



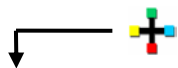
Set Free To Be A Servant: Studies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians

1969

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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Preface

The letter to the Galatians is one of the most dynamic pieces of writing in the world. It is probably the earliest of all the writings of the New Testament, having probably been written within about 20 years of the Resurrection. It comes out of the burning heat of the first great theological struggle of the Christian Church. It goes down to the very heart of the Gospel. At the time of the Reformation it inspired the world – shaking preaching of Martin Luther concerning the liberty of a Christian man. It is a letter which demands an answer from everyone who reads it. And I believe that it touches the central question which Christians in South India and elsewhere have to answer today. It is for this reason that I greatly desire to share with my fellow-believers the convictions that have come to me with fresh force from the study of this letter.

What follows is not a scholarly or critical commentary. But I hope that it does truly interpret the message of this letter. It is my prayer that those who re-read the Letter with the help of the following exposition will be enabled to hear the word of God spoken with something of the same force and penetration as those who first read it in the churches of Galatia, and as those who read it again with fresh eyes at the time of the Reformation. The Letter has been called the Magna Carta of evangelical Christianity, and the phrase is apt because this short letter is above all the charter of freedom for the Christian. But to know what that freedom really is, we must read the letter not as a traditional religious exercise, but with an alert consciousness of the real situation in which we live today. Those who do so will find that there are still surprises in store for them.

Madras, *November 1969*

Lesslie Newbigin

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Introduction

Why Did Paul Write This Letter?

This is a letter which cannot be understood unless we attend to the circumstances in which it was written. On this point, unfortunately, there is sharp disagreement among scholars. In this short exposition I do not intend to go into the arguments on both sides of the discussion. I shall expound the Letter on the basis of what I believe to be the most probable hypothesis – namely that it was written shortly before the meeting at Jerusalem described in Acts 15, and that it was addressed to those churches which Paul and Barnabas had founded during the first missionary journey described in Acts 13 and 14.

We have to begin by looking at the story of the various visits which Saul (Paul) paid to Jerusalem as these are described in Acts and in Galatians. According to Acts he paid two visits to Jerusalem before he set out on the first missionary journey. We have first the visit described in Acts 9: 23-30 which took place shortly after his conversion. Then followed the period when he was in Tarsus (Acts 9: 30). Thereafter, after an interval whose length is uncertain, he was brought back to Antioch by Barnabas to share in the great period of Church growth in Antioch (Acts 11: 19-26). During the period of his stay in Antioch, he paid a second visit to Jerusalem with Barnabas (Acts 11: 29-30). These two visits to Jerusalem are, presumably, the two visits described in Galatians 1: 18 and 2: 1.

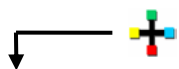
After the completion of the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) Paul stayed in Antioch. But during this period a very great conflict broke out on the subject of the place of the Gentiles in the Church. This conflict necessitated the third visit to Jerusalem which is described in Acts 15. Our

Letter was written out of the very heat of this conflict. What was the conflict about?

It is our study of the Letter as a whole which will enable us to understand the conflict, but meanwhile the issues must be explained in a preliminary way. Let us begin with the basic facts: Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. The earliest believers who formed the primitive Church in Jerusalem were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jews in their Scriptures. According to these Scriptures there is a radical distinction between the Jews, who are the people chosen by God to be His own people, and the other nations, the Gentiles, who are created by God but do not know His Law. The word 'Law' in the Old Testament does not mean primarily a system of legislation, but the continuous loving fatherly teaching and guidance which

God gave to his people. It was the marvellous and unique privilege of Israel to have received this continuous teaching and guidance. 'For what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?' (Deut. 4: 8). Israel was the Lord's garden, a small oasis of cleanness and beauty in the midst of a world which is a desert of idolatry and the chaos of wickedness. And the hedge which protected this garden, was the Law. The Law, given by God, was the most precious thing that existed. Martyrs had shed their blood for it. Every word of it was precious. To understand how a Jew felt about the Law, one should read the 119th Psalm again and again. This Law, these statutes and ordinances, were the hedge that kept Israel within the sphere of God's saving grace.

Jesus had remained within this hedge. He had deliberately limited his ministry to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. His first disciples had naturally thought that they should do the same. They remained loyal Jews, worshipping daily

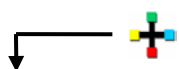


in the Temple, keeping all the statutes of their nation, differing from their fellow-Jews only in the belief that the Messiah had come, and that Jesus of Nazareth was that Messiah.

Then came the chain of events which is described in Acts 10. Peter, against all his previous beliefs and convictions, was almost compelled by the inescapable leading of God to go to the house of a Gentile military officer – a representative of the heathen ruling power – share his hospitality, and share with him the good news of Jesus. What followed was something that upset all previous convictions. The same overwhelming experience of the power of the Holy Spirit which had been given to the first disciples on the day of Pentecost was given to this heathen family. Peter could not doubt or deny the fact. Cornelius was an uncircumcised Gentile, but he and his household were filled with the same Spirit of love and power and communication as Peter himself had received on that unforgettable day. Peter and those with him knew that they could not deny this, and therefore they accepted the logical consequences: they baptised Cornelius and his household.

Of course when he got back to Jerusalem, Peter was in trouble. He had done something which was absolutely forbidden. There was a tremendous argument (Acts 11: 1-18). But the plain facts were on the side of Peter. The others could not contradict them. Finally 'they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life".'

So that question was settled; there was to be a place for Gentiles in the company of Jesus. But the next question was bound to arise: on what terms, are the Gentiles to be admitted? A Gentile is a heathen, a pagan, a person outside of the hedge of the Law, outside the sphere of salvation. To be inside the sphere of salvation you must somehow come



inside that hedge. How can there be such a thing as a Gentile Israelite? It is a complete contradiction in terms. It is like talking about a heathen Christian. (Please remember that the word 'Christian' did not exist at the time we are talking about; that came later.) It seemed utterly clear that if a Gentile wanted to come inside the sphere of salvation, wanted to become part of the People of God, then he must come inside the hedge; he must keep the Law.

And to keep the Law means to keep the whole Law. You cannot pick and choose among God's commandments to suit your fancy. Very specially there was the law of circumcision, the fundamental law on which all the rest stood. This had been given to Abraham centuries before Moses. It was the thing which above all marked out the Israelites from their pagan neighbours. The word 'uncircumcised' is the Old Testament word for 'heathen'. It stands written in the Law that 'any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off

from his people; he has broken my covenant' (Gen. 17: 14). Nothing could be clearer than that. And that command had never been rescinded. Jesus himself had been circumcised and had never spoken a word against circumcision. So it was obvious – at least it was obvious to the original group of believers in Jerusalem – that if Gentiles were to come into the fellowship they must first be circumcised. There could not really be any argument about it.

But mean-while away up in Antioch, 300 miles to the North, strange things were happening which were to put things in a quite different light. Antioch was a great gentile city, a centre of pagan religion and culture. Those who had been driven out of Jerusalem at the time of the death of Stephen began to settle in Antioch, and there – in the midst of a great pagan city – they bore witness to Jesus. As the result a great number of gentiles became believers just as Cornelius

had done (Acts 11: 19ff). Here was a new situation: gentile believers were not just odd isolated individuals in the midst of a Jewish community. The *majority* of the believers (it would seem) were not Jews but Gentiles. In Jerusalem the believers seemed to be (and generally were) Jews who believed in Jesus; but here they were gentiles, but gentiles who believed that they were part of God's people, members of the same family of which Abraham was the father. Here was anew kind of animal, not a Jew, and not an ordinary gentile, but – what shall we call him? – a 'Messiah-wallah', a 'Christian'. 'In Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians' (Acts 11: 26). It was a new name for a new thing, a new thing that the old believers in Jerusalem had probably never really expected.

But now the new thing in Antioch begins to explode. Paul and Barnabas set out on their great missionary journey (Acts 13: 1ff). Soon they are going from city to city through the Roman province of Galatia, and everywhere they leave behind them groups of people who are called Christians. Some of them are circumcised Jews who have left (or been driven out of) the synagogue to follow Paul; some of them – more and more as time goes on – are uncircumcised pagans who call themselves 'Christians' because they have believed in Jesus as the Messiah and been baptised in his name.

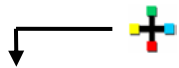
In every one of these cities there was a synagogue. From the synagogue each year some devout Jews would go to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Surely they must have talked about what was happening. One can imagine the tongues wagging in the streets and Temple precincts. 'Such horrible scandals going on all over the place! Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, clean and unclean, all living together and eating together and praying together as if there was no difference, as if the Law counted for nothing! And all because they claim to be followers, of the

Messiah – forsooth! Everything for which our fathers shed their blood is being destroyed and the Law itself brought into contempt.'

One can imagine the acute distress and embarrassment of the old believers in Jerusalem. They were still Jews. They had never had the experience of the believers in Antioch. Their traditional understanding of the Law had never been shaken. They were accepted in Jerusalem as Jews, even though they believed, what other Jews denied, that the Messiah had come. They must have felt that Paul's work in the Galatian cities was not only destroying the Law, but also destroying any possibility that the people of Israel could be brought to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. And who was this man Paul anyway? Who appointed him an apostle? He was not one of the original apostles, nor appointed by them. Obviously an impostor! This nonsense must be stopped!

And so a new kind of missionary journey started. Men went out from Jerusalem to visit all the cities where Paul and Barnabas had preached. Their purpose was clear: it was to undo the damage Paul had done, to remove the scandal which his work had created, and to warn these Gentile believers that if they wanted to be part of the household of God, then they must be circumcised and keep the Law. Their message was twofold

(a) Paul, who brought you the good news about Jesus, has not told you the whole truth. He has given you only part of God's word, not the whole of it. The truth (as you will see if you study the Scriptures) is that if you want to be saved, if you want to belong to God's people, you must be circumcised as the Law requires, and you must keep the whole Law. Paul has deceived you by making you believe that there is an easier way to salvation. He has told you that you only need to believe in Jesus and you will be saved.

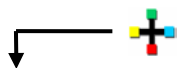


Certainly you must believe in Jesus. We believe in him. We are the true, the original believers. But that does not mean that you do not have to keep the Law. Jesus kept the Law. Jesus was circumcised. If you want to be saved, you must do the same.

(b) Paul himself is an impostor. He has made you believe that he is an apostle but he is not. Nobody appointed him. We are the original believers and we know who are the ones Jesus chose as his apostles. Paul is not one of them. He has deceived you. If you want to be true believers, you should have nothing more to do with him.

This was a powerful attack. It is not surprising that some of the new believers were shaken by it, and that some of them were more than half inclined to believe that it might be true. It is the kind of attack which it is not easy to resist. We have a good deal of experience of it in Madras in these days. Almost every year a new 'evangelist', appears in the midst of the Christian people of the city and tells the people, 'Unless you do what I tell you, unless you get yourself re-baptised, unless you start keeping the 7th Day, unless you keep this, that and the other rule, you cannot be saved'. There are always people whose faith is weak, and who are afraid about their own salvation. Selfishness and fear are present in every human being, and it is easy to appeal to these motives. Only those who have a very surely grounded faith in the Gospel can withstand such appeals – or else those who are indifferent to spiritual things altogether. It was not surprising that some of the Galatians began to waver.

