around, the Gospel goes in the opposite direction he goes.

We will never be able to separate the Gospel from the way we personally experienced it the first time. The specific circumstances of our conversion will always play a role in the way we pass on the message to others. It is obvious that this has both its advantages and disadvantages. Our subjective experience and the objective message are not the same. There is also a difference between our subjectivity and the subjectivity of others. Yet, our testimony can never be impersonal. The fact that our experiences are not the norm for others does not mean that we have to leave our personal emotions out of our testimony. Paul knew, of course, that not everyone would get converted on the way to Damascus. The point is not that the same miracle ought to be repeated in every human life, but that He who performed a miracle in Paul’s life does the same in the life of others. That such miracles show signs of similarity is in itself a miracle.

Paul’s observation that no human agency had been involved in his receiving of the Gospel, that it had come to him by way of direct revelation of Jesus Christ can cause misunderstanding. The question of the authority of the written Word of God had, in Paul’s days, not acquired the importance that it has in later centuries. We may assume that Cornelius’ experience in receiving the Gospel message is a paradigm of the transmission of the Gospel. The angel who appeared to Cornelius could only refer him to Peter. Passing on the content of the Gospel message is not part of an angel’s ministry to humans. That is a ministry given to humans alone. The secret is passed on from mouth to mouth. The question is now whether Paul pretends that God made an exception for him? If Paul received the Gospel through direct revelation, what guarantee do we have that others won’t receive it that way also? And why do missionaries have to go into all the world to preach the Gospel to those who had never heard?

We know that Paul was aware of the content of the Gospel before he set out on the road to Damascus. Through Paul’s contact with Gamaliel, Paul must have heard the details of the grilling of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup> He must also have heard Stephen’s testimony. Without

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1. Rom. 14:18

knowledge of the Gospel message Paul could never have come to the point of persecuting the early Christians with such zeal. Consequently, the revelation Paul received was no about the content of a Gospel message he did not know previously.

The account of Paul's trip to Damascus occurs three times in The Book of Acts. In chapter 9 we read the story as Luke renders it objectively. In chapters 22 and 26 Paul gives it as his personal testimony. We see in these accounts that what happened to Paul was a breakthrough of the truth. In the light that engulfed Paul there was no revelation of new facts. We could briefly reconstruct the conversation between Jesus and Paul as follows: Jesus asks Paul: "Why do you do this?" Paul answers with the question: "Who are you?" In this "why" and "who" lies the whole truth. In the last chapter we find the addition: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."<sup>1</sup> From that statement we conclude that Paul's resistance against the Gospel was actually against his better judgment. We could say that the revelation on the road to Damascus was more a revelation about Paul and less about Jesus Christ and not at all about the Gospel. Paul heard the message of forgiveness only three days later from the mouth of Ananias. When Jesus let His light shine on Paul, Paul saw himself for one moment in God's light. Conversion never means that we let our light shine upon God. When we see ourselves in God's light, we compare ourselves as the image of God with the original and we judge ourselves. That is the reason we make a U-turn.

What Paul means with appeal to the "revelation" is that people cannot reproach Paul that he was fed the Gospel from childhood, as if he got it with his mother's milk. He did not become a Christian as he first became a Jew and a Pharisee, as part of his birth and culture. Paul was never able to forgive himself for his previous sin of persecuting the church. His confession pops up every time in his testimony. Here we read in v.13 "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it." In Acts we read: "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison."<sup>2</sup> And "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."<sup>3</sup> In his epistles, he writes: "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."<sup>4</sup> And "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."<sup>5</sup> This accentuates the more the miracle of his conversion. Paul's becoming a servant of Jesus Christ was not the result of a natural development. It constituted a revolution. Yet, when Jesus revealed Himself to Paul He did not tell him anything he did not know already. It is, however, important in the light of Paul's argument in this epistle, to

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2. Acts 5:34-40

1. Acts 26:14

2. Acts 22:4

3. Acts 26:9-11

4. I Cor. 15:9

5. I Tim. 1:12-14

understand that the Gospel did not come to Paul in a way that could have been expected. This is proof of the fact that the Gospel is not “according to man.”

Paul’s conversion and his call to be an apostle, probably, did not occur simultaneously. In the account in Acts, we read that Jesus commands Paul to travel to Damascus to wait there for further instructions. Later in Acts we read about another vision Paul received while in the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> We are not told anything else about that vision apart from the fact that Paul’s commission to go to the Gentiles had disastrous consequences. When Paul mentioned this to the Jews with whom he had worked before, he expected that they would understand why he had changed so dramatically after he discovered the truth. He believed that they would be convinced by the mention of the supernatural heavenly vision he had received. Paul had been naïve to think that his former colleagues had opposed the truth because they did not know the truth, in the same way as he persecuted the churches because he had not known any better. He would not have been the fanatic he was, had he known. That made this revelation so painful for Paul. That was the reason he had such a hard time forgiving himself. He never overcame his amazement about the fact that God had forgiven him.

That was also the reason he was so troubled about what was happening in the churches of Galatia. He knew how easy it was to deceive oneself. It is true, this was not revealed to him by man, but by the Father in heaven. After all, revelation means to see oneself and the world in which we live as God sees us. It means the recognition of God’s right and objectivity. This kind of revelation ought to be a common element in the life of a Christian. Many Christians, however, fall into the sin of Jeroboam, who severed the bond with God’s revelation when he moved the place of worship from Jerusalem to the northern kingdom of Israel.

It seems that in vv.15 and 16 Paul combines the two visions, the one on the road to Damascus and the one in the temple in Jerusalem. The words “God, who set me apart from birth” are a paraphrase of God’s Word to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”<sup>2</sup> Paul recognized that God had an eternal plan for his life. His call did not come on the spur of the moment, like a spontaneous impulse; it was part of a perfect and well prepared plan. The two visions belong together. This does not mean that the content of the Gospel was communicated to Paul in a supernatural way. It was not a subjective experience with the same kind of authority as the written Word. In Paul’s day there were as yet no sects that could call upon the Scriptures to justify a revelation that had been given to individuals. The canon had not yet been established. The problem the church had to face in later centuries had not yet come to the forefront. As far as Paul was concerned form and content of the Gospel were one. The objective message and the form it took in Paul’s call and ministry were identical and could not be separated. C. S. Lewis uses the image of a man who has a nut which is still in its shell. He has not yet cracked the shell. When he does so, he knows which part should be eaten and which should be thrown away. For Paul and for the churches in Galatia the nut was still in its shell. To deviate from the Gospel message meant turning against the person who had preached that message to them. What would the Gospel message be, if it had not become flesh and blood in them? As Paul expresses it in a later chapter: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”<sup>3</sup> Paul sees it as his task to labor for this miracle of incarnation to be repeated in these believers. This is the essence of this epistle.

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1. Acts 22:17-21

2. Jer. 1:5

3. Gal. 4:19

The call God had given to Paul did not only consist in carrying out the work but also in living the life. Here again, we could ask where the line must be drawn. What is the work, other than the fruit of life with the Lord? This is obvious from Jesus' words: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."<sup>1</sup> Paul's statement "I did not consult any man" gives the impression that the whole process took very little time. This is obviously not true, since he also says that between his conversion and his return to Damascus, he spent three years in Arabia to sort things out. And then there was the journey to Jerusalem where he had the vision in the temple. It is difficult to place the various incidents in the timeframe Luke presents in Acts.<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to see the conspiracy in Damascus to kill Paul as a reason for his flight to Arabia. On the other hand it seems logical that Paul needed solitude and rest to study the written Word and find a correlation between the Scriptures and the revelation given to him.

We may assume that it was Barnabas who introduced Paul to Peter. The question that has spiritual importance is what Paul means with "I did not consult any man." The Greek text reads literally: "I immediately did not confer with flesh and blood." Paul contrasts his spiritual revelation with human consultation. In his everyday life, however, Paul seems to have combined the two frequently. If his second visit to Jerusalem is the same as we read about in Acts 15:1,2, then the revelation in Galatians 2:2 coincides with the very human request by the elders of the church in Antioch for Paul and Barnabas to make the visit. And the vision in Acts 22:17-21 is confirmed by the dedication to missionary ministry in Acts 13:1-3.

We could see Paul argumentation as an effort to detach himself as an apostle from the association with the church. But being "an apostle — sent not from men nor by man" did not make Paul a freelance evangelist. He had been commissioned by the church and he knew himself to be accountable to the church. All this means that there had been direct divine intervention and that there was a continuous supernatural element that was confirmed and acknowledged by men, but not initiated by them.

The common human experience is that God calls and the church confirms. This kind of confirmation is important, because we can easily deceive ourselves. We can be mistaken, thinking that God tells us to do certain things, while that is not true. Sometimes we need protection against our own fertile imagination. On the other hand there are circumstances in which the advice of others should not be the guideline to follow. At another time Paul disregarded the counsel of others not to go to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Both Paul' strong personal urge to go and the warning of his fellow Christians came from the Holy Spirit. Paul had to make a choice between two revelations. We owe the rich epistles to Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, his second letter to Timothy and Philemon to this choice he made against his own life. But at that point Paul had acquired years of deep intimate fellowship with God. He would not have faced any confusion in this conflict.

It is not easy to summarize Paul's argument in a few sentences. He seems to be saying that he received the Gospel message through direct revelation. But that appears not to be the case. It also sounds as if he did not recognize the church's authority above him. That is also not true. It even looks as if, in appealing to God's revelation to him and his subjective experience of the same, he pulls out from under the authority of the Scriptures. His quotations of the law, later in this epistle, contradict this.

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1. John 15:5

2. See Acts 9:19-30.

3. See Acts 20:22-24 and 21:4-6, 10-14.

So what can we say? First of all that there is a supernatural element, both in the message as in the messenger. Furthermore that the message and the messenger cannot be separated. The messenger becomes the incarnation of the message. Christ reveals Himself in those who preach Christ.

Paul's report of his encounter with Peter and James must be the event Luke mentions in Acts.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that Luke's mention that "Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him" and the "when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus"<sup>2</sup> was not part of Paul's first visit, but a later episode. In that case, Luke's report: "So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" would not be an immediate part of Paul's first two-week visit to Jerusalem.

Paul went to Jerusalem to meet Peter, but he encountered opposition. It is clear that Paul speaks here about his first visit after his conversion. If this were not so, this incident could not be used in his argumentation regarding the revelation of Christ in his life. If the account of Acts 9 does not speak of Paul's first visit, the suspicion toward Paul from the side of the church in Jerusalem would be unfounded. Why would the church be suspicious of someone who had already been received by Peter and James? Barnabas demonstrated his noble and heroic side by taking Paul under his wing. This compassion for someone who was rejected made him earn a friendship of more than fourteen years. It made him also lose that friendship afterwards for the same reason. It was Barnabas' compassionate attitude toward John Marc that caused separation of the two friends.<sup>3</sup> The fact that later Paul did take Marc back<sup>4</sup> is proof of the fact that Barnabas' compassion was a gift of the Holy Spirit.

So Paul met with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, through the mediation of Barnabas. At that point the Gospel had already taken solid form in Paul's life. Yet, Paul's meeting with Peter cannot have failed to leave an impression upon Paul. It must have made a deep impression upon him to meet the man whom the Holy Spirit had used to gather a harvest of three thousand people in one day. Christ's revelation to Paul may have been the most important experience of his life, but it must have been thrilling to meet someone in whom the same Jesus had become flesh and blood.

We should take a closer look at the words "But when God ... was pleased to reveal his Son in me." This revelation of Jesus Christ in Paul life was not an instant, once-for-all experience. It was not limited to the single moment on the road to Damascus. There was growth, bearing of fruit and ripening. Paul distinguishes five facets in this process. God had set him apart from birth. The Greek text states: "God who separated me from my mother's womb." This can refer either to his birth or to the time of his conception. Paul does not speak here of the doctrine of election and predestination. Otherwise he ought to have used words like "from the creation of the world."<sup>5</sup> The emphasis here is upon Paul's experience of God's call. Looking back over his life, he concludes that God's hand had been upon him, even in the time of his ignorance. In retrospect he saw a clear line of God's keeping and guidance.

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1. Acts 9:26,27

2. Acts 9:28-30

3. Acts 15:36-41

4. II Tim. 4:11

5. Rev. 17:8

God's setting apart of Paul began to take form early in his life. Then came the moment of discovery. The keyword is "grace." God called Paul in the most literally way possible, crying: "Saul, Saul..." followed by the words that broke self will and rebellion, "why ...?" We often think that God's judgment will consist in the questions "what?" or "how?" The most difficult of questions to answer will be when God asks us "why?" The fact that we cannot answer that question constitutes the despair of modern man.

"Saul, Saul, why...?" shows God's grace in the same way as the first question God asked man in the Bible: "Where are you?"<sup>1</sup> When Adam lost his position in creation, human life became meaningless. In calling Paul by name, God acknowledges Paul's identity. Paul has a name because he bears the image of God. The why-question can only be asked if there is a point of comparison. Paul's call was an act of God's grace. It was because God loved Paul that He made him see how badly his life was bogged down in the meaninglessness of his acts. Paul takes the whole process of conversion, regeneration, renewal and filling, and compresses it in the words "reveal His Son in me." The renewal of God's image within us comes about by means of the revelation of Jesus Christ in us. How deeply this process goes is clear from what Paul calls in the next chapter being "crucified with Christ."<sup>2</sup>

The revelation of Jesus Christ in a person is always goal-oriented. It is equipment for a task. For Paul this meant preaching the Gospel to the gentiles. God's revelation of Jesus Christ in us is never meant to be merely for the satisfaction of our spiritual and emotional needs. In a way, satisfaction is only a byproduct. It will come in the carrying out of our task, and therein the revelation will become complete. The joy of the Lord is in the joy of the labor for Him.

Paul's attitude in this was "not [to] consult any man." The Greek text has the word "immediately" in the context of this consultation, not in Paul's going to Arabia. We read: "immediately I did not confer with flesh and blood." This means, first of all, that Paul could not allow himself to passively see what would happen to him. He had to play an active part in the revelation of Jesus Christ in him and in preaching the message to the gentiles. "Consult any man" means asking the question what to do. According to a later version of Paul's encounter with Christ, that was the question he asked of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> There was something Paul had to do. He could have gone back to Jerusalem. He could have vetoed the revelation. Man cannot produce anything positive in life on his own initiative, but he has the ability to deny God access to his life. Grace is not irresistible. God's revelation will then be hindered. God never forces us. Paul had the option of consulting others, or following his own counsel. He went to Jesus for counsel and asked Him what to do. God honors us in His revelation, in calling us by name and in making His revelation depend upon our consent. Even the incarnation, the literally revelation of God's Son in this world, was dependent upon Mary's consent. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."<sup>4</sup> God's revelation is closely connected to our obedience and obedience is linked to love. Jesus said: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Gen. 3:9

2. Gal. 2:19,20

3. Acts 22:10

4. Luke 1:38

5. John 14:21

Paul reaches high when he rejects circumcision as a means of salvation. Circumcision seems to be a form of obedience, but it turns out to be the basis for disobedience, not of love for the Lord and unconditional surrender to Him. There is a possibility that we cleverly obey one point, so that on all the other points we can follow our own will. If, however, we obey God, the result will be that others praise God because of us.

### C. Gospel of Grace Is Approved by Jerusalem Leadership2:1-10

*1 Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.*

*2 I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain.*

*3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.*

*4 [This matter arose] because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.*

*5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.*

*6 As for those who seemed to be important — whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance — those men added nothing to my message.*

*7 On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews.*

*8 For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.*

*9 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.*

*10 All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*

It is possible that Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, fourteen years after his conversion, together with Barnabas and Titus, is the same journey Paul and Barnabas made at the request of the church in Antioch. That journey, then, occasioned the church synod Luke describes in Acts 15. Even the fact that Paul and Barnabas broke up and no longer form a team shortly after this council suggests this. The question of circumcision for the gentiles was clearly the main reason for this journey.

If this journey is the same one in which Paul and Barnabas functioned as delegates of the church, it is interesting to observe that Paul in this epistle describes it as a personal mission. Paul's forceful personality shines through in this. He never withdraws completely in the background. The way Paul describes it, he was the one who took the initiative. He brings Titus along and it sounds as if Barnabas merely followed with Paul's consent. It also sounds as if the revelation that was the basis for this visit, was a personal revelation to Paul. Luke gives a more objective version of the journey, saying that the trip was made at the request of the church.