News of these things reached Paul. One can imagine his deep distress, anger and perplexity. He is in an agony for these children whom he has brought to the new birth in Christ (Gal. 4: 19 – 20). He is indignant with those who are causing little ones to stumble (cf Matt. 18: 6). And he is perplexed about how to answer this powerful and subtle



attack. It is in this agony and perplexity that the letter to the Galatians is written. Because of the double nature of the attack his reply has to have a double character. First he has to make clear the truth of his own claim to be an apostle (Gal. 1: 11 – 2: 21). Then he has to show that his opponents are not truly interpreting the Scriptures upon which they rely (chapters 3 & 4). And finally he must show that when we are set free from the Law through Christ, it is not that we may do as we like, but that God's will may be fulfilled in us (chapters 5 & 6). To those who are in danger of being enslaved again in the bondage of religion, he wants to show that Christ has really and finally set us free from that bondage, but that we are set free to be servants.



The Letter

Greetings And Introduction: Chapter 1: 1 – 10

Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brethren who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1: 1-5)

Paul's letters naturally begin with some form of the customary greeting, but they always begin by designating himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. There are special reasons for emphasising this in writing to the Galatians, but it is his ordinary practice. An apostle is one who has been sent – a messenger. This means two things

(a) The messenger himself is not important; what matters is the message he brings. His business is to deliver it.

(b) This 'being sent' goes back to the action of God in sending Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke of himself as one sent, and he said to his disciples that he was sending them as the Father had sent him. The Christian message is news and not just views. The messenger is therefore not primarily a philosopher or a visionary, but one who is entrusted with news about what God has done.

Paul says that he was sent directly by Jesus, and not through men. Later on he will explain what was his relation to the



other men who were sent by Jesus (Peter and the rest of them). Now he emphasises that he received his call directly from the risen Lord who had appeared to him on the way to Damascus and given him the commission to go to gentiles.

Paul emphasises the resurrection at the outset. It is because God raised Jesus from the dead that we have a gospel. Otherwise the news about Jesus is not good news. Paul is a true messenger because he is a witness of the risen Lord as the other apostles were. It is important to remember that Paul is our first witness for the resurrection. This letter that we are now reading was written long before any of the four Gospels. We will do well in our thinking about the resurrection if we begin our thinking from the witness of Paul which is given so clearly and in so much detail throughout his letters – especially in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians.

Paul prays that his readers may have grace and peace. Grace is a common word in Greek letters of the time, but for a Christian it has a new meaning – it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peace is the great word of the Old Testament to describe the fulness of God's blessing. These gifts come from God whom we have learned through Jesus to call 'Father', and from Jesus whom we have learned to call 'Lord' and 'Christ'. 'Christ' means 'anointed one' – the one anointed by God to be King of all men; 'Lord' is the word which the Old Testament uses for the one God. It is Jesus who has delivered us from the powers of this evil age and made us heirs of the age to come. The dying and rising of Jesus (not the Law) is what accomplishes our salvation. That is the will and design of God our Father. It is enough that we trust in that.



I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Am I now seeking the favour of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ. (1: 6-10)

In most of Paul's letters the greeting is followed by a long thanksgiving as he remembers all the good things his readers have received from God. But here Paul cannot do this. He blurts out his feelings without any apology. After all, it was only a few months ago that Paul was with them as their beloved apostle and father in God. How could they so quickly fall away? Paul becomes passionate and angry. He thinks of these missionaries from the Church of Jerusalem who are disturbing the faith of his beloved children. And he curses them. Let us remember what the teaching of these missionaries was. They were not denying Christ, or the resurrection. They were Christian preachers. They based themselves squarely on Scripture. They pointed out the plain texts of Scripture about circumcision and about the Law. They told the Galatians that they would have to accept these things if they wanted to be saved. Paul's reply is absolutely uncompromising. Indeed it may startle and shock us by its violence. Of the preacher who brings this teaching he says: 'Let him be accursed'. And to the congregation he says: 'If you receive circumcision, Christ will



be of no advantage to you... You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace' (5: 2-4).

This is very strong language. In Paul's view the issue is one of life or death and admits of no compromise. Christ either is, or is not, the all-sufficient Saviour. You cannot *rely both* on Christ *and on* something else; it is Christ or nothing. To those who come and say, 'Unless you get circumcised, keep the Law, keep the 7th day, get re-baptised by immersion, etc., etc., you cannot be saved' the reply is absolutely uncompromising: 'If you yield to this, you are severed from Christ.' Paul has been accused of diluting the Gospel in order to make it easy for the gentiles to accept it. He has been represented as a clever fellow who compromises with paganism in order to win favour with the Gentiles. In other words, he is a man-pleaser. Now he hopes that his readers will recognise that he is no man-pleaser. The very idea horrifies him, and drives him back to remembering – humbly and gratefully – what he is, just a slave of Christ. With this phrase Paul's anger and indignation disappear like smoke. He is just a slave, that is all. Jesus is his master. How could he think of trying to please anyone except Jesus? How could he be a faithful slave of Jesus if he was trying to win favour with men

But they have accused him of being an impostor and no true Messenger. He must now – for the sake of the Galatian Christians – give his answer to that accusation. He must explain both how he is an apostle and what his relation is to the other apostles, especially to Peter.



Paul's Personal Position As An Apostle Chapters 1: 11 To 2: 21

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1: 11-12)

The message that Paul had brought to the Jews and Gentiles in the Galatian cities was not something that he or any other man had thought up; it was not something that could be explained as the product of social or historical forces. Nor was it received by tradition from the other apostles. It was given to Paul in a revelation of which Jesus Christ was the content. He had previously believed that Jesus was an accursed heretic who was rightly condemned and crucified; in that moment of revelation on the road to Damascus he had seen Jesus as the glorious Lord who had already claimed him and put his yoke upon him before he knew it.

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. (1: 13-17)

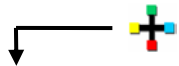
Everything in his former life had been against accepting the idea of salvation outside the hedge of the Law. He had been an able and devoted and passionate teacher of the Law,



consecrating his whole life to defending the ancient scriptural faith against the attacks of this new sect. And yet, while he did not know it, God had already chosen him to be the agent and witness of his purpose to bring salvation to the Gentiles. Paul often refers to the fact that God had laid hold of him long before he knew it. When he heard the words 'It is hard for you to kick against the goad', he knew that Jesus had already put his yoke upon him and he could not escape. When the due time came, God 'was pleased to reveal his Son to me'. Saul knew Jesus already – knew him as the cursed heretic on the Cross that day on the road to Damascus, God showed him that this same Jesus was his own Son. This man on the Cross, this excommunicated heretic, is the eternal Son of God: that is the Gospel. And God revealed this to Saul at the due time, in order that he might bring this Gospel to the gentiles. What happened on the Damascus Road was Paul's commissioning for his work in God's service. We call it 'The Conversion of St Paul' and of course it was a conversion, but we misunderstand conversion if we think of it as 'being saved'. Paul never speaks of what happened to him that day as his 'being saved'. Paul is sure that he will be saved on the last day, but his conversion was not a matter of his own salvation, it was his commissioning for service. And that is the truth of all real conversion. Conversion is for action. It is being turned round from trying to find our own salvation to serving God's saving purpose for

the world. What happened on the road to Damascus was that God, who had long ago laid hold of Saul, gave him his commission as a messenger to the nations.

This shattering experience had to be thought out in solitude. Just as our Lord, immediately after his baptism, went away into the desert for forty days, so Paul 'went away into Arabia' – that is the country of which Damascus was the centre-for a time of solitary wrestling and reflection.



Behind every life that has really changed history you will usually find a period or periods of solitude. Those who have spent years in prison have been among those whose thought has most profoundly moved mankind. There are things which can be learned only in the solitude of deep reflection and of wrestling in prayer. What had happened on the Damascus Road required nothing less than the complete re-thinking of his entire understanding of God's revelation to his people. It is out of this profound re-thinking that we have received the creative re-interpretation of the dealings of God with Israel which has made St Paul's writings so determinative for the life of the Church. A Church which gives no time for solitude and for silence will fail to find the creative re-interpretation of its own past without which it can never meet the demands of the present.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy'. And they glorified God because of me. (1: 18 – 24)

From his period of solitude Saul returned to Damascus and remained there – according to Acts 9: 23 – 'many days'. It is impossible to know whether the 'three years' spoken of in our text means that this whole period was spent in Damascus. From the language of this paragraph ('before God, I do not lie') it is clear that we are touching on a point where Paul was being accused of something. Presumably they were arguing that he was a merely second-hand wit-

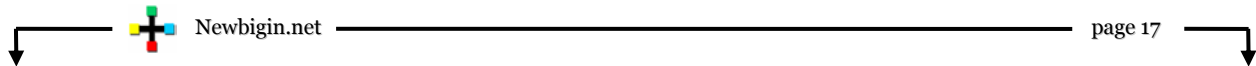


ness, dependent on the tradition passed on by the Jerusalem apostles and having no independent testimony to give. He says that he paid one short visit to Jerusalem and that he spent a couple of weeks with Peter, but that was all. After that we know from Acts 9: 30 and 11: 25-26 he was in Tarsus (Cilicia) and Antioch (Syria). Apart from this brief visit to Peter, he had no contact with the Mother-Church in Jerusalem, and could not have depended upon them for his teaching.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage – to them we did

not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (2: 1 – 5)

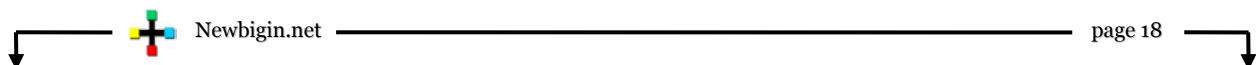
It was during this period, when Saul was in Cilicia and Syria, that the great expansion of the Gentile mission in Antioch took place. During this period, also, Saul paid his second visit to Jerusalem. This is briefly mentioned in Acts 11: 27 – 30 where it is also said that he went with Barnabas, and that he went as the result of a revelation given by a prophet. He tells us that he took this opportunity for a private consultation with the Jerusalem leaders about the teaching that was being given in Antioch. For if this had been condemned by the leaders in Jerusalem, then indeed his work would have been 'in vain' (verse 2). We have an illustration of the problem nearer our own time



and place, in the work of Robert de Nobili in Madura. 'His pioneering experiment in baptising the Hindu scholars and devotees of Madura without asking them to become in effect proselytes of a European religion was rendered largely vain by the condemnation of church leaders. The same thing could have happened to the work of Saul and Barnabas in Antioch.

One notices here the fact that Paul shows towards the Jerusalem apostles neither a false deference nor a false independence. We are familiar with both these things. There are those who give up any attempt at thinking for themselves and are content to repeat what they are told on authority. There are those who claim that they are totally independent of the 'organized church', for whom, in fact, 'the Church' means only those whom they approve of. St Paul falls into neither error. He has his own standing in the faith and he will never allow it to be compromised. But he acknowledges 'those who are of repute' in the Church and opens his heart fully to them with a deep sense of responsibility towards Christ and towards his people. This is the secret of true unity and mutual responsibility in the life of the Church.

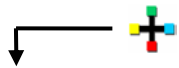
The verses which refer to Titus (vv 3-5) are difficult to interpret. It is not clear whether in fact Titus was circumcised or not. If he was not, why does not Paul say plainly 'Titus was not circumcised', instead of saying, 'Titus was not compelled to be circumcised'? There are also some early manuscripts which give the following version: 'because of false brethren... we yielded submission for a moment'. Evidently that matter of the circumcision or non-circumcision of Titus was one on which a lot of argument depended and one on account of which Paul was criticised. It is impossible to be certain of the course of events, but the most probable interpretation seems to be as follows:



Saul and Barnabas were both, of course, Jews. Titus was an uncircumcised Gentile. Jewish believers had visited the (mainly Gentile) Church in Antioch, but this was probably the first time that a Gentile believer had visited the Church in Jerusalem. This must have posed a very difficult problem. The Jewish believers were accustomed to visit the Temple for the regular times of worship. At the entrance to the inner court of the Temple there was a notice which promised death to any uncircumcised gentile who entered. What should the believers do when they came to that notice? Should they leave Titus behind by himself? Or should they abandon the custom of Temple worship? Neither could really be contemplated. And what should they do when, as we learn from Acts 2: 44, they shared their bread together in their homes? Should Titus be left out? or should he, contrary to the Law, be included?

One can well believe that Saul decided that this was an issue which could not be pressed to a decision at that time. It would eventually have to be decided, but to have pressed the issue at

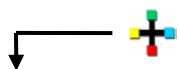
that moment would have split the Jerusalem Church tragically. The time was to come (v. 11) when, in a different context, he would insist that the issue must be faced. But – and this seems the most reasonable explanation of our text – Saul then decided, not because he was forced but of his own decision, that Titus should be circumcised. It would be natural, if this is what happened, that he would later be accused of double-dealing – of taking one line when in the presence of the ‘real leaders’ in Jerusalem, and a quite different line when he was on his own among the gentile cities. Paul refutes this. He says that there *were* false brethren, Christians who wanted to destroy the liberty which we have in Christ, but that we did not give way to them for an instant.



And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor; which very thing I was eager to do. (2: 6-10)

So much for the ‘false brothers’. As regards the ‘Authorities’ Paul is respectful but not subservient. They had recognised that the work Saul was doing was work given by Jesus Christ himself. The result of the conference was that Saul and Barnabas on the one hand, and the Jerusalem apostles on the other, recognised one another as fellow-labourers with different fields of work, and shook hands in token of their true fellowship. I find this a very moving picture. There is no handing down of orders on the one hand, nor is there the servility of ‘yes-men’ on the other. Nor, again, is there any proud independence of one another. They have different fields of work and different ways of working. But they belong together and acknowledge one another as equal partners. This acknowledgement was based upon the fact that they recognised the *grace* given to the others.

It is easy to pass over this without realising its revolutionary significance. The Jerusalem apostles were, in effect, living and working as Jews. Saul and Barnabas were, in effect, living and working as Gentiles. According to every-



thing written in Scripture, and according to all the ordinary thought and practice of the time, this meant that they must be total strangers to each other. The differences between these two cultural and religious worlds were enormous. They were much greater, for example, than those which today divide the two sides of the so-called iron curtain. Neither side attempted to impose its patterns on the other. Each side recognised that, *because the grace of Christ had been given to the other*, they had a unity which was greater than this enormous division. And so they gave each other the right hand of fellowship. The one fellowship was strong enough and flexible enough to hold together a colossal difference in the manner of working. It is the sign of our spiritual weakness that we lust for tight organizations wherein everything is governed by a set of inflexible rules. The multiplication of rules is the sure sign of spiritual decay. The two sides in this

discussion were separated by a far wider difference in practice than now separates, for example, Protestants and Roman Catholics. But they acknowledged the grace of Christ given to the others, and so they gave one another the right hand of fellowship.

‘Only’, says Paul, ‘they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.’ Saul and Barnabas had come on a famine relief programme. They were not likely to forget the original purpose of their visit. But it is of deep significance that this concern for the poor appears just at this point where the fundamental character of the Christian fellowship is being exposed. From this time onwards, the collection for the poor was one of the great preoccupations of Paul’s ministry. If we are faithful to the New Testament we shall recognise that the care of the poor belongs, along with the Word and the Sacraments, to the fundamental bases of the Church’s life.



But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? (2: 11-14)

Now the scene shifts back from Jerusalem to Antioch. Saul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch after their famine-relief visit. Later (Acts 12: 17?), Peter makes his first visit to this famous centre of Gentile Christianity – to the place where ‘Christianity’ was born. He at first accepts the situation as he finds it – just as Barnabas had done. Of course it is very strange and – at first sight – very shocking. For circumcised and uncircumcised to eat together as though there were no distinction is completely forbidden and under normal circumstances one could not approve of it for a moment. But these do not seem to be normal circumstances. What is happening is plainly under the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Peter, who had shared the experience of Pentecost, and the experience of Cornelius and his household, cannot fail to recognise that here too the Holy Spirit is at work. So he also goes along with what is happening and shares in this strange, new, mixed fellowship of Jews and Gentiles which is called Christianity.

But then a new factor comes on to the scene. Some of the stricter brethren of the Jerusalem Church also decide to pay a visit to Antioch and see for themselves what is going on. Can we not see them, these devout and conscientious believers from the Mother-Church of Jerusalem? How



anxious they are to see that the sacred traditions are upheld, and that nothing is done to bring discredit to the Church in the eyes of the Jewish people! One look at what is happening in Antioch is enough to convince them that this must be stopped. One can imagine the powerful sermons they preached, and the earnest private counselling that took place! Before long Peter, and even Barnabas, begin to feel a bit uncomfortable. ‘Perhaps we have gone a bit too far? After all, there are those texts of Scripture, and you can’t get round them! Perhaps it would be wiser and safer to go a bit more slowly. Eventually, of course, we must somehow solve this problem, but meanwhile, we must be careful’. So the familiar arguments went, and so the Jewish believers, and Peter and even Barnabas began to find reasons for absenting themselves from these common

meals and common sharings in the Lord's Supper. It takes a strong man to stand up to the charge of perverting the Scriptures!

But Saul had the strength that comes from having thought things through to their foundations. He knew that the very truth of the Gospel was at stake. He knew that if this was allowed to go unchallenged, there would be not one Church but two. Even more important, he knew that the question at issue was whether or not we are justified by Christ alone. And therefore in an open encounter with Peter himself, he began to unfold this great theme which is the central theme of this letter and of the Gospel itself—the theme of justification by the grace of God in Christ alone through faith.

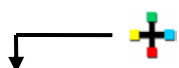
We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ,



we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. (2: 15-18)

If we are to enter deeply into Paul's argument, we must first step back to understand the background of this passionate concern of a Jew for justification. At the heart of it is the central faith of the Bible – faith in a God who is both righteous and sovereign. This faith has at all times to wrestle with the fact that righteous men suffer, righteous causes fail, the ungodly triumph and the world mocks. No race of men has had to suffer more than the Jews. The story of the Jewish people from the time of David to that of Jesus is an almost continuous story of suffering and defeat. But we have the Bible in our hands because of the long line of prophets and martyrs who continued to believe that in the end God would put things right – that he would justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. Through the centuries of agony and desolation, godly men and women in Israel were sustained by this faith and enabled to go on believing, in spite of all the evidence, in a righteous God.

It is against this background that we can understand the violence of the shock which the coming of Jesus created. Here was one who claimed that in him the promised day of God had dawned, but who did exactly the opposite of what had been promised: he justified the wicked and condemned the righteous. He said that he had come not for the righteous but for the sinners. He welcomed warmly those whom godly men rejected, the moral outcasts of society. But for the religious leaders and the official teachers of the Law he had the most severe censure. It is not surprising that in the end he was condemned and excommunicated. The Cross – the most degrading form of executing reserved by the Romans for those whom they regarded as barbarians,



and associated by the Jews with the special curse of God – seemed the most fitting end for Him. And for the devoted Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, the preaching of this crucified Messiah was the most monstrous possible perversion of the faith of Israel.

But all this had been turned upside down in that blinding moment of vision on the road to Damascus. There he had learned that the crucified One was the living Son of God, and that the

‘righteous’ who crucified him were the murderers of God – himself among them. It followed that God’s justification is not a reward handed out to the righteous, but an absolutely free gift of his grace to those who do not deserve it. It was because this seemed to undermine all traditional religion and morality that Saul and those of his kind had attacked this new teaching with such violence and passion. But now, he saw, there has to be a complete and total abandonment of all reliance upon our own righteousness. This action of God completely excludes any reliance upon my own. I cannot *both* rely on God’s grace *and* rely on my own righteousness. There has to be a decision.

This is the decision which Peter had to face at Antioch where, Paul says, ‘I opposed him to his face’. From the whole of Paul’s argument one can reconstruct the lines of his attack on Peter. ‘You were happy, until a few days ago, to share your food with the uncircumcised. That meant that you had abandoned the security of the Law and had given yourself to a new kind of solidarity – the solidarity of all those who rely completely on the grace of Christ. You had stepped outside of the hedge and begun to live in this new kind of community in which the Jews and the Gentiles are completely one. But now you are trying to get behind that hedge again! You are trying to be on the safe side – relying on Jesus, but keeping the Law too! So what you are doing is to start putting up what you formerly pulled

down. You are condemned by your own actions. Either you were wrong then, or you are wrong now. If you consented to eat with the Gentiles then, it was because you relied on the grace of Christ and not on the Law. And if you now try to get back under the protection of the Law, then you are really saying that you were wrong then. And, if so, it was Christ who made you do that, so Christ is an agent of sin! That is the terrible conclusion of this effort of yours to have the security of the Law as well as the security of grace. You cannot have both, Peter! You have to choose But as for me....’

For I through the law (lied to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose. (2: 19-21)

This argument with Peter has brought him to one of those great personal confessions which reveal to us the living heart of Paul’s faith. Let us spend some time in meditating upon it.

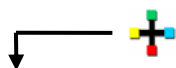
‘I through the law died to the law.’ The Law brings death. This is the shocking paradox which Paul had grasped as the result of his experience with Christ. The Law is good; it is the statement of what God intends for us; its purpose is to bring us life. But in fact it brings death. That had been Paul’s terrible personal experience. Zeal for the Law had driven the devout Jews to crucify the son of God. The Cross is the inescapable and unforgettable sign of the fact that the Law brings death. Why should it be so?

One way to approach the answer is to consider the word which Jesus applied to the teachers of the Law – hypocrites.

This word means precisely ‘play-actors’. Let us remember that these men whom the Gospels describe as ‘scribes and pharisees’ were by any standard among the finest of religious leaders.