There is, of course, a possibility that this voyage was not the one described in Acts 15, but of Acts 11, where Barnabas was first sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to assist the church. On the way he went to Tarsus to pick up Paul. The revelation mentioned could then be the one given to Agabus.<sup>1</sup> One problem is then the presence of Titus. If Titus was, at that point, already one of the trusted ones in Antioch, and not one of Paul's converts made during his first missionary journey, Paul's relationship with him, as evidenced in the epistle to Titus, is more difficult to explain.

Paul's visit to Jerusalem in Acts 15 is his third, not his second, as could be concluded from Galatians 2. It is also strange that Paul never mentions the synod gathering, which was a milestone in the history of the church. Even if this council did not take place during Paul's visit to Jerusalem, it would have happened before he wrote this epistle. Strangely enough, however, Paul never appeals to the council's decision, neither in this letter, nor in his first epistle to the Corinthians in which eating meat offered to idols is mentioned. The only phrase that suggest a public confrontation, as was the synod gathering, could be "I ... set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders."<sup>2</sup> We could understand this to mean that Paul explained himself both in a small circle as well as in public. From a distance of about twenty centuries it is difficult to get the facts straight. What is important is that those who were leaders of the early church endorsed Paul's ministry without reservation. Titus served as "a guinea pig" in that case. The fact that he was accepted as he was by the committee of brethren was proof that Paul's approach to the matter of circumcision was valid.

We ought to understand that Paul made a distinction between genuine Jewish Christians, who clung to their Old Testament heritage, and for whom the idea that their tradition would be no longer relevant was an insurmountable obstacle to accepting the Gospel, and those he calls "false brothers." He considers the first group to be acting in good faith. Paul was willing to be a Jew to the Jews. It was in respect for them that he circumcised Timothy,<sup>3</sup> and that he subjected himself to the Law of Moses.<sup>4</sup>

Paul opposed the second group of people violently. Here he calls them "false brothers," elsewhere "those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh."<sup>5</sup>

Evidently, the early Jewish Christians kept on obeying the Mosaic Law. They observed the temple rituals and continued to bring the prescribed sacrifices. The understanding that Christ was the end of the law, and that bloody sacrifices for sin had become redundant, only slowly took hold of the church. It was after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, that the Jewish Christian were forced to accept the fact that the images of spiritual reality in Christ were no longer needed.

Up to that time, the question whether Jews ought to be circumcised and follow the law was never even asked. The point of contention was whether gentiles ought to become Jews by means of circumcision, or whether they would be acceptable to God by faith alone. The final conclusion that came later would have far-reaching consequences for the Jewish Christians. Those who opposed the justification of the gentiles by faith alone believed that the whole of Jewish tradition was at

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1. Acts 11:27-30

2. Gal. 2:2

3. Acts 16:1-3

4. Acts 18:18; 21:20-26

5. Phil. 3:2

stake. They were right in this; justification of the gentiles signified ultimately the disappearance of Judaism.

The oneness of the body of Christ, the mystery of the church, implies this. The words “the freedom we have in Christ Jesus” entail this. That freedom is one of the leading themes of this epistle. “Revelation,” “not according to man” and “freedom” are the pillars upon which Paul builds his argument in Galatians. Efforts to follow the Mosaic Law were considered slavery in the New Testament. The Apostle says later in this epistle: “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.”<sup>1</sup> And the Apostle Peter endorsed Paul’s words when during the council meeting in Jerusalem he said: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?”<sup>2</sup>

Obedience to God’s law, even if it only pertains to outward rituals, is a burden for the unconverted. Freedom comes when love becomes the basis for obedience by means of spiritual regeneration. When a person says: “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,”<sup>3</sup> he is truly free. The early Christians understood that obedience was a matter of the heart, a surrender of the will, not merely an external affair. In genuine obedience, outward behavior will be the natural fruit of an inward conviction. Practical Judaism made a distinction between outward obedience and love of God. The freedom Paul speaks about is, in the literal sense of the word, “do as you please,” with the understanding that our will has been surrendered to God as a sacrifice of love.

Speaking about keeping the law, Peter said during the church council in Acts 15: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”<sup>4</sup> Not the Jews showed the way of salvation to the gentiles, but the gentiles showed it to the Jews! That was how important the matter of circumcision was. The roles are reversed: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” The gentiles, not the Jews, become the paradigm of salvation. That was the discovery the early Christian Jews made. That was the freedom they enjoyed.

The Judaisers analyzed this attitude for the purpose of finding weak spots in it and with the intent to persuade the brothers to change their mind by intimidation. At first glace it seems as if James, in his concluding remarks at the council, comes to a compromise. Paul’s words “Before certain men came from James” give the impression that, although James may not have been a Judaiser himself, he was surrounded by them. Would his famous speech at the council be a diplomatic effort to pacify this group? We must, however, not forget that the church council’s conclusion represented a unanimous decision of all the apostles and elders. It was introduced by the words: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...”<sup>5</sup> And the vital issue, circumcision for gentiles, was rejected. The stipulation to “abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality”<sup>6</sup> did not pertain to salvation of the soul, but to a

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1. Gal. 5:1

2. Acts 15:10

3. Ex. 21:5

4. Acts 15:10,11

5. Acts 15:28

6. Acts 15:29

testimony for the world. Freedom in Christ can never be separated from the love of the neighbor. Paul felt that if he gave in to the pressure of the Judaists, which would probably have been easy for him to do emotionally, would have meant a weakening of his testimony toward the Galatians. The psychological pressure was worse for him than it was for this church consisting of gentile believers. What Paul tells them is: "I did not give in, so why did you?"

Another interesting phrase is "those who seemed to be important." This sounds as if Paul lacks in respect for the official leaders of the church. A closer look will reveal, however, that the opposite is true. Paul's argument is that those who were the leaders and who were reputed to be pillars of the church backed up Paul and his message. He cuts off every effort to weaken this argument by referring to the leaders' past. In the snobbish and intellectual climate of the Pharisaic world in which he had grown up, lineage and education were very important factors. The church in Galatia may have been susceptible to such influences also, otherwise Paul would not have mentioned these facts. The surprise of the Gospel is always that God shows a preference of the uneducated. We read about Peter and John in front of the Sanhedrin: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."<sup>1</sup> And the prophet Amos declared: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"<sup>2</sup> Fellowship with God and spiritual and emotional maturity are decisive in a Gospel ministry. Education can be a helpful sideline in this. But unless education is geared to maturity it can be more a hindrance than a constructive affair. If knowledge is used to compensate for wisdom we are on thin ice. No one learns in school "Thus says the Lord." We only learn that by standing in the Lord's council. As God said to Jeremiah about the false prophets of his day: "But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds."<sup>3</sup> I am not pleading for less education or stupidity, but for wisdom that comes from the fear of the Lord. But honesty in ministry is more important than a degree in the subject of ethics; the power of the Holy Spirit does more for the salvation of people than a grade in theology. Being unschooled is no more hindrance for God than having a good education. God can even use a theology doctor!

According to Paul, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem came to the conclusion that the task of preaching the Gospel to the gentiles had been entrusted to Paul and the ministry to the Jews to Peter. This was obviously not a complete separation of tasks. It was Peter who had first preached to Cornelius, who was a Roman.<sup>4</sup> In doing this he gave the first impulse for the preaching to the gentiles. Paul's ministry to the gentiles did not mean that he spoke exclusively to gentiles. He followed the principle of "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."<sup>5</sup> Paul's ministry to the gentiles did not exclude the others.

Paul cuts off any possibility of rivalry by stating that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that enabled both Peter and Paul to carry out their ministry. "For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles."<sup>6</sup>

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1. Acts 4:13

2. Amos 7:14,15

3. Jer. 23:22

4. Acts 15:7

5. Rom. 1:16

The church leaders' acknowledgment and their giving the right hand of fellowship to Paul forged them into a band of brothers.

The theme of remembering the poor in Jerusalem is a recurring theme in Paul's epistles. Paul mentions it in Romans, where we read: "Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way."<sup>1</sup>

#### D. Gospel of Grace Is Vindicated by Rebuking Peter<sup>2:11-21</sup>

*11 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.*

*12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

*13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

*14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?*

*15 "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners'*

*16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

*17 "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!*

*18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker.*

*19 For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.*

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

*21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"*

Peter's visit to the church in Antioch must have occurred after the synod gathering in Jerusalem. We get the impression that Peter may have spent considerable time there. The confrontation Paul describes cannot have happened within the time space of a few days only. Eating with the gentiles may refer to participating in a church "love meal," an *agape*, which included communion celebration, or it could just mean having fellowship with those people. Evidently, Peter initially did not make any difference between Jews and gentiles, according to the principle he had established himself. A renewed attack by people from the group of Judaisers caused Peter to change his

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6. Gal. 2:8

1. Rom. 15:25-28

behavior. Whether these were the same people who had come to the Antioch church at an earlier date,<sup>1</sup> we do not know. Paul does not give any detail about who they were and what they said. It is likely that they did not, at this point, insist any more that the gentiles must be circumcised. The synod's decision had been clear enough on that. But there had been a clause in the statement regarding the testimony of converted gentiles toward unbelieving Jews that could be interpreted as if circumcision was a requirement for Christian Jews. Those from the group of James may have propagated that believing Jews ought to keep themselves apart from believing gentiles, because that would be a bad testimony toward unbelieving Jews. Paul's standpoint was that such separation constituted a bad testimony toward converted gentiles. He foresaw dire consequences for the unity of the church. The latter was one of the pillars of Paul's theology, as he expounds in his epistle to the Ephesians.

It would have been impossible for the Jews to imagine that the ceremonial law, and everything connected with it, would no longer be valid, because it had been replaced by the reality of which the law had been a shadow. This new condition must have been very confusing to say the least. As a matter of fact, so confusing that neither Peter, nor Barnabas could foresee the consequences.

Paul's unusual insight into the matter proves what caliber of person he was.

We may assume that Peter and Barnabas acted in good faith. The word "hypocrisy," however, suggests willful dishonesty. It seems strange that Peter would actually be guilty as charged. Paul may have meant that Peter's conduct would seem hypocritical in the eyes of the gentile believers. That may be the strength of Paul's argument. It was not only the Jews who looked at Peter, but the gentiles also considered him an example to follow. A man of Peter's status could not afford to adapt a doubting attitude. Peter may have been an apostle to the circumcised, he was also a guide of the uncircumcised.

Paul, a man of flamboyant character, may have had no problem confronting a great leader of the church, such as Peter was. That would have been more difficult for timid people. A closer look at Paul may reveal that he was in reality more timid than comes through here. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul states: "For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.'"<sup>2</sup> That would point to Paul as being shyer than appears here. And from what Paul said in 1:10, we understand that his bravery is the result of his choice for Christ; it was not because of his personality and character. As a servant of Christ he had the courage to do and say things that sounded unpleasant.

We can draw some important lessons from this incident of Paul's confrontation of Peter. (1) No one is above the danger of error. Peter and Barnabas had known Jesus personally, they had been filled with the Holy Spirit, yet they were wrong and had deviated from the straight way of the Gospel. (2) Unity of the church does not always mean peace with everyone in the church. (3) The straight way of the Gospel may not always seem straight to us. Peter and Barnabas may have thought that they were keeping on the right track. If we follow our heart, we usually end up on crooked paths. If we keep this in mind and we believe we follow the straight way, we will look at the genuine truth and believe it is crooked. "If it feels good, do it!" had led more people astray than anything else. (4) No one has exclusive rights to truth and wisdom. No one knows everything. To know and apply the truth is not possible for a single individual; it takes the whole of the church, the combined body of wisdom and insight. (5) We must understand the whole picture in order to comprehend the details.

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1. See Acts 15:1.

2. II Cor. 10:10

Paul's summary of the problem in vv.15-21 may be seen as the highpoint of this epistle. In these verses Paul looks at the Gospel from a Jewish point of view. He approaches the problem from a Judo-Christian angle. In doing so, he includes Peter and Barnabas in the matter. Paul actually elaborates here what Peter had already said during the synod gathering: "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."<sup>1</sup> Both Jews and gentiles are saved in the same way through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul explains what this means to a Jew. With: "We who are Jews by birth" Paul speaks about himself, Peter, Barnabas and all who, from Judaism, have come to faith in Christ. He distinguishes the Jew from the gentile, whom he calls, unapologetically, "Gentile sinners." Evidently, a Jew, even a Christian Jew, had a hard time seeing himself as a sinner before God.

The fact that God had chosen Israel to receive His revelation and that He had entrusted His Word to them had given them the illusion that they were better than other people in the world. It was only through faith in Christ that they came to the conclusion that they were sinner like the gentiles and that they needed salvation in the same way as they did. As sinners from among the gentiles, as most of us are, it may be difficult for us to imagine what such a discovery would mean to a Jew. Once, during a visit to Jerusalem, I was handed a pamphlet in which, to my astonishment, I read that the Jews believed that they had earned the right to repossess the temple mount because of the suffering they had experienced throughout the centuries. That mentality is quite foreign to us as sinners from among the gentiles. It may be easier for us to come under conviction of sin than it is for them, for whom it would mean a painful process of discovery. In this we may have the advantage.

The way Paul describes the process is remarkable. He begins with what is a known fact. "We ... know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." This knowledge is followed by an act: "So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified." Their faith in Christ Jesus results in their justification. Paul does not say what the proof is of this justification. We know that the proof is being filled with the Holy Spirit. It was this filling by the Holy Spirit that proved to Peter and the other apostles that God had justified the gentiles in the same way as the Jews. It was the blessing of Pentecost that had given to the Jews the assurance of their justification. It was only after having received that certainty that they began to realize how terrible their previous condition had been. Without the Holy Spirit there cannot be a true conviction of sin. That is what Jesus meant when He said: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin ..."<sup>2</sup> It is in our being confronted with the presence of God that we become aware of our filth. Paul knows that this is a universal principle. No one in the whole world can be justified by observing the law. The Greek text reads literally: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law." "The works of the law" represent a human effort, meaning that what we do for God ought to give us credits, that God ought to reward us for our efforts. When we try to be justified by our own efforts, we use our muscle power for that which needs atomic power. It is as if a person could begin space travel by using his strong arms to launch a rocket. That is just as ridiculous as trying to be justified by our own works instead of by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul may be hard to follow when he mentions the possibility that Christ promotes sin. The Greek text of v.17 reads literally: "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, are found also we our-

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1. Acts 15:10,11

2. John 16:8

selves sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin?" Paul may be referring here to an argument that would often be presented. In Romans, he brings up the same excuse: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"<sup>1</sup> The difficulty is in the fact that the argument is given in a form that is too concise. Paul speaks about people who try to be justified in Christ. That gives the impression as if it takes human effort of the same kind as observing certain commandments of the law. That gives the wrong impression. Just as wrong is the illusion many have that being justified in Christ is an automatic process in which we have nothing to do ourselves. To work out this justification requires our full cooperation. We have the ability to veto the process and we can do all kinds of negatives things that would hinder the effect of justification in our daily life, or even annul it completely. "Seeking to be justified in Christ," does not mean conquering new terrain, but holding what has been given to us. It is true that God will judge us according to our acts. What we do proves who we are. If we are justified in Christ our acts will begin to demonstrate our justification. Yet, even if we are justified, we will from time to time take the wrong steps. Paul must have had to example of Peter and Barnabas in mind when he said this. In such a case we cannot appeal to the work Christ has done in our lives. We cannot do "our own thing" and use Christ as an excuse. We cannot take credit either if the Holy Spirit produces His fruit in our lives. We also cannot blame God for our wrong choices. He can and will keep us from stumbling if we allow Him to do so. We will only stumble if we put something in His way. The reason is that we keep on falling back on our old tendency of wanting to do something; something for which God would have to give us credit.

That brings Paul to the greatest discovery in his life, the key to the secret. It is the secret of his identification with Christ in His death on the cross. Paul discovers the secret of his death with Christ, first of all, in his effort to keep the law. It was the law that revealed to him that he was dead in his sin. His death was the result of a broken relationship with God. Doing the will of God, which means keeping the law, is only possible in full fellowship with God. Anyone who tries to keep the law without such a fellowship will discover that it is impossible. It is by means of the law that we discover our own spiritual death. Paul draws from this the conclusion that, if he is dead, the law will no longer apply to him. The law only applies to those who are alive. Death severs all ties. When I was in my early twenties, we lived in a rental house that the owner sold to someone else. The new owner tried to evict us and began by taking us to court. Before this matter appeared in court, my father died, which was the end of the court case. Paul says that his efforts to keep the law led to the discovery of his spiritual death, which broke the power of the law over his life. That does, however, not mean a verdict of not guilty. It does not even give any emotional respite. It leads to the conclusion that, morally, we are in a hopeless, no win situation.

In the next verse, Paul moves from the moral level to the judicial. Being crucified with Christ means that we share in God's punishment of our sin. We have been rightfully condemned to death because of our descent from the great sinner, who was the first to sever the bond with God: Adam. This death sentence was executed for us in Jesus Christ. God appointed Him as our representative and He identified us with Him so completely that He considers what happened to Him as having happened to us. Paul expresses this truth elsewhere, saying: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."<sup>2</sup> In that way, our death

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1. Rom. 6:1,2

2. II Cor. 5:14

which was caused by the law, became His death. We can sing with the psalmist: “the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

Being crucified with Christ is not primarily an emotional experience. It is not something we should try to accomplish; it is a judicial fact. It is true because God says it is, not because I feel it experientially. For us it is a discovery. The crisis of the deeper life begins with this discovery. We make this discovery when we come to the point of agreeing with God’s verdict over us. We cannot measure the depth of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross if we do not, first of all, agree, without reservations, with God’s judgment over us. It is only when we agree that God was right when He condemned us to death that the Lamb of God can take our place.

In the Old Testament, sinners who wanted to come to God had to lay their hands on a sacrificial animal that they brought to the temple. We read in Leviticus: “He is to present the bull at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. He is to lay his hand on its head and slaughter it before the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the person who brought the sacrifice identified himself with the animal. He confessed that what happened to the animal actually ought to have happened to him. He asked God to accept the animal in his stead. In the same way, we are crucified with Christ. The difference between the image and the reality is that God took the initiative. It was His idea, not ours.

It is not only an acknowledgment of guilt, it is also an act of surrender. It is His surrender in our place. We will never be able to surrender our body to God in the same total manner Jesus Christ did. In that respect also, He took our place. Jesus is not only our sin offering, He is also our burnt offering, our grain offering, our fellowship offering and our guilt offering as described in the first five chapters of Leviticus. All these sacrifices Jesus became in our behalf when He died at Golgotha. He is the only factor that determines my relationship to the Father. I can do nothing by myself. I cannot even express my surrender and my gratitude to God without Him. He did this all for me.

The difficulty in all of this is that it is too easy! We feel we owe it to our own honor to be able to do at least something. It almost sounds like a copout. It does not require a superhuman effort to be crucified with Christ. All it requires from us is to accept an accomplished fact. For us this means the death of our ego, if not in fact, then in principle.

Accepting the principle and acknowledging God’s righteousness in all of this will have an immediate effect. It will lead to the realization of the resurrection. For, if we have been identified with the death of Christ, we are also identified with His resurrection. In this also it is God’s identification of us with Christ’s resurrection. We do not have the power to identify ourselves with the cross and we do not have it either in connection with the open grave. God did this all for us. When man rebelled against God, the process of death began to operate. Adam first died spiritually and after that his body followed. In this identification with Christ, the resurrection also begins with the spirit and it is followed later by the body. In the same way as the death of the body is included in the death of the spirit, so is the resurrection of the body comprised in the fact that our spirit is raised from the dead.

The Greek text of vv.19 and 20 reads literally: “With Christ I am crucified: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” The little word “yet” expresses the unexpected. Jesus Himself expressed the same kind of amazement when He said to John in Revelation: “I am the Living

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1. Ps. 118:23

2. Lev. 4:4

One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”<sup>1</sup>

In principle takes place what will later become a physical reality. When our body dies, sin that is in us will cease to exist. This principle also has already begun to be effective in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in our identification with Him. Sin has already begun to lose its grip over us. This victory will increase as the revelation of Christ in our life will become clearer. Paul elaborates this in greater detail in his Epistle to the Romans.<sup>2</sup> Paul clarifies there that we have to take up the position that God has prepared for us. Our emotions will follow our faith in this. It is only when the Third Person of the Trinity has taken His place in our life that we can say with confidence: “Christ lives in me.” Jesus says about the Holy Spirit: “you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”<sup>3</sup> And He also says: “My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”<sup>4</sup> Christ living in us and being filled with the Holy Spirit is one and the same. When we surrender we give ourselves to all three Persons of the Holy Trinity. We will only be able to experience a small part of the glory of this truth. It is enough if we say: “Not I, but Christ.”

Paul may be hard to follow when he mentions the possibility that Christ promotes sin. The Greek text of v.17 reads literally: “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, are found also we ourselves sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin?” Paul may be referring here to an argument that would often be presented. In Romans, he brings up the same excuse: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”<sup>5</sup> The difficulty is in the fact that the argument is given in a form that is too concise. Paul speaks about people who try to be justified in Christ. That gives the impression as if it takes human effort of the same kind as observing certain commandments of the law. That gives the wrong impression. Just as wrong is the illusion many have that being justified in Christ is an automatic process in which we have nothing to do ourselves. To work out this justification requires our full cooperation. We have the ability to veto the process and we can do all kinds of negatives things that would hinder the effect of justification in our daily life, or even annul it completely. “Seeking to be justified in Christ,” does not mean conquering new terrain, but holding what has been given to us. It is true that God will judge us according to our acts. What we do proves who we are. If we are justified in Christ our acts will begin to demonstrate our justification. Yet, even if we are justified, we will from time to time take the wrong steps. Paul must have had to example of Peter and Barnabas in mind when he said this. In such a case we cannot appeal to the work Christ has done in our lives. We cannot do “our own thing” and use Christ as an excuse. We cannot take credit either if the Holy Spirit produces His fruit in our lives. We also cannot blame God for our wrong choices. He can and will keep us from stumbling if we allow Him to do so. We will only stumble if we put something in His way. The reason is that we keep on falling back on our old tendency of wanting to do something; something for which God would have to give us credit.

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1. Rev. 1:18

2. Rom. 6:1-14

3. John 14:17

4. John 14:23

5. Rom. 6:1,2

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1. II Cor. 5:14

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In principle takes place what will later become a physical reality. When our body dies, sin that is in us will cease to exist. This principle also has already begun to be effective in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in our identification with Him. Sin has already begun to lose its grip over us. This victory will increase as the revelation of Christ in our life will become clearer. Paul elaborates this in greater detail in his Epistle to the Romans.<sup>2</sup> Paul clarifies there that we have to take up the position that God has prepared for us. Our emotions will follow our faith in this. It is only when the Third Person of the Trinity has taken His place in our life that we can say with confidence: "Christ lives in me." Jesus says about the Holy Spirit: "you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."<sup>3</sup> And He also says: "My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."<sup>4</sup> Christ living in us and being filled with the Holy Spirit is one and the same. When we surrender we give ourselves to all three Persons of the Holy Trinity. We will only be able to experience a small part of the glory of this truth. It is enough if we say: "Not I, but Christ."

Paul does not say much about the "I." We must not think that he speaks exclusively about his sinful nature. "I" stands for the whole of the human being, included everything we would call good qualities. God's condemnation of that which is "good" in us is much more difficult for us to accept than the rejection of our "sinful part." God sees us as one unit. When we say "no longer I,"

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1. Rev. 1:18

2. Rom. 6:1-14

3. John 14:17

4. John 14:23

we confess that we cannot do anything without Jesus and that we do not want to do anything without Him.

Paul furthermore states that this kind of life is a matter of faith. In every situation in which we find ourselves we must determine our position through faith. We must learn to lean on the Lord. It means simply letting go of the reins, relax and leave the consequences to God. Faith is not making an effort but trust and relaxation. If we live by faith, we will not allow ourselves to be influenced by outward circumstances or by our emotions. I do not believe that Christ lives in me because I feel that way. Faith, in the biblical sense of the word, is always based on the promises of God. I accept as the truth that I am crucified with Christ and that I am risen with Him and that Christ lives in me, because God says so. My emotions will confirm this from time to time, but they do not determine the reality. It remains true, even if I do not feel it. God's promise is only effective if I accept it, if I believe it and if I surrender to it.

"Christ in me" was the core of Dr. A. B. Simpson's message. In the hymn "First it was the blessing, now it is the Lord" he contrasts Christ's presence in our life with our tendency to pray God for certain things and then walk away as soon as we receive what we ask for. "Christ in us" means that the source of blessing is within us. It is a source that will never run dry.

It also means that we have fellowship with God. In his apostolic blessing, Paul mentions the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (II Cor. 13:13). This means "Christ in me." It is the oneness of His Spirit with my spirit of which the love between husband and wife is a vague image. The blending of two spirits is the goal of love. The following line in the verse speaks about love and surrender. Paul states about the Son of God that He "who loved me and gave himself for me." Love is perfected if I answer His surrender to me with love for Him and surrender to Him. The great miracle is always the realization that the love and surrender of Jesus Christ was for me personally. The death and resurrection of Christ has, of course, collective significance. The church owes her existent to that. Christ loves the church and has given Himself to her. But in response to my personal surrender and my realization that I merited the punishment which Jesus took upon Himself, follows the recognition that His love and surrender was for me personally. He "loved me and gave himself for me." Once we have understood this we will never be able to get over it.

In all of this Paul reaches very high in his reaction to the Judaisers. Paul realized how much was at stake. It was not merely a matter of observing ceremonial rituals concerning circumcision, but it affected the core of the Gospel. The fact that Christ is in us means the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). This is about the power of God's grace. He who trusts in his own efforts to please God, sets aside the grace of God. If I can get there on my own steam then the cross of Calvary is a tragic waste. As it is now, nothing can touch my justification. I have been completely rehabilitated through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. If I take any of this back by substituting the accomplished work of Christ with my own efforts, I lose ground. I will become the immediate target of the enemy and I will miss the satisfaction of an intimate relationship with Christ, which is the core of all spiritual experiences.

## II. The Gospel of Grace Explained

3:1—4:31

### A. Holy Spirit Is Given by Faith, Not by Works 3:1-5

*1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.*

*2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?*

*3 Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*

*4 Have you suffered so much for nothing — if it really was for nothing?*

*5 Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?*

The question here is how did the Galatians receive the Holy Spirit? Paul chastises the church in Galatia in the strongest possible terms. He asks them pointblank if they have gone crazy. Their conduct has not been that of reasonable, level-headed people. Sensible persons would not do what the Galatians did. Their behavior could not be explained as a different opinion about theological matters. Paul asked himself how someone, who had been given such a clear picture of Jesus' death on the cross, could do such things. He wanted to know what caused such unhinging of mind. Was Paul's reaction reasonable? Our first impression is that Paul is too angry. He calls them names. It is worth noting that anger and name calling can be part of Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit. We must assume that Paul thought that a normal reaction of people who knew beyond doubt that Jesus had died on the cross for their justification, would build their faith on God. It is also considered normal and healthy if people, who received this justification, would cling to it and live accordingly, without abandoning that basis. The strength of Paul's argument is that the Galatians received the Holy Spirit because they believed Paul's preaching before they knew anything about circumcision. That which occurred under the preaching of Peter,<sup>1</sup> must have also happened while Paul preached. But whether in fact the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Galatians had come in the same manner and with the same manifestations as at Pentecost and in the case of Cornelius, we do not know. There must have been signs of praises and maybe speaking in tongues. V.5 states that there had been a demonstration of miracles. The presence of the Holy Spirit had been undeniable. All the time, these people had been ignorant of the law of Moses and they had not been circumcised. It is true that no one has a complete understanding of the whole truth of the Gospel the moment he is saved. There is a growing process that increases comprehension insight. Comprehension grows with obedience. But these people had been saved without being circumcised and the Judaists preached that one had to be circumcised in order to be saved. If they would submit themselves to the rite of circumcision, they would admit that they had not been saved before. That would mean taking a step back, which had serious consequences. Paul is rightfully upset because the Galatians had begun with the Holy Spirit and ended up with the flesh, with mere human effort. And that human effort amounted to rebellion against God. This was not only a denial of an experience of spiritual ecstasy, a choice against the grace of God; it was more or less similar to the choice our first parents made, which led to a break with God.

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1. See Acts 10:44-46.

Paul indicates that God holds us responsible for the way we react to the things He reveals to us. “Have you suffered so much for nothing — if it really was for nothing?” This suggests that if we end up refusing God’s grace we will fall back further than the point from which we started. We do not go back to square one, but to a point below. The man in Jesus’ parable who had only one talent, which he did not use, ended up not where he was in the beginning, but he came out worse. “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”<sup>1</sup>

## B. Abraham Was Justified by Faith, Not by Works<sup>3:6-14</sup>

6 Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."

9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Paul uses the word “promise” in connection with Abraham, not in this section but later one in v.16. The topic there is the promise of the Holy Spirit given to us, which Paul calls “the blessing given to Abraham.” The words “promise” and “blessing” are used as synonyms. Several incidents in Abraham’s life are mentioned that are all contained in this “promise.”<sup>2</sup> This promise of the Spirit came to Abraham in the form of offspring. That offspring was primarily Isaac, whose birth was the result of God’s supernatural intervention. Abraham believed in what was a physical impossibility. We believe in a spiritual impossibility. The principle in both cases is the same. There is in both an expression of confidence in God that He will do what is impossible on the level of human effort. In the case of Abraham it was the fact that God had promised him a son from his wife Sarah. The fulfillment of that promise would not have been anything extraordinary if the child had been born in the early years of Abraham and Sarah’s marriage. It became more and more difficult as time went by. When Sarah was ninety years of age and Abraham one hundred it had become an impossibility. That made Abraham’s act on the basis of God’s promise an act of faith.

That is where Paul draws a line between Abraham and us. And he does this by turning things around. The Judaisers would bring up the argument that circumcision existed before the law was given to Moses and that, consequently, Christians ought to be followers of Abraham. Paul’s answer to this was that Abraham did what we do. That reversal proves that what we possess is not

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1. Matt. 25:29

2. See Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 18:10; 22:15-18.

a shadow of Abraham's reality, but that we have the reality in Christ of which Abraham had the picture. Paul elaborates this in his *Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>1</sup> Paul's first point is that the promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in us. Secondly, Paul points out that faith is the most important factor in the fulfillment of this promise. And finally, that this blessing is meant for all people. That means that uncircumcised people receive what God had promised to Abraham.

Paul expresses this beautifully by saying: "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'" Paul personifies the Bible as an evangelist. Abraham was the first one to hear the Gospel and he became a believer! Evidently, Paul supposed that the details were known to his audience and he therefore does not elaborate, apart from quoting some Scripture verses. The first quotation is "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."<sup>2</sup> In his quotation Paul indicates that accreditation of righteousness is done against all human expectations. It is not the consequence of human logic. The fact that we find the mention of it in the first book of the Bible proves that this truth runs through all of Scripture. This is not something Paul invented by himself. The children of Abraham are not those who have submitted to the circumcision of Abraham, but those who follow the faith of Abraham. We find the quotation Paul uses about the blessing of Abraham at two different instances in Genesis. After Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, God says: "and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."<sup>3</sup> Paul interprets "through your offspring" as "along with your offspring," meaning that we receive the same blessing Abraham received. It could also be understood that God used Abraham as the means by which His blessing would come to all nations on earth. Both are true.

So Abraham is important to us in two ways: He is our example to follow as far as faith is concerned and we share with him the blessing of the promise of the Holy Spirit. It was through Abraham that Jesus Christ came in the world. And it is through Jesus Christ that the Spirit of God is poured out over us. Abraham experienced the promise of the Holy Spirit in his life through the forms and circumstances that God made him pass through. That is why Jesus said to the people of His day: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."<sup>4</sup> Yet, we are in many ways ahead of Abraham. As far as Abraham was concerned, the Holy Spirit was a promise. The incidents in Abraham's life were pointers to the things to come. We live in the reality of which Abraham's experiences were a mere shadow. For us the promise has been fulfilled.

### C. Justification Is by Faith, Not by the Law3:10-4:11

#### 1. Christ Redeems Us from the Curse of the Law3:10-14

*10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

*11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."*

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1. Rom.4

2. Gen. 15:6

3. Gen. 22:18

4. John 8:56

*12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them."*

*13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

*14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*

Faith and our own efforts to reach the goal relate to each other as either a blessing or a curse. In the same way as the faith of Abraham was related to the blessing of Abraham, we cannot separate the works of the law from the curse of the law. Paul's sharp analysis penetrates the core of the problem. Without the intervention of the Holy Spirit a person cannot possibly fulfill the demands of the law. It is "the nature of the beast" in us that prevents us from reaching that goal. Paul treats this subject in a more elaborate way in his *Epistle to the Romans*.