They were the heirs of the teaching of Moses and the prophets and, unlike the Sadducees, they were eager both to remain faithful to this teaching and also to apply it to the changing circumstances of their time. And yet Jesus calls them 'play-actors'. Why? If we interrogate our own experience a little we shall begin to understand. All of us, whether we are Christians or Jews or anything else, have some conception of what Paul calls the Law. We are aware of a demand upon us, a standard that we ought to maintain, an ideal that we ought to strive for. I see that ideal as something outside of me, beyond me. I try to conform to it. I try to 'act up to it'. I force myself to do what this ideal demands. And if – through my weakness or forgetfulness – I forget my part and do something which is contrary to that ideal, I am angry with myself. I try to redouble my watchfulness so that this does not happen again. But in all this, am I not play-acting? If I stopped for a moment and asked 'Where did that unkind word, that mean action come from?', I would have to answer, 'It came from myself'. For that moment I forgot the part I was playing, I forgot the 'standard'; I was just myself. That word, that action, came from me – from my heart, as the Bible says.

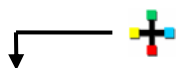
The reason why the coming of Jesus was so shattering to all traditional religion and morality was that he was not interested in the performance put up by even the best actors of his day: he was interested in the people themselves. He said: I did not come to call the righteous but sinners. He is not interested in that impressive performance that I put up on my 'best' days; he is interested in the real person who is behind that performance – this unclean, selfish, lustful person who is, in spite of it all, God's beloved child. So it was that the most successful 'actors' of his day were deeply



offended by him, but the people who had given up the attempt to act a part – the prostitutes and corrupt politicians for example – were taken straight into a living personal relation with him. The coming of Jesus, focussed in his Cross, means the end of the whole business of play-acting, and the beginning of a living relation between my own soul and God. The whole business of play-acting is swept away. Jesus has walked right past it into the place where the real person that I am really lives – without any make – up and without a part learned by rote. 'I died to the law that I might live to God', says Paul. Then he goes on to spell it out still further in one of the greatest sentences that he ever wrote: 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' Let us try to see this through his eyes, and then we shall learn to see it through our own.

Saul of Tarsus was a dedicated and passionate servant of God who had committed his whole life to the service of his people. In Jesus of Nazareth he saw one who was the blasphemous perverter of God's revealed truth. Jesus had done exactly the opposite of what God's Messiah was to be sent to do: he justified sinners and condemned the righteous. In the end, all right-thinking men had recognised the danger and had combined to destroy him. The powers of Church and State, of Law and religion, of rulers and common people, had finally all come together to blot him out. He had died alone. God's truth was vindicated again. With passionate zeal Saul devoted himself to the task of wiping out the last traces of this accursed perversion of the Faith.

Then came the experience on the Damascus Road. Saul, hurrying to his next assignment as the Hammer of the Christians is stopped dead in his tracks. He has a moment of blinding vision in which Jesus, the one whom he daily curses,



is revealed to him as the living Lord. He hears a voice which urgently questions him: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Blinded and prostrate he whispers, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the

answer comes back, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'. Saul's whole world is turned upside down. He is no longer the fighter for God but the enemy of God. His zeal, his godliness, his missionary ardour, are not for God but against him. The One who had died alone was the living God; the world that was ranged against him in condemnation was in that moment revealed as the enemy of God. The godliness, the ardour, the religious enthusiasm, with which Saul and his compatriots thought to serve the God of Israel was in truth not the service of God but a murderous treason against God. They were like the wicked tenants of the vineyard; when the owner came, they were all guilty men together. This is a sentence of death. It is the end of the road. I am crucified with Christ.

What, then, is the life that Paul still lives? It is not a continuation of the old life which is ended. It is the gift of a new life. Paul's life is forfeit; it is condemned and – in principle – ended. There is simply no more place for that Ego which joined in the murder of the Son of God. But Christ died not for nothing but for me and for all men. His death was not a futile demonstration; it was a mighty act done out of love for me and all men. That act cannot remain fruitless. If he died for me, then I live, but the life I live is not mine; it is his. It is not the extension of the life of the old Ego, relying on the achievements of the Ego; it is a life lived simply by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me. It is simply a clinging to him – or rather a confident reliance on his grasp of me.

But this life is true life. It is the kind of life which the Law envisages but cannot create. It is a life of freedom from the bondage of egoism. There is no longer any ques-



tion of *me* being a good man. I shall never, never, be able to think of myself that way. To the end I shall just be the sinner who lives because Christ loves, who lives in and for and by that love.

But this love is exactly what the Law is about. The summary of the whole Law is: 'Thou shalt love'. The Law commands love but cannot supply it. Love can only be a free gift; love which is the expression of *my* attempt to keep the Law is still centred in the old Ego; it is not true love. Love is free, overflowing, spontaneous. It is the gift of God and can never be my achievement. The true life of love, the life which the Law points to, is a life of faith and freedom depending simply on the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

If, having known that, I now try to *add* something to it; if I say, 'Yes, I rely on the grace of God but – in order to be quite sure of my salvation – I must also keep this and that commandment, then I nullify the grace of God. No one can add anything to the Gospel of the Cross. Salvation is by grace alone through faith; there is no other.



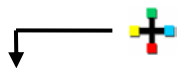
The Truth Of The Gospel Which Paul Had Preached (Chapters 3 & 4)

In the first two chapters Paul has expounded and defended his credentials as an apostle. He has explained the source of his apostleship and his relation to the other apostles. He has shown that he is both independent of and also in full fellowship with Peter. He has rebutted the charge that he has no authority as an apostle. In chapters 3 and 4 he defends the truth of his gospel by a threefold appeal to experience, Scripture and reason. Above all he is concerned to show that, though his opponents appeal to Scripture, they do not truly understand its meaning. Superficially they seem to have Scripture on their side. They can quote texts against him. But a true understanding of these same texts supports the interpretation which Paul had given in his preaching.

He begins, however, with an appeal to experience.

0 foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain? – if it really is in vain. Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?(3: 1 – 5)

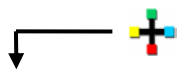
Some time ago the Christian world was startled by the announcement that God is dead. Even people who had never opened a theological book in their lives wanted to join in this argument. The title itself is enough to attract a crowd. When Paul and Barnabas first appeared in the synagogues of the Galatian cities, they brought an even more shocking



and startling announcement: ‘Messiah crucified’. The word Messiah stood for the anointed King for whose coming all true Israelites longed and prayed. Crucifixion was the horrible death reserved for those whom God has cursed. It would be difficult to pack more explosive power into two words than into these: Messiah crucified. But these two words summed up the message that Paul and Barnabas had given, first in the synagogues and then – when they were thrown out – all through the streets and homes of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. And his readers could vividly remember (for it was only a few months ago) what that message had done to people. For some – especially among the devout Jews – it was so shocking that they stopped their ears against it and tried to destroy those who announced it. But for some it had the same effect as it had had when it was first preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost: they were cut to the heart and said ‘Brethren, what shall we do? ‘This message was something that could shock people into the deepest re-thinking of their whole lives. It broke up traditional patterns of thought and broke open hard hearts. Above all it broke down the walls of self-righteousness with which men – and especially religious men – protect themselves against God. It brought people to a fresh self-examination and a fresh penitence. It compelled them to confess, ‘We are in the wrong, and only the grace of God can help us’. And the hearts that were thus opened were filled with a new experience of the love and grace of God. The blessing of Pentecost was renewed. The Holy Spirit took possession, and a new life began.

‘My dear stupid Galatians! That was only a few month ago! How could you forget it so quickly? How could you think that you could add anything to that by getting circumcised and starting to keep the Sabbath and all sorts of other rules and regulations?’

‘Yes, but those missionaries from Jerusalem told us

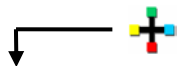


that we were not really sure of being saved unless we keep the Law of Moses. They said it was very good that we had become Christians, and they were Christians too, but they pointed to some texts in the Bible, especially in Genesis, which said that unless a person is circumcised he cannot be part of God’s people. They said it was good that we had left our paganism and become Christians, but that we must now go on to the

next stage and become really fully committed children of God by keeping the whole Law.’

‘But this is not going forward; it is going back. Do you really think you can go from the Spirit to the flesh and call it progress? Was it because you had been circumcised and kept the Law that you received the Spirit, or was it because you believed the message I brought you?’

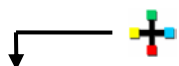
In this short paragraph Paul works with two contrasted sets of terms – Law versus faith, and flesh versus Spirit. Both point to the same basis really but they should be examined separately. The Galatians had not received this wonderful new gift of love and joy and peace because they could say, ‘Now at last we are keeping every jot and tittle of the law of Moses; now we are truly righteous people, pleasing to God in everything.’ Of course not. It was the result of Paul’s message. They had heard him tell the marvellous story of a Messiah who came in utter humility to take the whole burden of the world’s *karma* on himself, to bear the curse of the Law right up to the terrible Cross. And they *had believed*, and in believing had been released from the intolerable burden of a guilty conscience. They had heard and believed. ‘Faith comes by hearing’ as Paul says elsewhere. Faith is a deep personal relation with God which is based upon his promises and our acceptance of them and reliance on them. It is contrasted in the Bible with seeing. The works of the Law can be seen. You can make a list of the rules you have kept, the duties you have



done, the subscriptions you have paid, the good deeds you have performed. But these things don’t bring you into a personal relation with the loving God. That comes only when you *believe* his word, rely completely on it, and are delivered from the burden and anxiety of the man who is worrying about his salvation.

Closely related to this is the contrast between flesh and Spirit. The word ‘flesh’ in the Bible means that which is simply part of the created world apart from God. Many things which we would normally call ‘spiritual’ are – in the language of the Bible – flesh. For example, St. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their enthusiasm for various religious leaders and says that this kind of enthusiasm is ‘carnal’ – of the flesh. It is relying on men and not on God. So in this passage he identified reliance upon our own obedience to the Law with reliance on the flesh. The Jerusalem missionaries were arguing that they must get themselves circumcised in order to be sure of their salvation; Paul says that if they do so, they have abandoned the Spirit and returned to the flesh. He draws a radical distinction between the life that is lived simply by faith in God’s grace, and the life that is lived – even only partly – in reliance upon the correctness of my own religious and ethical practice. One is of the Spirit, the other is of the flesh, and the two cannot be mixed. They had suffered much because they had accepted Paul’s message and taken the path of the Cross as against all traditional religious teaching and observance. If they now accept the advice of these Jerusalem emissaries, then all their suffering is for nothing. They might as well simply have remained in the synagogue, or joined it as gentile proselytes.

Thus Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’. So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that



God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’. So then,

those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. (3: 6 – 9)

Now we begin to get into the argument from Scripture. The argument of Paul's opponents rested in the Scriptural account of the giving of the covenant to Abraham. The covenant with Abraham was the foundation of the life of Israel as God's people. To the question, 'Who will be saved?' the answer was, 'The children of Abraham'. And to the question, 'Who are the children of Abraham?' the answer was, 'Those who have entered through circumcision into the covenant which God made with Abraham and his seed, and who abide in that covenant by keeping the laws which the God of Abraham has given'. In particular the words spoken about circumcision in this context (Gen. 17: 14) are absolutely plain. There is no place for the uncircumcised among the children of Abraham. That, in short form, was the argument of Paul's opponents.

Paul refutes it by pointing to the context in which circumcision was given. If you take circumcision out of its original context you can use it to prove the argument of his opponents. But that is perverting Scripture. Behind the story in Genesis 17 stands that of Genesis 15: 1 – 6.