The law was never intended to produce justification for man. The law serves as a mirror that shows the dirt in us. And mirrors cannot be used to clean away dirt; they merely reveal it. One cannot wash oneself with a mirror; for that we use water and soap. In the same way does God's mirror show us our moral failures. The cleansing is done with the blood of Jesus Christ. The law can lead us no further than to the realization that we have failed. If we expect the law to do more we hurt ourselves and we suffer eternal damage. If we try to wash our face with a mirror the glass will cut us.

The law proclaims: "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out."<sup>1</sup> This quotation gives depth to Paul's earlier explosive statements: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"<sup>2</sup> Those words were not a personal gripe Paul had against certain people, they expressed the curse of the law upon those who wrongly apply the law.

There are various sources of energy that constitute both a blessing and a curse. Electricity and atomic power, for instance, are like a two-edged sword. They can work for good or for evil. If the law is applied as it is intended to be, as a means to produce conviction of sin which leads to reconciliation with God, then the law leads us to life. If we try to fulfill the demands of the law apart from this reconciliation, we are hit by the curse.

It is good to remember that Paul puts the whole complex of law under one header; he does not distinguish between the moral law and the ritual law. If we take the law as a whole, it not only convicts of sin but also offers forgiveness in the ritual of bloody sacrifices. In this context, however, the point is not so much what the law can do for us but what we expect from it. The contrast is not between obedience and disobedience to the law, but to subjection to the law on the basis of faith or manipulation of the law for our own advantage. Those who put their hope in the works of the law believe that they can sit at the same table with God as equals and negotiate a deal with Him, because God would have to take our efforts into account. Such people end up with less than those who come to God empty-handed. The keyword in our relationship with God is "unconditional surrender."

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1. Deut. 27:26

2. Gal. 1:8,9

Faith and surrender are as closely related as keeping the law and holding on to self. Genuine obedience to the law is symbolized in the laying of our hands on the head of the sacrificial animal in the realization that we have been crucified with Christ.

V.13 is one of the great surprises in the New Testament. Paul brings out the depth of Jesus' suffering for us by saying: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." That is difficult for us to imagine. This is the background of Jesus' cry "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"<sup>1</sup> Jesus' being forsaken was not merely a feeling of being depressed. In taking up the position of someone who was hanged, Jesus incurred God's curse on the hanged. That was reality; it was not merely a psychological phenomenon. Paul does not say that Jesus took the curse for us, but that He became the curse. The incarnate Word of God became the incarnate curse for our sake. Paul states elsewhere: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."<sup>2</sup> He became our sin and our curse. Someone has said that Jesus became the personified serpent for us.

It is impossible for us to imagine the fear, despair and spiritual suffering this must have meant, beside the unbearable physical pain of the crucifixion. As Isaiah put it: "He poured out his life unto death."<sup>3</sup> Our salvation was no mean matter. It was not a case of God overlooking our mistakes. If we could understand what price Jesus had to pay, we would never again want to have anything to do anymore with sin and the devil. The least we can do is to answer God's curse upon Jesus with our blessing.

The result of this agony is our total freedom from the curse. That is the price Jesus paid for us. This means that, legally, we have become His. He bought us and paid the price for us so that we would become His slaves. Yet, He calls us friends. He says: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."<sup>4</sup> As far as I am concerned, I adopt the words of the Hebrew slave who says: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free."<sup>5</sup> Jesus paid the price for my freedom from the law, but I consider myself to be His slave. May God help us to obey Him as slaves!

In the story of the fall, God does not pronounce His curse upon man. It was to the snake God said: "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life."<sup>6</sup> To Adam God said: "Cursed is the ground because of you."<sup>7</sup> God took Adam and Eve into His loving protection so that the curse would not hit them in full force. But this protection was not extended to Jesus. The curse hit Him directly in the same manner as it hit the devil in the form of a serpent.

Paul's Old Testament quotation is from the verses in Deuteronomy: "If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance."<sup>8</sup>

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1. Matt. 27:46

2. II Cor. 5:21

3. Isa. 53:12

4. John 15:15

5. Ex. 21:5

6. Gen. 3:14

7. Gen. 3:17

In the Old Testament scenario, the person who was hanged was already dead. As far as we know, crucifixion did not exist yet in the days of Moses. The hanging after execution was symbolic for God's curse upon the person. In His crucifixion Jesus became automatically the object of God's curse. At that point the deepest depth in world history was reached in a way that Adam never knew.

But Jesus was so holy Himself that He sanctified the cross when He died on it. He was never polluted when the sinful woman or the leper touched Him. It was because of Him that the curse of the cross turned into a blessing. At the point where Jesus' body touched the wood of the cross an opening occurred through which the Holy Spirit could enter this world. The curse of the cross became the gate through which the blessing of Abraham could come. We can never separate these two, not even in our own experience. It is in the measure in which we consider ourselves to be crucified with Christ that we will experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit. That is what the Gentiles receive together with the Jews.

## 2. Abrahamic Covenant Is Not Voided by the Law3:15-18

15 Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.

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

17 What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.

18 For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

The author of Hebrew also uses the image of a last will or testament.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, it was a common illustration for the first century church. But Paul does not say here that the testament "takes effect" at the death of the testator, as Hebrews does. The author of Hebrew explains that this happened at the cross in the death of the testator. The bloody sacrifices in the Old Testament prefigured this. This is what Paul intends to say here also, although he does not put it in the same words. The promise to Abraham Paul speaks about is the promise God gave him after his sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>2</sup> Abraham's giving back to God of his only son is a picture of God's giving of His only Son for the salvation of the world. Here also it is stated, in more symbolic language, that God's testament in this world has validity through the blood of Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus, when He instituted the ritual of holy communion, spoke the words: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>3</sup> In Luke's Gospel we read: "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood,

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8. Deut. 21:22,23

1. Heb.9:16,17

2. See Gen. 22:16-18.

3. Matt. 26:28

which is poured out for you.”<sup>1</sup> Mark renders this: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul assumes that the testament had legal validity before the law appeared, although the affirmation did not occur until the death of Jesus at Golgotha. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* affirms this.<sup>3</sup> Isaac’s symbolic death, and the death of every person who brought a sacrifice appearing before God and being substituted by a sacrificial animal, were shadows that were strong enough to realize the promise in a way that could not be stopped or altered by anyone. Since promise and faith had always been linked together throughout the ages, the combination continues now. God promised Abraham the blessing of the Holy Spirit, Abraham accepted this promise by faith, and nothing can alter that now.

The crucial point is that the promise pertained to one single person: Jesus Christ. He is “Abraham’s seed.” The deal was not primarily a multitude, an innumerable crowd, like the stars in heaven. The important point is the first link in the chain. Abraham knew that without Isaac there could not be an offspring that would run into the millions and trillions. For Abraham, the promised meant Isaac. This also is a picture of a single individual on whom hinges the fulfillment of all God’s promises: our Lord Jesus Christ.

There appears to be a problem in Paul’s statement in the realm of grammar. *Barnes’ Notes* gives a very long comment from which we copy the following: “He does not use the plural term, as if the promise extended to many persons, but he speaks in the singular number, as if only one was intended; and that one must be the Messiah. Such is Paul’s interpretation; such is evidently the sentiment which he intends to convey, and the argument which he intends to urge. He designs evidently to be understood as affirming that in the use of the singular number *sperma* (seed), instead of the plural *spermata* (seeds), there is a fair ground of argument to demonstrate that the promise related to Christ or the Messiah, and to him primarily if not exclusively. Now no one probably ever read this passage without feeling a difficulty, and without asking himself whether this argument is sound, and is worthy a man of candor, and especially of an inspired man. Some of the difficulties in the passage are these:

(1) The promise referred to in Genesis seems to have related to the posterity of Abraham at large, without any particular reference to an individual. It is to his seed; his descendants; to all his seed or posterity. Such would be the fair and natural interpretation should it be read by hundreds or thousands of persons who had never heard of the interpretation here put upon it by Paul.

(2) The argument of the apostle seems to proceed on the supposition that the word ‘seed’ *sperma*, that is, posterity, here cannot refer to more than one person. If it had, says he, it would be in the plural number. But the fact is, that the word is often used to denote posterity at large; to refer to descendants without limitation, just as the word posterity is with us; and it is a fact, moreover, that the word is not used in the plural at all to denote a posterity, the singular form being constantly employed for that purpose.

Anyone who will open Tromm’s Concordance to the Septuagint, or Schmids’ Concordance on the New Testament will see the most ample confirmation of this remark. Indeed the plural form of the word is never used except in this place in Galatians. The difficulty, therefore, is, that the remark here of Paul appears to be a trick of argument, or a quibble more worthy of a trifling Jewish Rabbi, than of a serious reasoner or an inspired man ... The very point of the argument of the

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1. Luke 22:20

2. Mark 14:24

3. See Hebrews 9.

apostle is, that the singular and not the plural form of the word is used, and that therefore an individual, and not a collective body or a number of individuals, is intended. But according to this interpretation the reference is, in fact, to a numerous body of individuals, to the whole body of Christians. Jerome affirms that the apostle made use of a false argument, which, although it might appear well enough to the stupid Galatians, would not be approved by wise or learned men ... But here there is no evidence that Paul was reasoning with an adversary. He was showing the Galatians, not the Jews, what was the truth, and justice to the character of the apostle requires us to suppose that he would make use of only such arguments as are in accordance with the eternal principles of truth, and such as may be seen to be true in all countries and at all times. The question then is, whether the argument of the apostle here drawn from the use of the singular word *sperma* (seed), is one that can be seen to be sound? or is it a mere quibble ... or is it to be left to be presumed to have had a force which we cannot now trace? for this is possible. Socrates and Plato may have used arguments of a subtle nature, based on some nice distinctions of words which were perfectly sound, but which we, from our necessary ignorance of the delicate shades of meaning in the language, cannot now understand. Perhaps the following remarks may show that there is real force and propriety in the position which the apostle takes here. If not, then I confess my inability to explain the passage.

(1) There can be no reasonable objection to the opinion that the promise originally made to Abraham included the Messiah; and the promised blessings were to descend through him ...

(2) The promise made to Abraham (Gen 22:18), ‘and in thy seed *b<sup>a</sup>zar`kaa*, Septuagint *en spermati sou*, where the words both in Hebrew and in Greek are in the singular number) shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,’ cannot refer to all the seed or the posterity of Abraham taken collectively. He had two sons, Isaac by Rebecca, and Ishmael by Hagar, besides numerous descendants by Keturah; Gen 25:1 ff. Through a large part of these no particular blessings descended on the human family, and there is no sense in which all the families of the earth are particularly blessed in them. On any supposition, therefore, there must have been some limitation of the promise; or the word ‘seed’ was intended to include only some portion of his descendants, whether a particular branch or an individual, does not yet appear. It must have referred to a part only of the posterity of Abraham, but to what part is to be learned only by subsequent revelations.

(3) It was the intention of God to confine the blessing to one branch of the family, to Isaac and his descendants. The special promised blessing was to be through him, and not through the family of Ishmael. This intention is often expressed, Gen 17:19-21; 21:12; 25:11; compare Rom 9:7; Heb 11:18. Thus, the original promise of a blessing through the posterity of Abraham became somewhat narrowed down, so as to show that there was to be a limitation of the promise to a particular portion of his posterity.

(4) If the promise had referred to the two branches of the family; if it had been intended to include Ishmael as well as Isaac, then some term would have been used that would have expressed this. So unlike were Isaac and Ishmael; so different in the circumstances of their birth and their future life; so dissimilar were the prophecies respecting them, that it might be said that their descendants were two races of people; and in Scripture the race of Ishmael ceased to be spoken of as the descendants or the posterity of Abraham. There was a sense in which the posterity of Isaac was regarded as the seed or posterity of Abraham in which the descendants of Ishmael were not; and the term *sperma* or ‘seed’ therefore properly designated the posterity of Isaac. It might be said, then, that the promise ‘to thy seed’ did not refer to the two races, as if he had said *spermata*, ‘seeds,’ but to one *sperma*, ‘the seed’ of Abraham, by way of eminence.

(5) This promise was subsequently narrowed down still more, so as to include only one portion of the descendants of Isaac. Thus it was limited to the posterity of Jacob, Esau being excluded; subsequently the special blessing was promised to the family of Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Gen 49:10); in subsequent times it was still further narrowed down or limited to the family of Jesse; then to that of David; then to that of Solomon, until it terminated in the Messiah. The original intention of the promise was that there should be a limitation, and that limitation was made from age to age, until it terminated in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. By being thus narrowed down from age to age, and limited by successive revelations, it was shown that the Messiah was eminently intended, which is what Paul says here. The promise was indeed at first general, and the term used was of the most general nature; but it was shown from time to time that God intended that it should be applied only to one branch or portion of the family of Abraham; and that limitation was finally so made as to terminate in the Messiah. This I take to be the meaning of this very difficult passage of scripture; and though it may not be thought that all the perplexities are removed by these remarks, yet I trust they will be seen to be so far removed as that it will appear that there is real force in the argument of the apostle, and that it is not a mere trick of argument, or a quibble unworthy of him as an apostle and a man."

We have the same way of using the word "seed" in God's word to Satan and Eve in Genesis, where we read: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>1</sup> The "offspring" that would the serpent's head was a single Person, Jesus Christ. The promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ also. What happened with Isaac was only a shadow of the reality.

The number of 430 years is not meant to be a literal count. It is derived from the mention at the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt that reads: "Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years."<sup>2</sup> The period between Abraham and Joseph is not calculated in it. When God gave His promise to Abraham, He mentioned this time.<sup>3</sup> That is probably what Paul is referring to here in order to indicate that there was a lapse of time between the promise given to Abraham and the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. We could read Paul's statement as "the law that came after slavery."

Because the promise must be seen as a testament that would only become binding upon the death of the testator, no one could do anything to change it. God promised us the Holy Spirit in Christ. Since Christ died for us, this promise is rightfully ours. What must one do to receive a heritage? Nothing! People who wear themselves out trying to get a heritage in our society are considered pariahs.

### **3. Law Given to Drive Us to Faith3:19-22**

*19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.*

*20 A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.*

*21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.*

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1. Gen. 3:15

2. Ex. 12:40

3. Gen. 15:13

*22 But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.*

In this section there are some phrases that are difficult to interpret. Paul seems to refer to a para-biblical tradition, found in the Talmud, regarding the way the law was given on Mount Sinai. Stephen made reference to the same tradition in his defense before the Sanhedrin, saying: “you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”<sup>1</sup> In the account in Exodus we read nothing about the intermediary of angels. But that has little importance as far as Paul’s argument here is concerned.

Also the phrase “A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one” is difficult to explain. As *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “This verse is allowed to be both obscure and difficult; and it is certain that there is little consent among learned men and critics in their opinions concerning it.” What Paul seems to be saying here is that the law is like a contract between two parties, which is only valid as long as both parties fulfill the conditions. But God’s covenant with Abraham was a one-sided promise. God expected nothing from Abraham, except that he accept. The purpose of the law was to demonstrate that man was unfit to fulfill his obligations. As Paul states in *Romans*: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” The general gist of Paul’s argument is that all efforts to fulfill the obligations of the law in order to achieve righteousness are based on a misunderstanding of what the law was meant to be. Man’s problem throughout the ages has been that he is unaware of his real condition. There must be some understanding for man to come to the point where he will call upon God for his salvation. The real problem in *the Parable of the lost sheep* was not in the one that was lost, but in the ninety-nine who believed that they did not need to repent.<sup>2</sup>

The promise given to Abraham of total renewal and restoration pointed to Jesus Christ. God wanted the world to yearn intensely for the coming of the Messiah. Missionaries among some primitive tribes have discovered that the expectation of the return of eternal life had been preserved among them throughout the centuries. The law was intended to create the right kind of climate for the coming of the Savior. We could say that the law has failed in that respect. The only ones who came to Bethlehem at the news of Jesus’ birth were some shepherds and a few foreign astrologers. Most people are never delivered from the allusion of their assumed righteousness by keeping the law by means of a confrontation with the law which convicted them. This failure does not change the character of the law. Misjudging the character of the law is as old as the law itself. When the law was given on Mount Sinai, “the people all responded together, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said.’”<sup>3</sup>

What it amounts to in a nutshell is that God gave the promise of the Holy Spirit, via Abraham, to Jesus Christ. Jesus passed this promise on to us. By His death on the cross He came into the position from which He could share the Spirit the Father had given Him to those who put their faith in Him. The law has a two-fold function in this. It makes us long for the Holy Spirit because we realize that we are unable to fulfill God’s demands on our own. Secondly, the law is being fulfilled in us in the measure in which the Spirit of God is allowed to take possession of us. That truth is the main lesson Paul further develops in chapters 5 and 6. It is the same thought Paul develops in

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1. Acts 7:53

2. Luke 15:7

3. Ex. 19:8

greater detail in *Romans*. We read there: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

In the first instance, Paul calls the law “the law of sin and death” in the second “the law of the Spirit of life.” It is clear that it is the same law that demonstrates itself in different ways according to the position we occupy in the Holy Spirit. Paul does not make here any distinction between the moral law and the ceremonial law. This is done on purpose since the problem began with the matter of circumcision. This stipulation was part of the ceremonial law that would lead to the moral law. Paul would say to those who listened to the Judaists: “every man who lets himself be circumcised … is obligated to obey the whole law.”<sup>2</sup> For those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, the requirements of the law are not annulled, but fulfilled. The question is not if one is allowed to kill or to commit adultery, but where to find the strength not to commit those sins. It remains true that “neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup> The inward presence of the Holy Spirit will make it easier for us to live a holy life than to sin. But we are running ahead of what Paul will explain later about the freedom we have in Christ.

What Paul is saying here is that the law does not cause us to be justified before God because we are spiritually dead. Once we are spiritually alive we will be able to obey the moral precepts of the law. Dead people cannot do anything. And the law cannot make us alive. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. The law is unable to provide us with righteousness if we are spiritually and morally dead. But the law can give confirmation of our righteousness when the Holy Spirit has made us alive. Psalm One Hundred Nineteen is a long drawn-out moan of longing for this kind of life by the Holy Spirit that would fulfill the demands of the law in us.

In v.22 Paul speaks about the law as if it would be an independent person: “the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin.” We must not see more in this than merely a poetical way of stating the fact. Paul believed that the Old Testament was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Paul says here the same as in Romans: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.”<sup>4</sup> The idea is not that the law causes this kind of condition, but that it reveals it. Everyone stands condemned but salvation is available for everyone also. The only reason the Bible accentuates the universality of judgment is to emphasize the universality of redemption. That is not an automatic process. No one is condemned without taking personal responsibility into consideration. Salvation, therefore, never takes effect without our personal choice. The offer of salvation is universal, but salvation does not come automatically. The whole purpose of the law to bring about a sense of conviction of sin would be meaningless if a person were saved without a sense of guilt playing any role in it.

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1. Rom. 8:1-4

2. Gal. 5:3

3. I Cor. 6:9,10

4. Rom. 3:19

The Greek of v.24 reads literally: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster (our pedagogue) to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” The emphasis in this is on more than just a sense of guilt or a conviction of sin; it points to the purpose of the law to lead us to Christ. It reveals the solution to the problem of sin. The blood of the sacrificial animals that covered human sin in a temporary manner was a means of protection for man to keep him for the day on which the shadows would fade and the reality of redemption would dawn. The Old Testament Jew had so often slain his lamb for the covering up of his guilt that it had become a habit. The full significance of the ritual became clear when John the Baptist announced Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that the killing of a sacrificial animal is meaningless without a sense of guilt of the person who brings the sacrifice.

Atonement in the Old Testament was also based on faith. The person, who laid his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal when it was being killed, expressed the expectation that the act would have its effect upon his sin. The author of *Hebrews* reminds us of the purpose of the Old Testament sacrifices. We read: “But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”<sup>2</sup> The great difference between the shadow of the Old Testament and the reality of the New Testament was in the removal of a sense of guilt. We read elsewhere in *Hebrews*: “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”<sup>3</sup>

We need this “psychological boost” It is our soul’s reaction to a spiritual reality. We are not only cleansed in a judicial and spiritual sense, we will also feel clean. The freedom Paul mentions later on in this epistle is both actual and emotional. Paul compares this spiritual experience to a physical growing up into maturity. We find some of this in Isaiah’s experience when he was touched by a coal of the altar. It brought him from “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips” to “Here am I. Send me!”<sup>4</sup> Our “education” is completed in Jesus Christ. We are no longer in school under the tutelage of the pedagogue. Our relationship with God is that of an adult.

As in the natural, so in the spiritual, there are people who never grow up to maturity. But that does not change anything in the fact that our identification with Christ gives us the status of “grown-ups” before God. As Paul says: “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” This may have been more meaningful to the Galatians than it is to us, because for them baptism was administered immediately upon their conversion and acceptance of Christ in their lives. Postponement of baptism, as is customary nowadays, takes away some of the fullness of the meaning of baptism. It is true that baptism for Paul has a deeper meaning than the ritual performed in water. It pertains to what the Holy Spirit does when He drenches us with Himself and makes us into members of the body of Christ. Our identification with Christ makes us into people to whom the promise of Abraham is being applied. The “seed of Abraham” is Christ, and if we are identified with Christ, it is us! The key is in this identification, first with Christ’s death and then with His resurrection.

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1. John 1:29

2. Heb. 10:3,4

3. Heb. 9:13,14

4. Isa. 6:5,8

Whereas before Paul put it as a personal experience: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,” he now places it in the context of our fellowship with one another as believers. As soon as we have come to the realization “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,” our relationship to others, who share the same experience, changes completely. Being “clothed with Christ” is no longer merely a personal experience, it becomes a common factor. This whole section is, therefore, in the plural.

The reverse of this is, that if we think that God has accepted us on the grounds of our personal achievements, we harm the church. The unity of the church is revealed in those who have identified themselves with Christ in His death and resurrection. Elsewhere, Paul uses similar language, saying: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual and social distinctions fall away, as well as difference between sexes. The difference between Jews and Greeks was not primarily a racial distinction. Paul comprises in the term “circumcision” all those who counted themselves to belong to the covenant of the Old Testament and in “uncircumcised” those who were excluded.

V.28 emphasizes how revolutionary the Gospel must have been to first century Christians and pagans alike. All barriers between God and man were destroyed, as well as between man and man, man and woman, slave and free. It took centuries for the principle to result in the abolition of slavery, but the principle is established here. It was only in the twentieth century that people began to realize that God had not created this world for “men only.” Twenty centuries earlier, the church of Jesus Christ had already proclaimed that there were no qualitative differences between a man and a woman.

What it amounts to is that God had given the promise of the Holy Spirit to Abraham and to “his seed.” The seed of Abraham is Christ. The signification of the Jewish nation consists exclusively in the fact that it is the nation that brought Jesus Christ into this world. Some present-day “Friends of Israel” seem to have lost sight of this fact. Israel will again play a major role in world history, because she will be confronted with Him, “the one they have pierced.”<sup>2</sup> For us as Christians it is difficult at present to choose between a Jew and an Arab, unless one of the two is a brother in Christ. The important factor is not a country in the geographic sense or a people in ethnographic sense, but it is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham and Christ that God would give them the Holy Spirit. To quote Peter’s words on the day of Pentecost: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”<sup>3</sup>

What God promised Abraham was not a land and a people, but Himself, His Holy Spirit. Unless the Spirit of God lives in us, all the other blessing will have no value. But now, I have been clothed with Jesus Christ and I am heir to the promise of God’s Spirit.

#### **4. Believers Are Free from the Law3:23—4:11**

*23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*

*24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

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1. I Cor. 12:13

2. Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7

3. Acts 2:32,33

25 Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,

27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

4:1 What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.

2 He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.

3 So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.

4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,

5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

9 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 principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

10 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!

11 I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

The difficulty in this section is the interpretation of the Greek words *tá stoichéa toú kósmou*, rendered in *The New International Version* “the basic principles of the world.” *The King James Version* calls them “the elements of the world.” *The Revised Standard Version*: “the elemental spirits of the universe.” *The New Living Translation*: “the basic spiritual principles of this world.” The words evoke images of demonic powers that influence the world’s philosophy and culture and that may be what is meant here. Paul uses the same words again in v.9 where they are obviously in the context of idolatry.

Paul addresses here those who were under the law, or who had placed themselves again under its authority. The context points to people who are spiritually mature or immature. Paul uses the image of natural immaturity because of age. Most countries recognize a person’s age at which he or she is considered to be an adult. In some countries this 18, in others 21. Practical consequences are the need for parental permission in some instances. In our modern Western world acknowledgement of adulthood is automatic because of the law of the land. In Paul’s day it was a decision the family made. A father determined the moment of adulthood for his son. That may have had its advantage because a father ought to be a better judge of the maturity of character of his own child than anyone else. In our present-day complex society adulthood and maturity are not necessarily synonymous.

It is also difficult for us to understand the conditions of a society in which slavery was an integral part of life. That may prejudice us against Paul’s line of thought and it makes it hard to look at Paul’s words with from objective frame of mind. What Paul is saying here is that an underage person, in spite of his position as the potential heir of a family fortune, is in practice not different from a slave who has no legal rights. Such was the position of those who were under the law. As far as the future was concerned, man was created in the image of Almighty God and destined to

wear that image in glory. But in the practice of daily life he is a weak, vulnerable human being with a strong tendency toward sin. He is the object of, to quote Shakespeare's Hamlet, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ... the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Even David exclaimed: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"<sup>1</sup> But David adds to this: "Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor."<sup>2</sup> In practice, the person under the law is not different from the animist who looks up to the sky and fears the elements of nature.

Jesus was born in these circumstances, under the law, without any legal rights. In that condition, however, He stilled the storm and the waves and He walked on water. That is where the breakthrough began. Jesus may have been born under the law, He was not subject to "the basic principles of the world."

We may have difficulties determining what those basic principles stand for, but we understand that the result of being subjected to them is a manifestation of sinful self-preservation in its various forms. Following certain prescriptions, sometimes to the extreme, for the purpose of getting points with God, or to bow down to self-made gods, which are less than human and that consequently can be manipulated, are both manifestations of the same principle. The arrogance of the Pharisee in Jesus' *Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector*, and the deception of the witch-doctor who want to enrich himself with someone else's "soul stuff," as well as the pagan who hears the Gospel and want to have himself circumcised in order to get favor with God, have nothing in common with the person who sees himself as condemned to death and who realizes that his execution has taken place on the cross of Jesus Christ.

In our underage immaturity, we were subjected to the nonsense of giving ourselves credits before God. Now as we are in Christ, we partake in the blessedness of being poor in spirit and thus receiving the keys to the kingdom.

Paul says here the same as he said before that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" and "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>3</sup> Christ redeemed us from our underage immaturity and our identification with Him in His death means for us the fullness of His presence within us, His life in us through the Holy Spirit. We are sons with all rights that come with that position.

The first result of our newfound position is that we may lift up our heads to the Creator of heaven and earth, the Almighty God, who sits on the throne and who has "the appearance of jasper and carnelian," and we may call out, "Abba, Father," "Daddy!" This surpasses our wildest imagination! Elsewhere Paul says: "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."<sup>4</sup> The realization of our sonship is the greatest discovery we can make during our life on earth. The heritage will fol-

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1. Ps. 8:3,4

2. Ps. 8:5 - *New Living Translation*.

3. Gal. 3:13; 2:20

4. Rom. 8:14-17

low later, although the certainty of being heir to God's glory will make a difference for us in our position in this world. This is particularly important as we face Satan. Our being God's heir provides for us the basis to resist him. But the essential part is our fellowship with the Father through Jesus Christ.

The Greek of v.4 reads literally: "But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law." "The fullness of time" stands for more than a reference to the fact that it happened at that time. The determining factor was the spiritual maturity of a person or of a group of people. Actually, the people to whom the Lord revealed Himself was the least mature of all in world history. There was among the Pharisees or among the political figures of that time no one of the caliber of Abraham, Moses, David or Daniel. The measure of time was full, but not in the positive sense of the word; it was full negatively. It was the fullness of time, as far as God was concerned. It was probably the deepest point in the history of the world. The suggestion, however, is that God had created time for one specific purpose. The whole reason for which the solar system was created in which the heavenly bodies determine days and times of day on earth was for the fertilization of an egg cell in the body of a girl named Mary. The fullness of time came when God sent His Son into the world, to be born of a woman, born under law.

There was another factor that determined the fullness of time: the function of the law had reached its point of saturation. The mirror had hung on the wall long enough.

We must remember that Paul's whole argument about the under-age heir has nothing to do with obedience to the law, but with the rightful position. Obedience is never even mentioned. Being mature does not mean that before we had to obey the will of God as slaves, but now we can neglect God's will. The whole matter of salvation hinges on the fact that we love God and consequently we do what He commands.

The way in which Paul depicts the contrast between the previous condition and the present is brilliant. The Galatians had served idols, which had no intrinsic value. They had been deceived and they deceived themselves. The Israelites were obviously much closer to the truth. They may have misunderstood the purpose of the law, but the law is the genuine expression of the will and character of God. The fact that the old was a shadow of the new did not diminish the value and reality of the revelation. Yet, neither Jew nor Gentile managed to arrive at this reality. If one fails, it makes little difference how much one fails. Whether the drowning man fails to reach the shore by ten feet or ten miles makes little difference. We all fall short of the glory of God.

In our present new condition we have come to know the truth in Jesus Christ. This is the beauty: Not only do we know God, God knows us! This does, of course, not mean that there has been a breakthrough in God's omniscience. The very meaning of the word "omniscience" implies that God knows and understands everything. Paul defines the concept elsewhere by saying: "The man who loves God is known by God."<sup>1</sup> This knowledge stands for intimacy. From our side it means wanting to be known. It means that we surrender to God in love for the purpose of being searched by Him in such a way that we become conscious of it. It implies that we do not wish anything within us to be hidden from Him.

This is all part of what Paul called earlier "the truth of the gospel."<sup>2</sup> To recapitulate: this implies on the one hand God's revelation of His Son in us,<sup>3</sup> and on the other hand our identification with

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1. I Cor. 8:3

2. Gal. 2:5

3. Gal. 1:16

Christ in His death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup> This is all the work of the Holy Spirit we receive when we come to faith.<sup>2</sup> And this means that we belong to Abraham's seed, and are heirs of the promise.<sup>3</sup> This means that God knows us if we surrender to Him in love.

It is this contrast between the shadow and the light that gives Paul's epistle such a dramatic impact. Over against this deep and tender intimacy with God, stands a stupid and mindless performing of acts and rituals that have been robbed of their meaning. Circumcision and observation of certain days and customs without fellowship with God are nothing but empty rituals. In his book *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens describes a woman who was abandoned by her future husband on the day of her wedding. She spends the rest of her life in her wedding dress as "the eternal bride." She illustrates well what the Galatians tried to do here. It is represented in "the seed" in Jesus' *Parable of the Sower*, where some fell along the wayside and other in good soil. The devil steals what fell on the wayside. The life-giving Word disappears from the heart and what remains is the hard trodden path. In the good soil, man dies to himself in order to share in Christ's resurrection and bear fruit for God.

V.11 forms the bridge to the next section. Paul looks back to the time when the church in Galatia came into being. He considered the church to be the fruit of his labor. If Paul had not been there, there would have been no church in Galatia. This does not mean a denial of Jesus' Words: "on this rock I will build my church."<sup>4</sup> Jesus looked at Peter when He said this. I believe that in Galatia, Jesus looked at Paul. But this does not keep Paul from being discouraged at this point. He looks at the field he had planted and he sees that part of the ground does not produce the fruit that could have been expected. He concludes that his labor may have been in vain. We could ask, can what we do for God ever be in vain? Ought Paul to accuse himself?

One of the reasons Paul said this is that his words would have a psychological effect. Paul tried to wake up the church and to bring them under conviction of sin. He had earlier asked them: "Have you suffered so much for nothing — if it really was for nothing?"<sup>5</sup> Implying that the experiences they had increased their light and insight and that this had increased their responsibility. We cannot return to square one without being held responsible for what happened in between.

It is natural for a father to feel responsible when he sees his children fail. In a sense this is true. Looking as some candidates for church leadership, Paul says to Timothy: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, our children are not robots either. They are human beings with their own personality and their own free will. We will be held responsible as parents, mainly, if we fail in giving them love and the benefit of a good example. Paul had nothing to reproach himself at that point. What Paul means to say, maybe that he could have used his time better elsewhere.