The commandment to circumcise, and indeed all of God's commandments, have been given in the context of promise and faith – God's promise and man's believing response; take them out of that context and you misunderstand them and therefore pervert them.

This is something very fundamental which underlies the whole of Paul's argument. To put it very briefly, God's law depends upon his promise, and not *vice versa*. God's first



word to man is not law but promise. His fundamental revealing of himself – this is the teaching of the Bible – is in the form of a promise which is at the same time an invitation to believe the promise and work with God for its fulfilment. It is because of this fundamental fact about the revelation of God in the Bible that the Bible is permeated by a sense of the meaningfulness of history. Where there is no promise, the affairs of men and nations are ultimately nothing but an endless cycle of birth, growth, decay and death. There is nothing within history itself to tell us where it is going. We cannot discover the direction of history by the study of history. The very idea of world-history as a meaningful story has only been able to develop in cultures where the influence of the Bible has been present. From the perspective of the Bible human history is a meaningful story because of God's promise.

The proper human response to the promise is faith. It is to say, 'Lord, I believe your promise and I will go in the direction that your promise calls me'. That response is righteousness – that is, it is the right relation of man to God. And it is within this context of promise and faith that, according to Paul's reading of the Old Testament, the Law is given. The picture which the Old Testament gives us is not of a lawgiver issuing legislation with rewards and punishments; it is of a Saviour and Leader who summons his people to go the way that his promise points. The typical form of this relation is given in the story of God calling Abraham from Ur and promising him the land of Canaan, and the story of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with the promise that they will come back into the land of their father. It is as if God says: Come, believe my promise, and walk in the way that I show you towards the promised blessing. It is significant that when we repeat the Ten Commandments in worship we invariably omit the phrase which – in the original text – provides the true context. The introductory phrase in



the original is, 'I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'. It is this Saviour God, speaking to those whom he has rescued and is leading

towards the promised land, who gives them the fundamental commands and prohibitions which will guide them on the way.

When this 'placing' of Law in the context of promise is forgotten, then the relation between man and God is perverted. This, Paul shows, is what the Jerusalem missionaries have done. Many others after them have done the same. If God's command is in the context of his promise, then the centre of the picture is what God is doing; my part is to trust and follow, believing that he will finish what he has begun. But if God's command is a bare command apart from the promise, then the centre is shifted to me and my destiny. The question then becomes, not 'How can I share in the completing of God's plan?', but 'What shall I do to be saved?'. The centre is me and my salvation instead of God and His glory. When this happens, and men are encouraged to think that they can make sure of their salvation by fulfilling this or that command, then God's revelation of himself has been subverted. There cannot be a right relation with God on this basis, because the centre is myself and not God. True 'rightness with God' means believing God's promise, trusting him, and setting out to walk under his guidance in the way he shows.

There is a place for Law. Paul will show later what it is (verses 19-29). But Law alone is not and can never be the basis of a right relation with God.

It is interesting to note the contrast between the way Paul treats this passage of Genesis and the way it is treated by the great Alexandrian philosopher Philo, who was his contemporary. Philo reads this story as an example of faith, and holds up Abraham as an individual believer and as an example



to other believers. In other words, he treats the story from the point of view of the individual, in the way which is also typical of the 19th century western individualism which survives in some contemporary evangelical preaching. Paul does not treat the story from the point of view of the individual; he is trying to answer the question, 'Who are the real children of Abraham?' This is the question which both Paul and his opponents were concerned with, because they were in agreement that it is the children of Abraham who are the people of God. His opponents answered the question, on the basis of Genesis 17, by saying that the children of Abraham are those who are circumcised and keep the law. Paul answers that the children of Abraham are those who believe God's promise and join the pilgrim company of those who are journeying towards what he has promised. Paul had seen Gentiles being brought into this pilgrim company. So he says that Scripture had foreseen this and – before even the law was given – proclaimed the promise to Abraham that in him all the gentiles would be blessed. He concludes, therefore, that those who believe the promise belong to the people of God along with the descendants of Abraham.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.' Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the Law; for 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'; but the law does not rest on faith, for 'He who does them shall live by them'. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree' – that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (3: 10-14)

We have seen that Law depends on promise. But now Paul draws out the consequences of reversing this relationship – of supposing that the promise depends on the Law. It is agreed that God's blessing rests on the true children of Abraham. But, says Paul, Scripture also shows that God's curse rests upon those who rely on the Law. At first sight this is a very shocking statement. In the letter to the Romans, chapter 7, Paul shows how he had found it impossible to keep the Law. Here he argues not from experience but from the Scripture to which his opponents appealed. The text of Deuteronomy pronounces a curse upon all who do not keep the whole Law (Dt. 27: 26). It follows that if your relation to God depends upon your fulfilment of the Law, then you must fulfill every jot and tittle of it. There are no exemptions: one transgression, and you are out. But Scripture also says that he who through faith is righteous shall have life (Hab. 2: 4). He whose standing before God is that of a believer who accepts and trusts his promises, this man lives.

Here are two incompatible positions. You cannot combine them. The point which Paul is making is vividly portrayed in dramatic form in our Lord's parable of the two sons. The younger son, when he came back from the far country, had absolutely nothing to rely on except his father's love. There was not a thing he could say or do which would earn him even the lowest menial job in the house. He had been brought down to the point where he knew he had absolutely nothing to offer; he could only trust in his father's love. The elder brother was sure that he had earned the right to a place in his father's house. Therefore he was not willing for a moment to put himself in the same position as his younger brother. If the younger brother would get out, he would come in – not otherwise. He could only come in and share in the gaiety of that evening if he was willing to take

exactly the same position as his younger brother – that is to say, simply to trust in and rejoice in his father's love.

These two positions are incompatible; you cannot mix them. Saul and his friends had tried to live by the Law, and therefore they were under a curse. They were outside in the dark, like the elder brother. They did not have, and they could not have, the joy of the Father's home. But now the unbelievable thing had happened. The Messiah himself had come and taken the curse upon himself. Paul quotes a text which must have been used thousands of times by the enemies of the Gospel, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'. There it was – the most perfect proof – text you could find to silence these deluded followers of Jesus! Saul himself must have used it countless times in his preaching. But then came that encounter on the Damascus Road. The 'cursed one' was none other than the glorious Son of God. This could only mean that he had taken upon himself the curse that belongs to all who try to justify themselves by their own works, in order that the blessing which God had promised to all the nations through Abraham might come to them.

The sign and seal of that blessing is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the coming in of a new power and the release of imprisoned souls from the intolerable burden of self-righteousness. It was this gift of the Holy Spirit which had convinced the Apostles – in spite of all that they had read in Scripture – that the Gentiles were to be partners in the household of God. First Peter in the house of Cornelius, and then the other Apostles in Jerusalem and at Antioch, were convinced by the manifest and undeniable fact that the Holy Spirit had been given to Gentile believers just as to the first apostles on the day of Pentecost. This blessing, promised long ago to Abraham, is now given to the Gentiles 'in Christ' – that is to say, in the fellowship of believers who have been knit together in the Church in one body, the body of Christ.



To give a human example, brethren: no one annuls even a man's will, or adds to it, once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. (3: 15-18)

Into this argument from Scripture Paul now interjects an argument from reason. It is in two parts

(a) In a human contract the terms cannot be changed unilaterally by one party. In Abraham God established a covenant relation with man based upon promise and faith. This is the true, basic, proper relation between God and men. Having done this, God could not without inconsistency proceed to change the fundamental terms of the covenant and put it on a quite different basis. For if the fundamental basis of our relation with God is law, then the character of that relation is completely different from that of the relation based on promise. In the one case the inheritance is earned and I have a right to it; in the other it is a pure gift. It is again the difference represented by the two sons in the parable. If God had thus changed the fundamental terms of our relationship, he would no longer be a faithful God. He would be breaking his promise.

(b) Moreover there is a further point. The promises were made to 'Abraham and his offspring', not 'offsprings' not to many but to one. At first sight this looks like a verbal quibble, but it is not. Who was it that really received the blessing promised to Abraham? Certainly not all of his



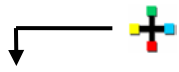
descendants – Paul's opponents would agree here. Not those who perfectly kept the Law – for none did perfectly keep the Law, except One, Jesus himself. So the truth is that the promise was only fulfilled in Jesus. He and he alone is the 'offspring' referred to in the text. It is only through him that we can inherit the blessing promised to Abraham.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one; but God is one. (3: 19-20)

We come now to the crucial question which obviously cannot be evaded: Why, then, the Law? If God's relation to man is on the basis of promise and faith, what is the role of the Law? Is it merely a deviation from the right path? Why should there be Law at all? Paul begins his answer to these questions by making three points

(a) The Law was introduced 'to produce transgressions'. This phrase, which seems very odd at first sight, is illuminated by what Paul says in the Letter to the Romans, 5: 13-14. His point is that Law enables man to recognise the fact that his life is not in accordance with God's will. It is a mirror which shows us what we are. It is a map which enables us to see that we are not going the way of God's promise, but in the opposite direction. It thus has an essential part to play in God's leading of us.

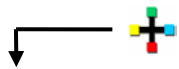
(b) The Law was given till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made'. In Jesus the fulfilment of God's will was not a matter of law but of loving and joyful co-operation. The coming of Jesus was therefore the end of the Law and the beginning of a new relation between man



and God. The stage in man's relation to God which was governed by Law came to an end with Jesus.

(c) 'The Law was ordained by angels through an intermediary.' This phrase, which seems difficult at first, leads on to the central point Paul is making. It was part of the tradition of the Jewish teachers that there had been angelic intermediaries in the giving of the Law. References to this are found in Stephen's great speech (Acts 7: 38, 53) and in Hebrews 2: 2. In Jewish thought this angelic mediation enhanced the glory which surrounded the giving of the Law. But Paul gives the idea a quite different interpretation; he says that it means that the Law did not bring men into a direct personal relation with God. It shows that the one living God was not there in person, but only subordinate intermediaries. The Law therefore does not bring us into that living relation with God for which we long.

Paul will develop this idea in the following paragraphs where he speaks about the 'elemental spirits'. In the Hellenic world to which Paul's readers belonged, as in our world of traditional Indian thought, it was believed that there was a great variety of beings intermediate between man and God. Among these beings were the sun, moon and planets, but also a great variety of other spiritual powers which – in one way or another – controlled men's lives. These powers came between men and the supreme God so that there was no direct personal relation between men and God. Paul is – in effect – treating the Law as one of these 'powers'. This comes out clearly in the following paragraphs, but the idea is introduced here through the reference to the role of the angels in the delivery of the Law. The Law, as he sees it, does not bring us into direct fellowship with God, but is rather one of the powers that separates us from God. The same idea is made very clear in Colossians 2: 14-15. And it is not a strange idea, for it is confirmed in our experience. We know very



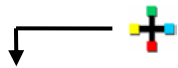
well that Law – rules, regulations, standards, principles – can become an impersonal tyranny which produces death rather than life. The supreme example and proof of this is the fact that Jesus was crucified by the upholders of the Law.