#### **D. Galatians Receive Blessings by Faith, Not by the Law4:12-20**

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1. Gal. 2:20
  2. Gal. 3:2
  3. Gal. 3:29
  4. Matt. 16:18
  5. Gal. 3:4
  6. I Tim. 3:5

*12 I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong.*

*13 As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.*

*14 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.*

*15 What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.*

*16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?*

*17 Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you [from us], so that you may be zealous for them.*

*18 It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you.*

*19 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,*

*20 how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!*

Paul could make an appeal to the Galatians to follow his example because he was a human being of the same mold as they were. He had said the same to the Corinthians: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> There, however, Paul’s appeal is not as a fellow human being, but as a follower of Christ. That appeal is, of course, also implied in this one to the Galatians. What Paul means is that the Galatians ought to be as he was in their following of Christ, because he faced the same difficulties and restrictions they did. They should not have the impression that Paul was capable of some supernatural achievements, from which they were a priori excluded. In daily life Paul was not different from our Lord Jesus Christ, who lived as a human being in this world under all the limitations as we, using the same means that are at our disposal. Within these limitations He won the victory over Satan by faith in the Word of God and was obedient to the Father in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. If we bring about the defeat of Satan in the same way, we do nothing more or less than our Lord has done also. As we read in Revelation: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”<sup>2</sup> The blood of the Lamb, our testimony and our willingness to die for Jesus are the modern means to win the battle over Satan.

The same thought is also expressed in his Epistle to the Philippians: “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”<sup>3</sup> And in Ephesians it is brought to its highest expression in the words: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”<sup>4</sup> In that context Paul does not even mention himself anymore. The fellowship of obedience is the all consuming principle.

“You have done me no wrong” (v.12) is the rendering of the Greek “You have not at all injured me.” The Greek word used is *adikeo*, which can mean “to be unjust,” or “to hurt one morally, socially or physically.”

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1. I Cor. 11:1

2. Rev. 12:11

3. Phil. 3:17

4. Eph. 5:1,2

The question when and how Paul preached the Gospel for the first time to the Galatians is open to discussion. There is a “north Galatia hypothesis,” which considers the Celtic region of Galatia and a “south Galatia hypothesis” that believes that the church was in the Roman province of Galatia.

In the first case there would be two visits to the area, mentioned by Luke in Acts.<sup>1</sup>

There is also a variety of opinion about the meaning of “my illness was a trial to you.” Some commentators see Paul’s sickness as the reason Luke mentions in the verse: “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.”

From the words “I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” it has been concluded that Paul may have suffered from a disfiguring eye disease. Some Bible scholars believe that this may have been the “thorn in my flesh” the Apostle mentions in his letter to the Corinthians.<sup>2</sup> Paul’s eye trouble could have been the result of the blinding light he saw on the road to Damascus had upon him. None of this can be proven with any degree of certainty, but an encounter with God can leave severe traces as we see in Jacob’s experience at Peniel, where the angel touched his hip. We read: “The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.”<sup>3</sup> It is better to enter life with one eye than to see perdition with two!

As is often the case with Paul’s style of writing, he engages in unexpected twists. His sickness must, first of all, have been a trial for himself. If the thorn in the flesh is what this is all about, we understand how difficult this must have been for the Apostle. It took a while before he came to understand the purpose of his handicap. It must not have been easy for him to preach the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to see that God used his hands to perform miracles of healing in others, while there was this short-circuit in his own body, caused by his encounter with the risen Lord. How can one explain that kind of paradox to others? The Galatians must have observed this inconsistency and wondered about it. But they did see the power of Christ through the disguise of Paul’s weakness. God knew that these people needed to understand this. That understanding makes their falling back on outward things, like circumcision, so contradictory. They could have known better. They had seen what it means to boast in weakness.

The Galatians’ reaction to Paul’s sickness had been moving and tender. There is a sense in which people react better if they can be of help to someone than when they need to be helped themselves. There is some psychological value in allowing people to help. The guilt of gratitude can be a heavy burden. Paul’s physical weakness had forged a strong emotional bond between him and the church. That is the reason the Apostle puts such a stress upon his personal relationship to them. He manipulates his own guilt feeling toward them in a rather sly manner. He tells them: “I am your best friend; you helped me in my time of need.” This kind of approach is psychologically effective, particularly because the other party also uses it.

Preaching and counseling were never for Paul merely professional matters in which he was not personally and emotionally involved. God will always see to it that we are personally deeply involved in the message we pass on. Fellowship, both in suffering and in joy, is an integral part of our ministry. Paul experienced his church planting in Galatia as going through labor pains in order to give birth. This image expresses well the pain and the joy of producing new life. That Paul, as a man, uses this female illustration proves his sensitivity for other people’s suffering. It also demon-

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1. Acts 16:6; 18:23

2. II Cor. 12:7

3. Gen. 32:31

strates the involvement of the shepherd in the forming of the flock. It is true that a church will not rise above the level of its pastor. Christ did not just promise to build the church; He said: "On this rock I will build my church." The rock plays a vital part in the building of the church. What all this amounts to is that Paul loved the church in Galatia. Love is the key to success in the Kingdom.

## E. Law and Grace Cannot Co-exist 4:21-31

*21 Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?*

*22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.*

*23 His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.*

*24 These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.*

*25 Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.*

*26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.*

*27 For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."*

*28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.*

*29 At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.*

*30 But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."*

*31 Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

In this section Paul addresses particularly the Jews and those who insisted in following Jewish traditions. He meets them on their own turf. The allegoric interpretation of the historic facts in Genesis<sup>1</sup> is a typical example of the hermeneutic of the Talmud. We tend to consider that kind of approach, which ignores the historic facts almost completely, as daring and unscientific. But for the Rabbi of Paul's day that was not a problem. If he would object to Paul's approach, he would lose ground himself. In both cases Paul would achieve his purpose.

So, Paul appeals here to the Talmud, rather than to the law. The word "law" stands for the whole Pentateuch. Jesus used the term "the Law and the Prophets" for the whole Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> So, the book of Genesis is considered part of "the law." The story referred to is the celebration of Isaac's being weaned off his mother.<sup>3</sup> During the feast Ishmael poked fun at his half-brother, thus incurring the jealous anger of his stepmother Sarah. Sarah, thereupon, insists that Abraham send away Hagar, her slave girl, with her son, Ishmael, so that Ishmael would not inherit any of Abraham's wealth. There is a good deal of culture involved in this that is unfamiliar to us. Abraham reacts emotionally, since Ishmael is, after all, his son. But God tells him that Sarah is right.

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1. See Gen. 21.

2. Matt. 22:40

3. Gen. 21:8-21

From a hermeneutic point of view, Paul's application seems farfetched. But within the framework of Biblical theology, his conclusion appears to be justified. God's promise to Abraham had been a test of faith. Sarah's plan to give a son to Abraham with the help of her slave girl, Hagar, had been a very human attempt to give God a hand and to circumvent the apparent problems that faith could not handle. The role Sarah played in all this would make a beautiful plot for a novel. It was only after God made Sarah laugh that the full consequences of faith became clear to her. Hagar and Ishmael are indeed typical for man's sinful human nature, "the flesh." The fact that it was "the flesh" of Abraham and Sarah does not change the truth. The birth of Ishmael was the fruit of human cunning which tried to help God by using pious pretexts. This put Abraham and Sarah in a position in which God "owed them something." It was the same mentality that recommends circumcision as a way of salvation. Ishmael was the innocent party in all of this. He is the child of Abraham's carnality. But by poking fun at his half-brother and by his denial of God's promise, however, he leaves the circle of the faith and he becomes guilty. The same can be said about Hagar.

Paul calls the birth of both of Abraham's two sons symbolic of two covenants. The Greek word used is *diatheke*, which literally means "a testament." The author of Hebrews uses it in the verse: "In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because *a will* is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living."<sup>1</sup> It is the word Jesus used, saying: "This is my blood of *the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>2</sup> We usually think of it in the context of something God does for us. But in the story of Abraham and Hagar, as well as with Israel at Mount Sinai, is it something man does to himself. It is difficult to understand what God's intent in giving the Ten Commandments was. But we read what Israel's reaction was when they received the law: "The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said.'"<sup>3</sup> That is the reason Mount Sinai "bears children who are to be slaves." That is Hagar.

It is obvious that the manifestation of God's glory on Mount Sinai to Moses and Israel surpasses by far what Paul is saying here. We can imagine the reaction Paul's statement here must have provoked among the Judaists, when he stated that the two holy places where God revealed the Shekinah gave birth to slaves. But it was not the glory of God's presence that produces slaves; it was human arrogance that refused to see itself as submitted to God that gave birth to slavery. The person who clings to his independence and to his own authority becomes subject to powers lower than he is. Jesus says: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."<sup>4</sup> Only those who pledge obedience to God are really free. No one said it better than Jesus Himself: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."<sup>5</sup> Human efforts to be free outside fellowship with God have led to the worst tyranny. "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free." That paradox is the key to true freedom. The servant who declares, "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,"<sup>6</sup> is the real free person. It is our choice to submit to service that makes us truly free. That

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1. Heb. 9:16,17

2. Matt. 26:28

3. Ex. 19:8

4. Matt. 10:39; 16:25

5. John 8:34-36

makes us children of the New Jerusalem. The bride who surrenders to her husband is free because she reached the goal in her life for which she was created.

The Apostle Paul probably never read the last two chapter of the Book of Revelation. But he had this in common with the Apostle John that he had seen the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride adorned with the glory of God for her bridegroom. That is the source of the joy and ecstasy of these verses. Paul's quotation is from Isaiah: "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the Lord.<sup>1</sup> What a solace for the unmarried! Try to imagine what Sarah went through in life. She felt inferior her whole life because she was barren. Then there was her mocking laughter; mocking because she could not allow herself to take the Lord's promise seriously and end up being lonely and rejected again. But when the fulfillment of the promise came, she laughed and shouted and laughed her head off. Heaven is full of that kind of laughter, because "the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised."<sup>2</sup>

"Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" (v. 28). This means, first of all, that we are the fruit of something that, humanly speaking, is impossible. The birth of Isaac was a miracle of the same caliber as Jesus' resurrection. It was a shadow of that resurrection. Isaac was born out of a body that had died, so is our regeneration by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In Romans, Paul describes Abraham's reactions to God's promise: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed — the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'<sup>3</sup> Abraham realized that his body, as well as Sarah's, was dead as far as a possibility for procreation was concerned. He believed in God as the One who raises the dead and "calls things that are not as though they were." That faith was credited to him as righteousness. We too are the result of faith that honors God by believing and confessing that God has the power to do what He promises.

Lastly, we are the fruit of the Word of God. For what is "the promise" other than "the Word?" We understand, however, that the promise is not fulfilled automatically. It is this marvelous combination of divine power and human faith that breaks through the demonic dominance of death in this world. Paul places the victory of resurrection over against the Judaist routine of circumcision. We are, as Isaac, the child of God's promise of resurrection.

Paul contrasts Ishmael to Isaac as being born in the ordinary way and born by the power of the Spirit. The Greek text reads literally: "he that was born after the flesh" and "him that was born

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6. Ex. 21:5

1. Isa. 54:1

2. Gen. 21:1

3. Rom. 4:16-22

after the Spirit.” Again, in Romans Paul gives the clearest definitions of “the flesh” and “the spirit.”<sup>1</sup> The flesh is that miserable power of rebellion within us that refuses to capitulate and that continues to do its subversive work in us even after God’s atonement has become a reality in our lives. The persecution of the spirit by the flesh is not only some kind of animosity between us and a group of people. That may have been the case when the Judaists came to Galatia to preach circumcision. The fact that they found a sounding board in the church of Galatia proves that the hearts of the Galatians were receptive to this kind of false teaching. There is within every Isaac an Ishmael. Paul appeals to our origin as “children of promise,” as “the free woman’s son,” and he quotes Scripture, saying: “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” That places us on the basis of the new life in Christ, so that the battle can be fought from the victory that Christ won for us.

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1. See Rom. 7:13-24.

### **III. The Gospel of Grace Applied 5:1—6:18**

#### **A. Position of Liberty: Stand Fast 5:1-12**

*1 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.*

*2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.*

*3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.*

*4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

*5 But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.*

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

*7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?*

*8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.*

*9 "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."*

*10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.*

*11 Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.*

*12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*

The Apostle follows the same method in this letter as in his epistle to the Romans and to the Ephesians. He shows the position in which God has placed the person who has put his faith in Christ, and proceeds to draw the practical consequences of that position. The keyword here, as in Ephesians, is “stand.”<sup>1</sup> God does not expect us to obtain the victory by fighting. He wants us to hold on to the triumph of Jesus Christ and not let go.

In the previous section, Paul established the fact that Christ has liberated us. Thus he confirmed Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Living as a liberated person is the result of remaining in Jesus, of obeying Him and of understanding the truth. This freedom is being free from the slavery of sin. “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” It is the being “free indeed” which is the topic of Paul’s letter here. There were probably in Paul’s days as many slogans and cries of propaganda proclaiming freedom as there are in modern times. The freedom Paul speaks about is the real thing. There is ultimately only one real form of slavery, which is the slavery of sin; and one only form of tyranny, which is the rule of the devil. One can be bound to other people on a social level, or in the bonds of marriage, or in a non-emancipated way of life. Breaking any of those bonds, without being inwardly free of the bonds of sin, means falling from the frying pan into the fire. The only way to real freedom is in understanding the truth of the Gospel. Christians, who devote their lives exclusively to bringing about social changes outside the preaching of the Gospel, actually misuse their time. Abolishment of slavery and emancipation of women are the exclu-

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1. Eph. 6:13

2. John 8:30-36

sive result of the influence of the Gospel. Wherever there is inner freedom the outward changes in society will eventually follow. There were in Paul's day many slaves and serfs who gloried in the freedom of Christ. The freedom Paul preaches is freedom from the power of sin over human life. He expressed this in Romans as: "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."<sup>1</sup>

But the danger remains that the devil manages to get his foot in the door. If we entertain the illusion that we could do something that would oblige God to credit the account of our justification, we put ourselves back under the old tyranny. "Stand firm" means to remain quiet while God does the fighting for us, as Moses said to the Israelites when Pharaoh pursued them: "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."<sup>2</sup>

Paul defines the problem sharpest in vv.2-6. The problem is not circumcision as such, but the motive behind it. The medical procedure that is performed nowadays on newborn male babies has no spiritual significance at all. It only acquires meaning if it is done for the purpose of receiving justification by God. Infant baptism, however, can play the same role as circumcision did in the church of Galatia. There is a sense in which the confession of some churches state it, that infant baptism has taken the place of circumcision; although that is not the way the statement is intended to be understood.

When Paul says: "we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope," he speaks about the practical working out of the life of Christ in us, in whom we have received God's righteousness. He speaks of the visible results which the Holy Spirit brings about in our lives. By faith we come into the position in which we are covered by the righteousness of Jesus. The important part for us is to "stand firm" in this position without trying to add or subtract anything. The righteousness of Jesus will become flesh and blood in us as we remain where God has placed us. A combination of faith and love will result in a lifestyle of righteousness.

When Paul says "we hope," he does not mean that he is uncertain as to whether this is true or not. He is unable to see by himself what the righteousness of Christ does in his own life. We are not supposed to become our own case-study. If we pay too much attention to ourselves in this, we end up in the devil's trap. Self-conscious saints are hard to live with. Oswald Chamber says: "We want to be conscious saints and unconscious sinners; God makes us conscious sinners and unconscious saints." Conscious saints are people who are hard to live with!

Yet, God allows us some glimpses of truth which give us the confidence that, on the Day of the Lord, we will stand clothed with His righteousness. Our cover is the blood of Christ. Every sin we confess comes under that cover. Righteousness will demonstrate itself in the end in a series of forgiven sins. In practice this will mean that we love the Lord and our neighbor more than ourselves. If that is true, circumcision and baptism will lose much of their meaning.

We must never neglect the practical implications that are evident in Paul's arguments. Luther may have been so taken up by his discovery of justification by faith alone that he underemphasized the practical demonstration of this in daily life. I believe that God will not make a distinction between our acts and our position in Christ. The key verse in Romans may be "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they

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1. Rom. 6:6,7

2. Ex. 14:14

pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone,"<sup>1</sup> rather than: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> God will accept us on the basis of a life lived in justification. And the only way in which we can live justly is by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is only when His love is poured out in our hearts that we can live a life that is pure. We are still lost if we separate justification by faith from "faith expressing itself through love" (v.6). The difference Luther saw between Paul and James does not exist in reality. A person who says to have faith, but who does not demonstrate love in his acts is a hypocrite and does a lot of damage to the Gospel. That is why Paul uses the word "hope" in this context. The manifestation of our position in Christ in daily life is not something that comes naturally to us. The proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof!

Paul compares the process to the running of a race and he makes clear, although it sounds almost as if it is coincidental, that the manifestation of righteousness is a matter of obedience to the truth. Obedience to the truth is little else but a growing awareness of reality. Sin always projects unreality and lies. It is about understanding the truth and obeying it that Jesus says: "the truth will set you free."<sup>3</sup>

The problem of the Galatians was due to the fact that they were not led by the Holy Spirit. "The yeast" Paul speaks about here is not personal sin but a person or persons in the church, as the weeds among the wheat in the field in Jesus' parable.<sup>4</sup> The enemy had introduced "ersatz Christians" in the church who polluted the atmosphere.

Paul hoped that most of the people had been of good faith, but were misled in following the wrong kind of advice. Circumcision would make the message of the cross more acceptable and take away the repugnance of the cross. It is difficult for us to hold out a hand to accept a free gift for which we cannot do anything to make us deserve it. We experience that as an insult to our human dignity. The message of the cross deflates our ego. Paul explains this clearly in his Epistle to the Corinthians.<sup>5</sup> In Corinth it was baptism that caused a split and made the effect of the grace God had bestowed in the cross of Christ into a hollow sound. The cross is foolishness because it is an insult to our dignity. If we accept the cross of Christ, it becomes the place where we are stripped naked and put to shame. The shameful way Jesus died robs us of anything to boast about before God. Baptism and circumcision can be used as a means to put our ego back on the pedestal. Paul suggests that those who insist upon the rite of circumcision follow the practice of the pagan priests and have themselves castrated. Circumcision had become a meaningless cutting of the body, which was forbidden in the Levitical Law.<sup>6</sup>

## B. Practice of Liberty: Love One Another5:13-15

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1. Rom. 9:30-32

2. Rom. 3:23,24

3. John 8:32

4. See Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43.

5. I Cor. 1:17-2:31

6. Lev. 21:5

*13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*

*14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

*15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

The freedom of Christ in which we are placed by regeneration is not only a position, but also a calling. That means that it is not only a gift we have to treasure and keep but also a call that must be answered. As with all calls, we must answer with “Here am I. Send me!” God’s intent was obviously that we would give up our freedom instead of hanging on to it. Even as Adam in paradise had the choice between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, we have the liberty to choose for ourselves or for the Lord. Jesus calls us friends instead of slaves,<sup>1</sup> but it is safer for us to consider ourselves to be slaves of righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this freedom is that we serve one another in love. This brings us back to the theme of the bond slave in Exodus who says: “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free.”<sup>3</sup> We must defend our freedom before the devil; before God we may give it up. As with our life, so with our freedom; we will lose it if we try to keep it, but keep it if we surrender it to God. This paradox is beautifully expressed in the hymn “Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.” Our freedom is a freedom for service. Our position of freedom in Christ is characterized by the words “faith expressing itself through love.” With the call to freedom comes the word “serve one another in love.” That is fulfilling the law, not submit to circumcision. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is a quotation from Leviticus.<sup>4</sup> In His answer to a question by a teacher of the law, Jesus combined this statement with the one from Deuteronomy, which states: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”<sup>5</sup> In doing so Jesus erased any qualitative difference between both commandments. It will be impossible to love our neighbor as ourselves if we do not love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength. We must love God more than ourselves and be willing to give our life for our fellowmen. The Apostle John writes: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”<sup>6</sup> Circumcision, therefore, can be a form of self-preservation.

The statement in v.15 – “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” is not without a touch of humor. We will all be murderers and cannibals if we do not love our neighbor.<sup>7</sup> Although we may not always be aware of this, self-preservation is always at the expense of someone else.

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1. John 15:15

2. Rom. 6:19

3. Ex. 21:5

4. Lev. 19:18

5. Deut. 6:5

6. 1 John 3:16

7. I John 3:15

## C. Power for Liberty: Walk in the Spirit5:16-26

### 1. Conflict between the Spirit and the Flesh5:16-18

*16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

*17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*

*18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*

In the midst of the turmoil within us the decision we make to live by the Holy Spirit is crucial. The Greek verb rendered “live” is *peripateo*, which means “to walk about.” We find it in the verse: “As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.”<sup>1</sup> It has a connotation of fellowship as we read about Enoch and Noah that they “walked with God.”<sup>2</sup> The prophet Amos uses it in the sense of agreeing with God. We read: “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”<sup>3</sup> Proverbs defines it with: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”<sup>4</sup> In the apostolic blessing: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”<sup>5</sup> The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is put next to the grace of Jesus Christ and the love of God, the Father. Victory over the flesh which was won on the cross of Christ becomes a reality in us if we live by the Holy Spirit.

Paul uses words that are synonyms and that describe what is pivotal in our struggle: “walk” and “be led.” This presupposes fellowship and surrender. It means that it is not our struggle with the flesh that will give us the victory but it is the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit does not force Himself upon us. He depends on our consent and surrender. It is obvious who is the stronger in this battle. What matters is that we give the Holy Spirit a free hand in our lives. But here also our heart is deceitful. We will try to manipulate the Holy Spirit. The flesh is our enemy; it is the poison in our blood. It is only in as much as we allow God’s Spirit to work in us that He will keep the upper hand. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, the Apostle Paul uses the same expressions: “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”<sup>6</sup> The adventure is in being led by the Spirit of God. Our flesh does not have a chance against the Spirit of God. And without the Holy Spirit we are no match for the flesh either. The way Paul puts it indicates that our danger is that we do not recognize how serious our condition is. The desires of the flesh are completely opposed to what God’s Spirit wants to accomplish in us. Some Christians put all tendencies in us to resist the working of the Holy Spirit on account of demons. Demons do influence our thinking, but they find a clear sounding board in our sinful nature.

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1. Matt. 4:18

2. Gen.5:22; 6:9

3. Amos 3:3

4. Prov. 3:5,6

5. II Cor. 13:14

6. Rom. 8:13

Paul uses some cryptic expressions that may throw us for a loop. What does it mean that we are not under the law when the Holy Spirit leads us? The problem is that we have little idea about how much damage sin has caused in our lives. Even after conversion the depth of our corruption remains a mystery to us. The law has the function of comparing our thoughts and motives with the perfect will of God. The law demonstrates the seriousness of our condition. “Through the law we become conscious of sin.”<sup>1</sup> The law also reveals our flesh, our sinful nature.

If we believe that by keeping the law we do something that God will put on our account, we are literally correct. But what God puts on our account is a debit, not a credit. But if we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, there will be no negative balances. The law only becomes active where there is transgression. When there is no transgression the law leaves us alone.

## 2. Works of the Flesh 5:19-21

*19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions*

*21 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.*

Paul gives us a list of fifteen “acts of the sinful nature.” The first three are sexual sins, or sins of the body. The two following ones are spiritual, serving Satan in the form of idolatry or in the illegal exercise of power over others. The next eight are psychological or emotional sins in which one loses control over thoughts, feelings and will. Drunkenness and orgies are a surrender to the influence of alcohol. In our day we could add drug abuse; these are included in Paul’s “and the like.” These are the works of the flesh. This is the fruit of a life that is left to itself.

## 3. Fruit of the Spirit 5:22-26

*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

*24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

*25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

*26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

Over against this is the fruit that we cannot produce on our own. This nine-fold cluster grows in us through the Holy Spirit in our fellowship with Jesus Christ. Jesus depicts this as a branch that is part of the vine. It cannot bear fruit on its own, but it is fruitful if it is connected to the vine and receives the nourishment of the root.<sup>2</sup> The person who understands Jesus’ statement “apart from Me you can do nothing,” is already on the way to fruit bearing. The freedom in which we are placed is the freedom to bear fruit, the freedom of fellowship with the Lord.

The first fruit is love. The word Paul uses is *agape*, the love of God. The Holy Spirit fulfills the first and greatest of the commandments in us: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and

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1. Rom. 3:20

2. John 15:1-8

with all your soul and with all your strength,”<sup>1</sup> as well as the second command to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the love that will grow in us by the Holy Spirit in our fellowship with Christ. We cannot produce this in our own strength. Jesus asked the simple question: “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”<sup>2</sup> Fruit begins small and takes time to mature. But the Lord takes care of it by pruning and training; it will grow. We can say this about every kind of fruit.

Although Paul uses the word fruit in the singular, in reality it is a cluster of various kinds of fruits that belong together. We are not supposed to possess all spiritual gifts available, but we must have the whole cluster of fruit. Our love is inspired by God’s love for us. As the Apostle John writes: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”<sup>3</sup> The definition of that love is sacrifice, as John writes: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”<sup>4</sup> We discover life if we give it up. The decision not to hang on to our own life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us. This fruit grows till it is ripe and becomes a resolve. The joy that follows is closely connected to this. Joy and happiness are never fruits that grow on their own. The joy that takes all of mankind under its wing and makes them into one brotherhood, in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, is not the real thing. One cannot celebrate an “Ode to Joy” without reference to the source. When we search for joy we will not find it. Jesus connected joy to love as He spoke with His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion. He told them: “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”<sup>5</sup> And in His final prayer, He said to the Father: “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.”<sup>6</sup> Love and joy will grow together in us if the Lord is in us.

This is followed by the emotional condition called “peace.” This is the ozone loaded air after the thunderstorm, the stillness of the cool in the evening in which fellowship with God becomes a reality. It is the peace with God after the healing of the broken relationship, and the restoration of communion with our fellowmen and with ourselves. The struggles are finished; the dissonant has dissolved in harmony. Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul connects this part of the fruit with answered prayer. We read: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> Peace may be the dominant one in this cluster. Joy has a tendency to go up and down, but peace is a constant in all circumstances.

Patience is the rendering of the Greek word *makrothumia*, rendered “longsuffering,” or “patience.” The Greek word for incense is *thumiana*, to which there seems to be an allusion. The dictionary defines *makrothumia* with “I defer my anger.” This word is the first that indicates a structural change of character. Most people are not naturally patient. The Holy Spirit makes us do

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1. Deut. 6:5

2. Matt. 6:27

3. I John 4:10

4. I John 3:16

5. John 16:24

6. John 17:13

7. Phil. 4:6,7

all kinds of exercises to change our impatience into patience. Patience makes it possible for us to wait. It is not something passive. One needs hope and vision in order to be patient. Patience is the first virtue that is time-related. In eternity patience will no longer be needed because time will be no more. Or maybe we can say that everything in eternity will be patience.

The fourth fruit is *chrestotes*, which the dictionary defines as “moral excellence in character or demeanor.” It is “gentleness,” or “kindness.” It is used for the tender feelings God has toward His creatures. Kindness or friendliness grows on the stock of love. In inter-human relations it is the love of God we project to our fellowmen. In Christian ethics it is also the attitude we must exhibit toward our enemy. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>1</sup> “Goodness,” *chrestotes* in Greek, means: “usefulness,” also in the sense of “moral excellence in character or demeanor.” It draws a straight line to the character of God. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says: “No one is good — except God alone.”<sup>2</sup> God is good and He is the source of all goodness. A person can only be good if he has fellowship with God. Left to ourselves, we deteriorate rapidly. Goodness is part of the image of God within us.

“Faithfulness” is the rendering of the Greek word *pistis*, which simply means “faith.” If “faithfulness” is intended it refers to human relations in the same sense as kindness and patience. “Gentleness” is the translation of the Greek word *prautes*. It stands for “mildness,” or “humility.” We find in a slightly different form in the verse: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Faithfulness develops best in adverse circumstances and kindness in hostile conditions. Faithfulness will also demonstrate itself best in difficult situations. It perseveres when other stimuli fail. It is the quality that keeps on in times of drought. It is like the “tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.”<sup>4</sup> God is faithful.

Originally, meekness was not considered a virtue in the days of Paul. Christianity has made it into an asset. It is the humility of the heart. As such Jesus testified about Himself: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”<sup>5</sup> Meekness is the opposite of harshness and pride. It is the quality that develops, first of all, in our relationship with God and is then carried over into inter-human relations. It was the character of Moses, of whom God testified: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”<sup>6</sup> It was Moses’ relationship with God that made him meek. Moses did not react to the accusations Miriam and Aaron brought against him. We learn meekness if we take up the yoke of Christ.

The Greek word, rendered “self-control,” is *egkrateia*. It is a combination of the words *ego* (self) and *krateo* (to take hold of). It is the domination of the spirit over the soul and the body. *The Book of Proverbs* states: “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.”<sup>7</sup> In self-control the Holy Spirit does for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Self-control is not a matter of repressing genuine emotions. This control is not tyranny but putting the things of the heart in order. That which is lower ought not to control that which is

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1. Matt. 5:44

2. Luke 18:19

3. Matt. 5:5

4. Ps. 1:3

5. Matt. 11:29

6. Num. 12:3

7. Prov. 16:32

higher. In order to practice self-control one must have a measure of self-knowledge. Self-control is a form of victory over self and victory over self is the opposite of self-deception. The best illustration of this is found in Jacob's struggle with the angel at Peniel.<sup>1</sup> We read "The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip." Self-control is like a sunrise after we have asked the Lord to forgive us. As Hosea says about Jacob's experience at the Jabbok: "He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor."<sup>2</sup> Self-control is the gift of the Holy Spirit to our new nature. And forgiveness is an important part of it. It is quite appropriate that *Proverbs* uses the image of war and conquest. The human heart will resist to the bitter end. Surrender requires a lot of inward struggle. Exercising self-control does not mean that we cannot get upset about injustice.

Paul says correctly: "Against such things there is no law." The Greek text reads literally: "Against such there is no law," leaving open whether it is against things or people. The law is not against the fruit of the spirit, because the fruit of the spirit is the spirit of the law. It is what Jeremiah prophesied about, saying: "'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"<sup>3</sup> The law will do nothing against us as long as we do not trespass. It is our carnal nature, not the Holy Spirit that kicks its heels against the law.

When we have surrendered to Jesus Christ, we consider ourselves to be crucified with Him and dead in His death. We must not draw the wrong conclusion from Paul's words in v.24 that we must actively put something of ourselves on the cross. No one can crucify himself. As in chapter 2:20, being crucified with Christ means that we agree with what God did when He included us in the death and resurrection of His Son. What Paul describes is the discovery that our carnal nature, that exercised tyranny over us, is included in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Henceforth we can ignore "the flesh" as an imposter. What God did with us and for us is all past tense. We are not expected to do anything more in the present. Victory over self does not mean that we accomplish something we are unable to achieve ourselves. It consists in looking at and resting in the finished work of our Lord. Our sinful nature with its passions and desires has been crucified. Our passions and evil desires are not repressed, but they are taken away from us. An indication of spiritual renewal is that the desire to sin is taken away. We may believe that God, in the cross of Christ, has taken away from us the desire for evil. We will experience defeat if we try to fight against our own sins. Sin is stronger than we are but the power of God is stronger than our sin. Unless we call upon the power of the Lord we are doomed to fail. Victory is in faith. The important part is that we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us. Without the Holy Spirit there would be no spiritual life. That must be our starting point in life. To allow the Holy Spirit to guide us is a logical consequence of our position in Christ. We will keep on the right track by going on the narrow path that God has traced for us and for which He has equipped us.

## **D. Performance in Liberty: Do Good to All Men6:1-10**

### **1. Bear One Another's Burdens 6:1-5**

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1. Gen. 32:22-32

2. Hos. 12:4

3. Jer. 31:33

*1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

*2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

*3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

*4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else,*

*5 for each one should carry his own load.*

This section deals with our relationship to the fellow-members of the body of Christ. Paul's warning against jealousy does not seem to fit too well in the whole of the line of reasoning of this epistle. After all, the topic is the spiritual sin of trying to justify one self before God on the basis of a religious ritual: circumcision. What Paul is saying in this section deals with, what could be called, "psychological sins." We could conclude that psychological sins are rooted in spiritual sins. Our relationship with our neighbor is closely connected with our relationship with God.