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (3: 21-22)

Where is the argument leading us? Does it mean that there is a contradiction in God – that his promise and his Law are opposed to each other? To answer this question we must understand the true function of Law within God's whole way of dealing with us. One thing is clear; Law cannot produce life. We know that in experience. The law 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' does not have the effect of filling our hearts with love; it can have the opposite effect. We all know the effect of the sort of preacher who is always telling us what we ought to be doing, and scolding us because we don't, and threatening us with disaster if we don't do something about it.

This kind of preaching (which is – alas – the only kind of preaching that some preachers ever attempt) can have two kinds of effect. Either it can produce despair, because I know that – in spite of all efforts – I do not love my neighbour as myself. Or else it can produce a hard spirit which is self-satisfied, but censorious of others. ‘I am O.K.; I am as good as anyone else in this congregation. The people who should really be listening to this sermon are the ones in the seat just behind me! ‘Both effects are familiar to us, and both are deathly.

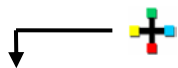
The truth is that there is an inescapable paradox at the heart of the Law. All law is summed up in the command-



ment to love. But love is exactly the thing that can never be commanded. When a person sets out on a programme of ‘loving’ in order to put his conscience right with God, we easily recognise that this is not genuine love, but self-love. No one wants to be at the receiving end of that kind of ‘love’. True love is never the result of a commandment, never the effect of my trying to put myself right. True love is a gift; it is the overflow of a full heart. There is no other way to true love. Scripture, says Paul, has blocked up every other way. By showing us in the Cross of Jesus how exceedingly great is the love of God, and how exceedingly great is the sin of men, Scripture has finally blocked every possibility of self-justification. No one can contemplate the Cross of Christ and then say: I am a righteous man. There is no way left for any of us except this one: to receive our righteousness (that is, our right relation with God) as a free gift through Jesus Christ.

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (3: 23 – 29)

So then we see that law has a subordinate role to play in God's plan – but a real role. Here Paul takes an analogy from the staff of a great Roman house. In such a house there was a slave (called *paidagogos*) whose business it was

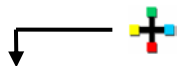


to look after the young children. He had to control and discipline them at home and also protect them when they went out. When the children grew up, of course, there was no more need for the *paidagogos*. That, says Paul, is what the Law was; it was to protect and discipline us until we came to the status of adults and could have an open, free, adult relation with God. This new relation is given to us through Jesus, who alone could introduce us to that relation.

Paul applies this idea to all his readers, whether they come from a Jewish or from a Gentile background. The Jews were under the Law of Moses, and the Gentiles were under other ‘powers’. But in fact their status was really the same – as we shall see in the next paragraph. But now, he says to them, you have all graduated to a new status. When you were baptised into Christ Jesus, you accepted that new status as adult sons in the household of God. In this household the old distinctions are no longer significant. There was a prayer used in the Jewish synagogues which ran as follows: ‘Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast not made me a heathen who hast not made

me a slave who hast not made me a woman.’ Perhaps Paul was familiar with that prayer. If so, it could have shaped this sentence. These distinctions no longer counted in the new household. The only thing that matters is to belong to Jesus Christ, as you do through your faith and baptism. If you belong to him, you are Abraham’s family and inheritors of the promise that God made to Abraham at the very beginning.

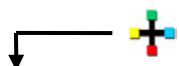
I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,



to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. (4: 1-7)

Paul now carries further the argument based on the analogy of a Roman household. The children, even though they are heirs, are really just like the slaves, in that they have no freedom but are under the control of those appointed by the father. They do not yet have a direct relation with their father. So with us, he says; we were slaves to the ‘elemental spirits of the universe’. This is an important phrase which we must examine. It is a translation of the Greek word *stoicheia* which means ‘elements’ or ‘rudiments’. It could be used for the letters of the alphabet, then for the elements of which the world was supposed to be made – earth, air, fire, water. It is used by Paul in conjunction with the word ‘powers’ to which we have already referred. (See Colossians 2: 18-15). It refers to those realities by which the fundamental structure of life was thought to be determined and by which the life of men was controlled. The language which Paul uses about these things is the language of his time, which pictures them in mythological form. But the reality which is referred to is something which is part of our experience.

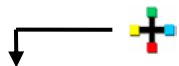
Human life as we know it depends upon certain orders and forms and structures which are given. There are times and seasons, weeks and months and years. There are the political structures of nation and community and village. There are cultural forms, ethical norms, religious traditions which we cannot ignore and to which we are very largely bound to conform. These things provide a certain shape and order for human life. We are not random atoms, or loose



grains of sand in a sand-bank. We find already given, before we start to think, that there are structures which – to some extent – rule our lives, give them form and order, and protect them from chaos. All these things are created by God, and it is only in Christ that they ‘hold together’ (Col. 1: 15-17). Christ himself is the centre of the whole ‘system’. It is only in him that they have coherence. But, more than this, Christ has robbed these things of their final authority (Col. 2: 8-9, 15). He has ‘disarmed them’ through his cross. As a result of this, we now have a direct relation with God himself. These powers can no longer separate us from God (Romans 8: 38-39). These powers still exist, but they are no longer absolute. In Christ, they have been put in their proper place.

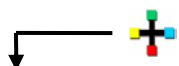
In the present paragraph of Galatians Paul very boldly includes the Law of Moses among these 'elements', just as in the Colossian letter he includes pagan philosophy. He is writing for a community which includes both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews among them know what a terrible burden the Law could be; the Gentiles know the terrible power of the forces which once ruled them – as those newly converted from idolatry know. Paul says to them that this demand to be circumcised is really not a call to advance, but a call to go back into bondage to the 'elements' from which Christ has set them free. It is not a call to higher Christian obedience, but to apostasy.

The truth is that Christ has rescued us from under the tyranny of these powers. He is the Son of God – not a slave, not a mere agent of God, but the Son having the same nature as the Father. But, Son though he is, he humbly accepted the position of a slave under the Law, so that we might graduate to his position as free adult sons of God. This is the new status which Christ has given us. We are no longer slaves, but sons. Why then should we want to go back into bondage?



If we are really to grasp this teaching, we have to translate the mythological language of Paul's time into the language of our own experience. What does this 'deliverance from the elemental spirits' mean in terms of our own ordinary experience? In our study of that final verse of Chapter 2 I referred to our Lord's use of the word 'play-actor' to describe the Pharisees, and said that there was an element of play-acting in every attempt to live according to the Law. From the point of view of this passage, the 'part' which the actors have to learn is part of the 'law', and therefore is one of the things that stand between us and God. But, if we reflect for a moment, we shall see that at a certain stage we do need to learn this 'part'. We have to have some sort of pattern to guide us. If you are appointed a bishop, you cannot sit down and work out how a bishop ought to behave right from the beginning as though there never had been any bishops before you. Inevitably you begin by looking round to see how other bishops have behaved and you try to copy the best examples you know. In this sense you have to become a 'play-actor'. You are not just 'being yourself'; in a very real sense you have to begin by learning to be somebody that you have not been before. You could not cope with the problem if there were no patterns to guide you. But you know very well that the pattern can become a tyranny. You may be so controlled by the pattern of how a bishop should behave that you can never 'be yourself' at all and you become nothing more than a play-actor.

Or, to take another example, if you have a wedding in your family, you do not begin by working out, as a matter of pure theory, how a wedding ought to be conducted. You begin by looking at the way weddings usually are conducted and you take that as a model. You have to do so. And yet we know very well that the current 'pattern' for weddings in our South Indian Christian community is one that brings



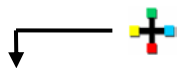
ruin, debt and disgrace to scores of Christian families. The pattern, which we need, can become a tyranny.

One could take many other illustrations to illuminate the things that Paul is telling us here. God has created certain forms, patterns, orders, without which our life would be a chaos. These things are needed to guide and protect human life. They are not in themselves evil; in fact they have been created through Christ and they come from God. But they are not *absolute*. Christ has, in fact, dethroned them. He has done so by his dying on the Cross. The Cross is an overturning of all the accepted patterns. The most venerable of them all – the Law of Moses – was in fact 'set aside' when Jesus died. The representatives of the Law had made it their business to destroy Jesus, not knowing that by so doing they were ending for ever the absolute claims of the Law.

From the moment when Jesus died on the Cross there is a direct road open for every soul to God – even if you are a criminal being executed for murder, even if you are a prostitute, a rebel, a misfit. The Law – the forms and rules and patterns – can no longer stand between you and the living God. There is no longer a merely indirect relation with God. Through Christ you are brought right into the very presence of the living God himself – even if you have broken all the rules and fallen short of all the patterns.

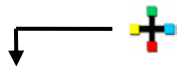
You notice that Christ has not destroyed the ‘elements’. If he had done so, Christians would be anarchists. What he has done is to dethrone them, that is to say, to relativise them – which means that Christians are revolutionaries, but not anarchists. There are still rules, forms, patterns. There have to be. But they are not absolute. They can be changed. They must always be brought under the criticism of the Gospel and changed to ensure that they perform their proper function of protecting life and not destroying it.

From this fact, which Paul expounds here and elsewhere,



there comes that radically critical attitude to law, custom and tradition which marks authentic Christian discipleship. The pagan lives embedded in his sacred tradition. In principle it cannot be questioned. It is all part of a single sacred reality on which man depends for his existence. But wherever the Gospel goes, there traditional patterns come under questioning. Nothing is absolute except Christ; through him there is direct access to the Father, and therefore every tradition, law, custom or principle is to be tested to see whether or not it is serving its proper function of training men for full sonship. It is an unfortunate fact that those who have received the Gospel often fall back again into a non-critical slumber in which the Gospel itself is surrounded and obscured by all sorts of sacred traditions which cannot be questioned. One of the strangest examples of this is the manner in which some members of our own Church regard the 1662 English Prayer Book as part of the sacred deposit which cannot be criticised or changed. It looks as if forms of worship which are already becoming extinct in England will be preserved in a sort of mummified state in our churches in the erroneous belief that by clinging on to them one is being preserved from the dangers of change.

Once these forms have been dethroned they can never be put back again except for a very limited period. What is called ‘secularisation’ follows inevitably upon the preaching of the Gospel, because that preaching removes the ancient sacred tradition from its absolute power and opens the way for endless questioning. Our Lord himself opened the way to this by his attitude to the Sabbath. In saying ‘The Sabbath was made for man’ he made it impossible in principle to treat even the holiest of sacred tradition as though it were above questioning. We are living in a time when the process of secularisation is going forward with accelerating speed. In such a time men are faced with two contrary

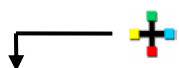


temptations. On the one hand there is the temptation to imagine that man has become the master of all things, answerable to none. That way lies disaster. We have been liberated from slavery not to become masters but to become sons. We are still responsible to the Father, even though our responsibility to him is now that of adult sons, not slaves.

On the other hand there is the danger of trying to creep back again under the protection of the old rules. This is the commoner temptation for religious people – as for the Galatians to whom Paul was writing. There is always a strong force in us which wants to pull us back to the safety and security of childhood. Some kinds of religious revivalism derive their force from this fact. They appeal to our nostalgia for the old days when the familiar patterns which protected us in

childhood were still strong and secure. They invite us lovingly back to the kind of world that Grandmother knew.