Peace with God, the restoration of this relationship, will also bring psychological healing for us. In the words of Jesus, the principle of the law is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>1</sup> This is the basic pattern of all human relationships. It is about God, our neighbor and ourselves; in that order! Pride, jealousy, envy are symptoms of emotional insecurity and a poor self-image. Those symptoms will disappear when the Holy Spirit comes and God takes us by the hand to make us walk with Him. The first result of our fellowship with the Spirit of God is the healing of our soul. If we exhibit pride in the church, we show that we believe that the gift the Holy Spirit has given us is more important than the gifts He gave to other church members. We lose the concept of the unity of the body of Christ. The eye cannot say to the hand that it does not need it. That would mean failure to recognize that the Spirit bestows His gifts for the wellbeing of the whole body. We rebel against God if we separate ourselves from the body and become proud of our natural abilities.

We cannot use our gifts as if we made them ourselves. Because they are gifts, we are accountable for the use of them. The antidote to pride is humility. And humility consists in the realization that the image of God in us has placed us in a very high position. If we exhibit pride, we actually place ourselves at the very bottom, for which we feel we need to compensate ourselves.

The sin of jealousy referred to here is well illustrated in the Old Testament stories of Sarah and Hagar<sup>2</sup> and Hanna and Peninnah.<sup>3</sup> The assumption that there is no ground or reason for this kind of conduct is at the basis of the last verse of the previous chapter: "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." It seems, however, that there would be grounds for criticism in the opening verse of this chapter. A brother in church is caught in a sin. In Matthew's Gospel

Jesus indicates the procedure that must be followed in cases like these.<sup>4</sup> The goal of discipline is to bring the brother back into the fold and to take the devil's prey away from him. Paul emphasizes that when we do this, we must be conscious of the fact that we could become a prey ourselves. The basis of counseling is always that there is no difference between the counselor and the counselee. The counselor is a person who possesses the same kind of sinful nature as the one he counsels; he or she has the same potential to fall into sin as the other. We can only lose our integ-

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1. Matt. 22:37,39

2. Gen. 21

3. I Sam. 1

4. Matt. 18:15-18

rity with our permission. But apart from the grace of Christ our integrity does not amount to anything. Who are we to judge our fellowmen?

Our love for God demonstrates itself particularly in our relationship with people who have fallen in sin. God wants to use us as forgiven sinner to bring forgiveness to others. How we do this is a good indication of our spiritual condition.

*The New International Version* renders v.2 “Carry each other’s burdens.” *The Amplified Bible* reads: “Bear (endure, carry) one another’s burdens *and* ‘troublesome moral defaults.’”<sup>1</sup> The suggestion is that the burden is something the person has put on himself. It may pertain more to people who are difficult to live with than with the burden they are bearing. Paul’s appeal here is to the love that “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”<sup>1</sup> The principle of the law is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Because of love for ourselves, we easily disregard our own sins and idiosyncrasies. We all believe that our offensive behavior is compensated for by our good qualities. We find it difficult to catalogue our faults and failures. But we are rarely as blissfully unaware of the imperfections of others as of our own.

There is, however, in the verse also the implication of love that makes us sympathize and have compassion on who are carrying burdens of grief and hardship. God wants our hearts to ache for other and our tears to flow for them. We read several times in the Gospels that Jesus was moved with compassion for human suffering. When a leper came to Him, saying: “If you are willing, you can make me clean,” we read: “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’”<sup>2</sup> And “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>3</sup> There is no greater example of compassion and sympathy than Jesus, who took upon Himself our sicknesses and our sins. This is the essence of the law of Christ. We will never be able to become a substitution for other people’s sins and sorrows, as Jesus Christ was. But can show willingness to give our life for others. Thus we carry one another’s burden, in an act of simple surrender.

It seems as if Paul makes a substantial jump from v.2 to v.3. There is a good deal of irony in this transition. The reason we are unwilling to bend for the other and carry his burden is because we rate ourselves too highly. We are not realistic in our self-evaluation. Paul indicates that the greatest mistake a person can make is being mistaken about himself. I will never forget a sermon illustration I once heard at a missions’ conference. The setting was a pastors’ retreat in which everyone who registered was given a specific task to fulfill to keep the conference running smoothly. One person was given the job of cleaning the outhouses of the campus and empty the sanitary buckets. The man exploded in a rage, declaring that he had not gotten his doctorate of theology in order to perform demeaning tasks like that. But during one of the meetings, the Holy Spirit convicted him of his pride and with deep emotion and loud cries, he got up to go to the altar, shouting: “I will clean the outhouse buckets!” The Lord Himself gave us a demonstration of the same order when He knelt down and began to wash the feet of His disciples, including Peter and Judas. A greater object-lesson in humility has never been taught. Whoever ranks himself higher than the Lord Jesus Christ is certainly mistaken.

There is also a trace of irony in v.4. There is little reason to believe that we like to look critically at the achievement of others, only for the reason of praising them. And if we look at our own work with the same critical eye, we will discover that we have little reason for boasting either. Paul is

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1. I Cor. 13:7

2. Mark 1:40,42

3. Mark 6:34

saying that our first responsibility is to mind our own business. We must recognize the fact that our fellow members in the body of Christ are subjected to the head, not to other parts of the body. In connection with this, the Apostle writes in Romans: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis applied this rule to his own life never to judge others, except in cases where he was specifically placed in a position that required this, such as a parent over a child or a teacher and a pupil. We must leave it to the Lord to judge others. Paul also states in Romans: “You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”<sup>2</sup>

The “burden” or “load” mentioned in v.5 is not the same as in v.2. The Greek word *baros* in v.2 means “a weight” that weighs us down; *phortion* in v.5 stands for “a task or service.” We assume that Paul puts these words together in order to bring out the paradox. There is no contradiction between the help we give to others in lightening their load and our own responsibility for the load that has been put on our own shoulders. All this reminds us of Jesus’ words: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Do Not Be Weary While Doing Good6:6-10**

*6 Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.  
7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*

*8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*

*9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

*10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

Although the sharing of all good things in v.6 probably refers to the giving of financial remuneration, the Greek word *koinoneo*, “to share with others” has a wider meaning than giving money. *The Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* defines it as “to come into communion or fellowship, to become a sharer, be made a partner,” or “to enter into fellowship, join oneself as an associate, make oneself a sharer or partner.” The same word is used in the verse: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too *shared* in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil.”<sup>4</sup> And also in: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not *share* in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.”<sup>5</sup>

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1. Rom. 14:4

2. Rom. 14:10-12

3. Matt. 11:28-30

4. Heb. 2:14

5. I Tim. 5:22

Some Bible scholars believe that a reference to finances would violate the context of this passage. It is true that the Apostle Paul does show a tendency to jump from one subject to another. But a reference to finances is not completely out of context here. The functioning of the body consists, at least in part, in giving material help. And elsewhere in his epistles Paul emphasizes financial help. In Romans for instance we read: “For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”<sup>1</sup> And in First Corinthians: “For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The ox appears again in his letter to Timothy in obvious reference to financial aid: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’”<sup>3</sup> Giving financial assistance is a form of spiritual investment.

Elsewhere Paul says: “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”<sup>4</sup> Here, in v.7, the topic is not generosity but indulging in carnal enjoyments or concentrating on things of the spirit. We may conclude from this that those who do not contribute to the sustenance of their pastor are involved in carnal activities. Generosity is also a fruit of the Spirit. Much of our giving is done impulsively and emotionally. We ought to consider the bearing of financial burdens to be a spiritual obligation. I remember hearing one preacher say that a Christian can always afford to pay his bills.

Although our financial policy is part of the sowing, this is not all Paul is speaking about here. The warning “God cannot be mocked” pertains partly to that subject, but that is not all. We seldom realize that, if we pay nothing more than a few nickels and dimes for the preaching of the Word that saves our souls, we actually mock God. But what pertains to finances also covers the whole of our sowing and reaping. What we cultivate is what we will harvest. We can hardly expect to receive the crown of self-denial if we live our lives unto ourselves only. Once we have made up our mind that we must be willing to give our life to our brother, giving monetary assistance will be easy.

It seems strange that, in an epistle that deals mainly with the topic of justification by faith in Jesus Christ, we read that eternal life is the result of what we ourselves sow in the spirit. What Paul intends to say is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ will empower us to live a holy life. If we endeavor to justify ourselves before God by doing good deeds, we will never sow in the spirit. There are, of course, two facets to eternal life. There is eternal life now through faith in Jesus Christ, while we are living on earth. That is what Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and

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1. Rom. 15:27

2. I Cor. 9:9-14

3. I Tim. 5:17,18

4. II Cor. 9:6

believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”<sup>1</sup> And there is eternal life in its fullest manifestation in heaven when we will share God’s glory, which is still invisible to us now. God’s glory in heaven will be the harvest of what we sow on earth.

The term “carnal Christian” ought to be an oxymoron. Because he who sows carnality will harvest destruction. The proof of our Christianity will be our sowing in the Spirit. When we proclaim to be a Christian and practice corruption, we mock God. And whoever mocks God makes a mockery of himself. We must not become weary in doing good. If our doing good is done in the power of God there will be no weariness. If, however, we try to be good in our own strength we will exhaust ourselves. “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”<sup>2</sup> The freshness of our life will be a testimony to our source of strength.

This influence for good must manifest itself, first of all, in the body of Christ. We must be a blessing to one another. The best illustration is probably from the Psalm that states: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul does not say that we must do good when we have the opportunity, but because the opportunity is there. God will always give us the opportunity and we may ask for it. If we pray for means to help others our prayers will certainly be heard. Hannah’s prayer for a son fits into this category.<sup>4</sup> The opportunity is always there and God wants us to avail ourselves of it generously. Our brothers and sisters in Christ have priority, but Paul does not exclude unbelievers.

## E. Conclusion6:11-18

### 1. Motives of the Circumcised6:11-13

*11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!*

*12 Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

*13 Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.*

The words “See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!” have been a topic of much debate and controversy among Bible scholars. The Greek text reads literally: “You see how large a letter I have written unto you with my own hand.” Some believe that Paul refers to letters, others that the reference is to the epistle. *The Amplified Bible* gives the alternate reading: “Mark carefully these closing words of mine.” Without the original manuscript it is impossible to decide whether the last verses or the whole epistle were in Paul’s handwriting. Some see in the reference

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1. John 5:24

2. Isa. 40:31

3. Ps. 84:5-7

4. I Sam. 1:10,11

to the large letter a connection with Paul's eye trouble mentioned earlier.<sup>1</sup> The mark of Jesus on his body in v.17 could also be a reference to his eye problems.

In these concluding verses Paul gives a synopsis of the whole epistle. His last words are about the difference between the Judaists and himself. Circumcision is nothing but an effort to rob the cross of Christ of its power. Paul elaborates on this in his Epistle to the Corinthians.<sup>2</sup> There the problem was baptism. Paul said: "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."<sup>3</sup> Baptism can become the same kind of obstacle to the power of Christ as circumcision. In that sense, the Calvinists are correct when they say that baptism has taken the place of circumcision.

Paul demonstrates in his words the reality of being crucified with Christ. To the Corinthians he wrote: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."<sup>4</sup> The Judaists preached circumcision in order to beef up their statistics. What they looked for was outward success. This had nothing to do with the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

The inconsistency in all this is that the Judaists expected from others that which they did not do themselves. Paul accuses those who preach circumcision that they do not obey the law themselves. It is always easier to preach than to practice. Few always escapes that trap. Only the Holy Spirit can keep us safe. In saying "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" Paul confesses that he himself is not immune to the temptation. Boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only effective antidote to spiritual pride that fails to give the glory to God. Boasting in the cross will keep our feet out of the pitfalls and traps on the road. No one was ever more heroic, more victorious, more honorable and strong than Jesus in His suffering and death. A more glorious attitude in the midst of this greatest shame of the nations, this inhuman behavior of mankind cannot be found in heaven or in earth. The Lamb that was slain is the Lion of Judah. Whoever concentrates on Him has no time for anything else.

Paul sees himself crucified with Christ, as he stated also earlier in this epistle. Because of this, the resurrection of Christ is also manifested in him. In the context in which the statement appears here, it means that there is a radical break with the world and the mentality that governs the world. The Apostle John defines the world as "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does."<sup>5</sup> When we identify with the cross of Christ, the sting is pulled out of our sinful tendencies. Jesus said to His disciples: "Take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>6</sup> That statement brings the victory into our own souls.

So Paul sees the cross of Christ as a two-sided experience. The world was crucified for him in Christ and he was crucified for the world. Jesus took the cravings and lust and boasting out of us

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1. Gal. 4:5

2. See I Cor. 1:17-2:5.

3. I Cor. 1:17

4. I Cor. 2:1-5

5. 1 John 2:16

6. John 16:33

as His body was nailed to the wood of the cross. He became our shame and unworthiness for us and we were crucified in Him which gives us immunity to the attraction the world can have upon us. There is no greater immunity than death. A dead body is immune to infection.

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.” The one extremity, the preaching of circumcision and the other extremity, forbidding circumcision are equally dangerous. They draw the attention away from what is crucial. There are a lot of things that can bring about this distraction: baptism, the covenant, communion service, dispensation, etc. None of these items are insignificant, but apart from fellowship with God, they have no meaning. For those who are in Christ, they occupy a second place. They are all subjected to the importance of the new life of Christ’s resurrection. This new life is in our identification with Jesus Christ. As modern-day Christians, we can hardly imagine how out of the question and revolutionary Paul’s statement must have sounded to the people of his time. It would have been unimaginable for a Jew not to be circumcised. That was the sign of the covenant. God had said to Abraham: “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Motives of the Apostle Paul****6:14-18**

*14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

*15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.*

*16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.*

*17 Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*

*18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.*

There is no more surprising word than “but.” “I no longer live, *but* Christ lives in me.”<sup>2</sup> The same surprise is expressed in “I was dead, *and behold* I am alive for ever and ever!”<sup>3</sup> Amazement about this miracle will never go away. “A new creation!” The personal renewal that occurs in our life when Christ enters it is like a down payment of the new heaven and new earth God will create. We are like the seed God plants in the ground that will grow into the full harvest. The harvest will be brought in when happens what God says: “I am making everything new!”<sup>4</sup> These words are the extension of Jesus’ words: “I am the resurrection and the life.”<sup>5</sup> We are the firstfruit of the harvest.

We must be on our guard against weeds in all shapes and forms they may come. To be a Christian means to celebrate on a small scale the cosmic renewal that is about to come. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”<sup>6</sup> This should be a theme of our life, the rule we apply. Maturity always demonstrates itself in the ability to distinguish between

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1. Gen. 17:14

2. Gal. 2:20

3. Rev. 1:18

4. Rev. 21:5

5. John 11:25

6. II Cor. 5:17

things of primary and secondary importance. There is a special blessing for those who recognize the difference: “Peace and mercy.”

Now who is “the Israel of God?” We can hardly imagine that Paul refers to circumcised Jews. From a grammatical point of view there are two possibilities, according to our interpretations of the words “even to.” The Greek text only has the little word *kai*, “and.” If it is only a “copulative article” it may mean that “the Israel of God” is not the same group as those “who follow this rule.” But the word can also be a clarification of “all who follow this rule.” In the first case, it would refer to the physical nation of Israel. In the second, it would point to the members of the body of Christ, the church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. The latter would seem to fit better into the context of this epistle. Those who are a new creation in Jesus Christ receive the blessing of God’s peace and mercy.

The last mysterious part of this letter is the reference to “the marks of Jesus” in Paul’s body. It seems doubtful that Paul would refer here to a mystical experience of having the “stigmata,” the physical marks of crucifixion as some medieval saints are said to have received. Circumcision was originally a physical mark of God’s covenant with Abraham and later with Israel.<sup>1</sup> In the same manner did the pierced ear of the Hebrew slave indicate voluntary service.<sup>2</sup> Some Bible scholars are of the opinion that the physical signs that Paul was a slave of Christ Jesus were the scars of persecution he had received. Those scars would be the countersign of circumcision. None of this can be proved or disproved. Paul may have considered his thorn in the flesh to be the mark of Christ. In the same way Paul sublimated his imprisonment by considering himself to be, not the emperor’s but Christ’s prisoner, he could accept poor eyesight as a token of his being a slave of the Lord. The Galatians must have understood what Paul was talking about. It is not too clear either what Paul means with “let no one cause me trouble.” It probably means that Paul did not want to be contradicted on the contents of his epistle.

In his concluding blessing, Paul calls the Galatians he had addressed earlier as “You foolish Galatians!” “Brothers!” What that emphasis on the fellowship in Jesus Christ, he closes.

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1. Gen. 17:11-13

2. Ex. 21:5,6