But the truth is that, once Christ has been preached and accepted, the old patterns have lost their absolute power. There may be a temporary restoration, but it will not be for long. The truth is that no 'pattern' will save us. As Paul says later in the letter (5: 6): 'In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love'. The Christian has a free and adult relation with his Father. He is free because he believes what Christ has done and promised, and being free he can do whatever love requires without anxious thoughts for his own salvation. It is for this that Christ has set us free. We are no longer slaves. We are not masters. We are sons invited to share with our Father in the development of his whole estate and the completion of his plans for it. The proof of this is that we have been given the very Spirit of Jesus so that we say – like him – Abba, Father. We are in direct touch with our Father. The 'elements', no longer

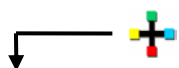


stand between us. There are no angel intermediaries. We are sons.

This carries with it the further truth that we are also heirs. We not only enjoy now the freedom of fellowship with our Father; we also look forward eagerly to enjoying *then* the complete fulfilment of his plans. These plans are for nothing else than the completion of his whole creative work in Christ. The Spirit of God given to us is our guarantee that we will share in that consummation. And so, by the Spirit, we both *have* fellowship with God now, and also *hope* for the perfection of fellowship in a completed creation hereafter.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain. (4: 8-11)

Paul now makes a direct appeal to the Galatians. Having once been liberated, how could they possibly want to go back again into bondage? Having been liberated from a boarding – school existence, governed by innumerable rules and regulations and fixed times for doing everything, how could they want to go back to it again? Yet this is what they are doing. They have started to observe special days and seasons. Presumably these are the days and seasons prescribed in the Old Testament – the 'new moons and Sabbaths' referred to in the Letter to the Colossians where similar warnings are given (Col. 2: 16f). It is easy to see how the Jerusalem missionaries could have persuaded them that they are bound to observe the days and seasons prescribed in the Scriptures – the Sabbath and the monthly and



annual festivals. But Paul tells them that what they are really doing is to fall back again into a pagan bondage to the 'elements'. After all, these days and seasons are fixed by the movement of the sun, moon and stars. If you think you are bound by them, then you have simply fallen back again into pagan subjection to things which are not God.

This teaching of Paul about our liberation through Christ from control by the 'elements' has very far-reaching implications. It is very rarely that Christians have fully grasped it and carried it out in practice. It requires great faith and courage to stand simply on the ground of what Christ

has done, and in the strength of that to subject every other tradition, rule or principle to criticism. What, alas, has generally happened is that Christians have taken these 'elements' not merely as part of God's creation (which they are) but as absolute and unchangeable things (which they are not). They have forgotten what Paul teaches about Christ's action in dethroning the powers. Consequently they have taught that the new creation in Christ will be manifest only in the changed lives of individuals, and not in the changing of traditions, political and social structures, etc. Consequently Christians have been found among the defenders of such abominations as the slave trade and the dowry system, believing that these things were part of God's creation. The mark of a man in Christ will be that he has the freedom of spirit to examine and criticise every so-called principle of authority with the single criterion: does this help or hinder God's plan to re-create all things through Jesus Christ his Son?

Brethren, I beseech you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong; you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did

not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the satisfaction you felt? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. For a good purpose it is always good to be made much of, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you! I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (4: 12 – 20)

This is a passionate and personal appeal to his readers which it is hard for us to understand because we do not know all the personal details that lie behind it. He had identified himself completely with them. He, a Jew and a Pharisee, had been with them simply as a gentile among gentiles. (Cf I Cor 9: 19-23). Are they now going to separate themselves from him and become Jews? There is no reason for such a separation. Paul has no complaint against them. He remembers their great kindness to him when, apparently, he was ill with an illness that might have made them want to avoid him. But they had received him as a real messenger of God (Cf Acts 14: 12). They are allowing these Jerusalem missionaries to supplant their true father. It is possible that the true reading in verse 17 is 'they want to shut us out'. But the accepted reading is quite intelligible. 'They want to shut you out'. They are practising the old trick which C. S. Lewis calls the technique of the 'Inner Circle'. When we see a group of people from whom we are excluded, there is something in us which makes us want to break in and join. It arises from a primitive fear of being left alone. The Jewish missionaries are playing on this fear just as some modern evangelists play on it – tor-

turing their timid hearers with visions of being 'left outside'. It is a well-trying trick of popular orators, and probably the Jewish missionaries used it successfully. It is agony for Paul to think that the children who have been born again in Christ through his ministry are being subverted

from their true allegiance. It is as if he is going through the pains of childbirth over again. And then another line of Scriptural argument occurs to him.

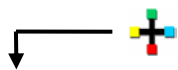
Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory; these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

*'Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear;
break forth and shout, thou who art not in travail
for the desolate hath more children than she who hath a husband.'*

Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now.

But what does the scripture say? 'Cast out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.'

So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (4: 21 - 5: 1)



Here is a story familiar to every Jew. The Jews were very sure that they were the true children of Abraham through Isaac, and that the descendants of Ishmael formed no part of the Chosen People. The children of Isaac were born through the promise which God gave to Abraham and Sarah, but the Ishmaelites were the descendants of a slave.

Paul takes this familiar story and turns it right round. There are two covenants, he says. The first, the original covenant, is the covenant of promise. This is God's original covenant with Abraham, when Abraham 'believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness'. The other covenant given on Mount Sinai is the covenant of Law. This second covenant brings men not into freedom but into slavery. Paul knows this from experience. So it follows that those who live by this covenant are really children of Hagar, not of Sarah. They are really 'Hagarenes' and the Hagarenes are a tribe in Arabia and Mount Sinai is in Arabia; so it all fits together! So the present Judaism represented by Jerusalem and depending upon that Sinai covenant, this religion of rules and regulations which do not set men free but enslave them in a hopeless struggle for their salvation, this is the 'Hagarene' religion, the slave religion. But behind that Sinai covenant there was the original covenant, the covenant of promise and faith. The real children of Abraham are those who believe in the promise. They live by faith not by sight, like Abraham who believed that he would have a son because God had promised, even though humanly speaking it was absurd. Those who thus live by faith do not look to the present city of Jerusalem – they look for the new Jerusalem, the city of God coming down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. These are they who live by faith in hope, and God has prepared for them a city (Heb. 11: 16).

Paul is here drawing the, same contrast as in 3: 3 between flesh and spirit, between seeing and believing. 'The flesh'

means reliance upon what is visible and calculable. To rely on the Law is flesh, because it means that you rely for your salvation on something that you do: you keep these rules, you carry out these ceremonies, and then you are *sure*. This is the flesh. It means that salvation is no longer by faith. To live by the Spirit means to live by faith in the invisible action of God which is not demonstrable or calculable but is to be received simply in trust. Abraham, who believed the promise of God in spite of all possible human calculations, is the type of those who are saved by faith.

The argument reminds Paul of a text from Isaiah. This was a word spoken to Jerusalem in her desolation after the exile, a promise that she would again be the mother of a great family. But Paul has seen that the old Jerusalem was barren. It made great missionary efforts (Cf Matt. 23: 15), but the result was death, not life. On the other hand he had seen the Gentile mission, beginning in Antioch, begetting a great and growing family of spiritual children through all Galatia. The old text from Isaiah has taken on a new meaning! The Jews of Jerusalem are the children of Hagar and they are barren. The true Jerusalem is the Church of the Gentile believers which is bringing forth children day after day to eternal life.

But Paul has not yet finished with this bit of Scripture. The Hebrew text which lies behind our versions says that Ishmael was playing with Isaac (Gen. 21: 9). But the word could mean that Ishmael was mocking Isaac. Later legends built upon this verse spoke of Ishmael actually attacking Isaac. Paul saw this also as an allegory of the attitude of the old Jerusalem to the new. He had himself been driven out of the synagogues of Galatia when he preached the news about Jesus, and the same had happened to his converts. The old text of Scripture was being fulfilled in a new way!

The Jerusalem missionaries had appealed to Scripture against Paul. Very well! Let Scripture decide the question. What does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' You cannot mix reliance on Law with reliance on grace. You cannot have a little bit of Law and a little bit of Gospel. You cannot be both the younger son and the elder son in the parable. You have to decide. The Christian is a radically free man. He is not even a slave of God: he is a son. If you listen to those who ask you to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to make sure of your salvation, you have fallen from that high status back into slavery. This kind of appeal is very impressive. It has all the appearance of godliness and humility. But basically it is an appeal to the slave mentality. It is based on a threat. 'Unless you do this or this, your salvation is not sure.' it is an appeal to selfishness and fear – two of the basest elements in human nature. Those who are weak will fall for it – as we can see at the end of many so-called evangelistic meetings. Paul is extremely tough with these Galatians. He tells them that if they do what these missionaries tell them, then they have nothing more to do with Christ. They are not going forward to full discipleship; they are falling back into apostasy. Paul challenges them in the sharpest possible terms to resist this seductive appeal and to stand fast in the freedom which Christ has won for them.

But now, after this devastating warning, he goes on to say what is the positive content of the life of freedom to which Christ invites us. In the remaining chapters we shall see that this is not mere freedom to please oneself; it is freedom for the service of God and men.



The Content Of Christian Freedom (Chapters 5: 2 – 6: 10)

In the two previous chapters Paul has set forth his interpretation of God's revelation – the same revelation to which his opponents appealed. Briefly his interpretation is as follows

1. God's fundamental covenant with man is based upon Promise, not upon Law.
2. The period of the Law is a period of preparation, analagous to the period when a child is under the control of a tutor.
3. Through Christ we have been brought to the end of this period and introduced into an adult relation with God our Father.
4. The Law is part of the whole system of 'elements' – the forms and structures through which life is ordered. When we have been liberated by Christ we are no longer under the control of these.
5. Therefore to submit to circumcision after you have been liberated through Christ is like going back to slavery after you have been set free.

This section ends, as we have seen, with a ringing call to stand fast in the freedom which Christ has given. Paul now goes on to describe the positive content of this life of faith and freedom.

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through

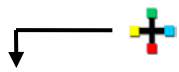


the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! (5: 2-12)

Paul begins with very strong warnings. There can be absolutely no compromise with the invitation to try to make salvation sure by something we do. If this invitation is accepted, then you have severed your connection with Christ, and you have no further any blessing from what Christ did for you on Calvary. If you want to make your salvation sure by your works, then you must keep the whole Law, and if you fail at one point you are lost. The Christian is one who truly fulfills the Law; but he does not do it in order to be saved, he is able to do it because he has been saved. If once you accept the invitation 'Do this, or else you will not be saved', then you have fallen away from Christ.

'For through the Spirit by faith we wait for the hope of righteousness.' This is a very concise summary of the Christian attitude as distinct from the attitude represented by the Jerusalem missionaries. There are three points to be noted in it:

(a) We wait for the *hope* of righteousness. Our justification is something which we look forward to at the end. We do not possess it as our own security now. We live in hope and we march forward in hope with all God's pilgrim people, looking for the City which He has prepared. This is the essential orientation of the Christian life – hopeful looking forward.



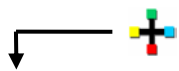
(b) It is by *faith* that we live. We do not see but we believe God's promises. Even Paul at the end of his life cannot say 'I have already attained'. He says only 'I press forward'.

(c) It is by *the Spirit* that we are able to do this, for the Spirit is the foretaste and guarantee of the blessedness which God has promised.

This is the essential character of the Christian life. Paul is not advocating uncircumcision as a counter – position to circumcision. When it seemed right he could also agree to circumcise a gentile convert. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important in itself. Paul does not want to found an 'uncircumcision party' to resist the 'circumcision party'. That would be turning uncircumcision into another sort of law. What matters, he says, is neither of these things but 'faith working through love'. Everything is really contained in that. If you really believe that God has done everything for your salvation in Christ, so that you are completely and finally released from all that self-centred worry about your own salvation, then you are free to be at the service of your neighbour. Your freedom will express itself in love – which is not a 'good work' done to make sure of your salvation, but the free outpouring of a grateful heart.

'You were running well' he says – using his favourite metaphor for the Christian life. The Christian life is not merely a pilgrimage, it is also a race. It calls for the qualities of an athlete. The goal is still ahead, and we have to run with all our strength, along with our brothers, to reach it. Or rather, to reach Him who is waiting for us at the end. But this call to be circumcised did not come from him; it is not a call forward but a call backwards.

Paul still trusts them to keep going. He is shocked to hear that his opponents have even misrepresented him by

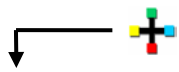


saying that he also preached circumcision. If he did that, why should the Jews be persecuting him? In that case there would be no more reason for the Jews to be scandalised by the preaching of the Cross. The real revolutionary power of the Gospel message, which upsets all traditional religious ideas, would then be lost.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another. (5: 13-15)

Christ has set us free; but freedom can be misused. After all the Law was given because without it human life would be a jungle of unbridled appetites and ambitions. It would be possible to go back to that, and then the Law would have to come into full force again. No, you have been set free in order to become servants one of another. God has liberated you from bondage to yourself in order that you may be the willing and loving bond – servant of your neighbour. You owe an infinite debt of gratitude to Christ, but he has appointed your neighbour to receive the discharge of that debt. Your neighbour comes to you (whoever he may be) as Christ's minister to receive the loving service that you want to give to him.

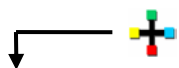
In this kind of life of mutual loving service, the original purpose of the Law is fulfilled. We saw earlier that there is a paradox at the heart of the Law, so that Law can never accomplish what it sets out to do. The fulfilment of the Law comes as a bye-product of something else – of the liberation from the Law which Christ has wrought. The most



beautiful illustration of this is to be found in the familiar story of the woman who broke into the house of Simon the Pharisee and anointed Jesus with her ointment and her tears. Simon was a man who strove to fulfill the requirements of the Law. The woman was one who, by any standard, had miserably failed to fulfill them. Yet in the presence of Jesus it was the woman who fulfilled the Law and the Pharisee who failed. For what is the real intention of the Law? It is that we shall love with a love like God's – free, uncalculated, overflowing. A life of love like that is the only absolutely good life. By that standard the Pharisee failed; in his relation to Jesus he could not go beyond the courtesies which custom and tradition required. The woman had ceased caring about custom and tradition. She wanted only to show her gratitude to the one who had loved the unlovely. What she did was not a religious 'good work'. She did not do it in order to 'be saved'. It was simply the outpouring of love from a full heart. And that, that only, is the true fulfilment of the Law.

The Law cannot produce that. But the Law is still needed, for it is a true mirror in which we can see what we are and where we are going. It is possible to go hopelessly astray – back to the jungle of appetite and ambition. Then – the Law reminds us – we can expect nothing but mutual destruction.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy,



drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another. (5: 16-25)

Paul now turns to give a fuller exposition of the inner content of the life of faith and freedom. The power of the law has been broken, not that the unbridled appetites may rush out, but that a new power may come in – the power of the living Spirit of God. The Christian is not under Law; but that does not mean he is free to do as he likes; it means that he is free to surrender to a new power.

Paul and his readers knew that the preaching of the Cross could produce one of two opposite reactions. It could lead to horror and violent rejection. Or it could lead to the breaking open of hearts hardened in self-righteousness and to the outpouring of penitent gratitude, like the penitent gratitude of the thief on the cross or of the woman in the house of Simon. It was this breaking open of hard hearts and this inflowing of a new power which had created the Christian fellowship in every place where the Gospel had been preached. What powered these new communities was not a new law, but a new incoming of God's love which could take control of men's lives and raise them to heights unknown before. It was not a new law, but it was definitely a counter-force against the selfish appetites and ambitions which the Law had sought to control. Therefore there is

conflict in the life of the Christian. The Spirit does not immediately obliterate all the old appetites and ambitions. There is a conflict 'the flesh against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh'. No Christian ought to be surprised by this conflict; he must expect it to continue through his life. And yet – emphatically – this new life is not a life of rules and regulations (verse 18); it is a life controlled by a new power.

There is a kind of life which you know very well, from your own experience and from the world around you (verses 19-21). There is no need to talk much about this. All that is necessary is to say that this sort of life is simply excluded from God's kingdom. These things exist – in the Church, in the Churches of Galatia and of India. There has to be a blunt warning from time to time. There is simply no place for this sort of thing in God's realm.

But there is also another sort of life which you have begun to know. When the Spirit is in control, the harvest is of a different kind: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This list needs to be deeply pondered. It is not a new set of regulations. You cannot convert this into a list of enforceable rules. Nor is it a list of spectacular signs – miracles, tongues, casting out devils, etc. There is a place for these things and Paul knew all about them, but they are not the heart of the matter. When Paul wants to list the fruits of the Spirit, he does not include things like that. You know that when men are drilling for oil, it sometimes happens that the oil catches fire as it bursts out of the underground source, and for many days there is a blazing flame lighting up the sky until it can be brought under control. So it also happens that when the Spirit first takes control of a new group of people there are spectacular signs of His power which draw people in wonder and admiration. But men do not drill for oil in order to have such fireworks. The real purpose is fulfilled when

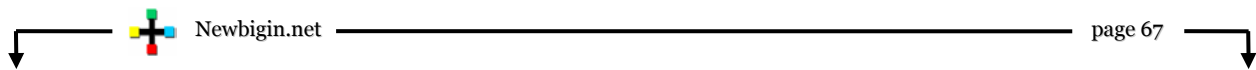
the oil is quietly flowing through the pipes to do the work of the world. So Paul tries to persuade the Corinthians that such spectacular signs of the presence of the Spirit were less important than love. So here, when he describes the fruits of the Spirit, he depicts the character of Jesus himself as he did also in the 13th chapter of First Corinthians.

From time to time in the history of the Church there have been movements which, like the Corinthians, tried to give primary importance to such things as speaking with tongues and casting out devils. Paul does not deny the reality of these things; indeed he thanks God that he speaks with tongues more than any of his readers. But when he is describing the work of the Spirit he makes it clear that the essential work is this: to reproduce the life of Jesus in the life of men. Where we see this happening, we know that the Spirit is at work.

What, then, is the relation of the life of the Spirit to the desires of the natural man – to the appetites and ambitions which Paul calls 'the flesh'? Paul's answer is 'crucifixion'. 'Those who

belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.’ It is not a question of a new set of rules which would keep the desires of the flesh under proper control. It is something more drastic. Those who have accepted the message of the Cross have done something more than accept a new law: they have been crucified with Christ. The Cross is simply the end of the road for every kind of human ambition and appetite. There is no way forward from there along that road. The Cross is the end, and a new beginning on a different road under the control of a different power.

On that road, we are to march together. This is the meaning of the verb used in verse 25. Once again, it is a picture of the whole people of God marching together, shoulder to

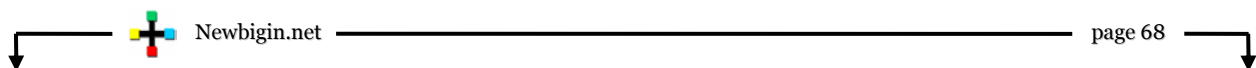


shoulder, along the road that leads to the City which God has promised. Baptism means that we have set out on that road. We are marked with the Cross in baptism in token of the fact that we have given up the other road absolutely, and are now committed to walk the way of the Cross together with all our fellow-believers. We march not as isolated stragglers each trying to get along by himself; we march as a company of fellow-pilgrims marked with the same Cross, looking to the same City. There is no room for the quarrelling and envying which so often (alas) disfigure church life from the first century till now. The Church in Galatia, like the Church in India, could fall into this kind of quarrelling and envying. But Paul reminds them of their calling to march forward as one company towards the goal which God has set before us in his promise.

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. For each man will have to bear his own load.

Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (6: 1 – 10)



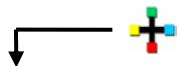
When we are marching along together, it may happen that one of our company stumbles or falls. What do we do? Leave him behind to fend for himself? No – surely not. We are to stop and help him to his feet again, remembering that we also may need the same help one day. We are not to be pharisees whose delight it is to find fault with a brother and put him out of the fellowship. We are to help the one who stumbles, and each one of us is to remember that he himself is liable to stumble too.

Christ bore our burden – otherwise we would still be crushed by it. In the same way we are to bear one another's burdens. The sin of my brother Christian is also my sin; I am to share that burden with him – not putting him away from me in self-righteous pride, but humbly stooping to bear the burden of his sin, as Christ stooped to bear the burden of my sin.

There is simply no room for all this self-righteousness. Who are you, anyway? Only a reprieved prisoner. Please remember what you are and don't put on, that 'holier than thou' attitude to your brother Christian. Let us have no snore of this pharisaic talk about 'nominal Christians' – who are always other people! Before you call other people 'nominal Christians', you had better watch your own step! And you had better remember that on the day of judgment you will have to stand before God and bear your own responsibility for whatever you have done, or failed to do.

Very specially you should remember those who are your leaders in the march. They are trying to show you the way by their teaching; help them with your substance and with your prayers.

We are living in a rational universe. Things do not change by our wishing them to change. If you sow paddy you will reap paddy, and if you sow thorns you will reap thorns.



Things are what they are; why should we wish to deceive ourselves? If you spend a lifetime pleasing yourself, then you have created for yourself a character which would find heaven worse than hell. There are too many people with infantile minds who imagine that things can be what they want just by wishing them so. The first thing – always – is to open your eyes and see things are as they really are.

And the next thing is to go on without wearying. It is easy to grow weary. We often talk about the temptations of youth, but the temptations of middle-age are much more deadly – the temptation to sit back and take it easy, to slack off, to 'coast' along, thinking that one can get to the winning post without any more sprinting. There is nothing more striking in the teaching of Jesus than his constant insistence on 'enduring to the end'. This is a march. We have got to march together and keep on marching till we get there. It will be worth it in the end.



Paul's Personal Postscript (Chapter 6: 11 – 18)

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh. But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.

Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit, brethren.

Amen. (6: 11-18)

Paul dictated his letters. At the end of some of them we have the greetings of the writer as well as those of Paul (Rom. 16: 22). Here Paul wants to finish with a final message written in his own hand. It is an expression of his longing to 'get through' to these beloved friends of his. He wants them to feel that he himself is speaking straight to them from his heart. The final section contains

the very heart of what he wants to say to them. The heart of what he wants to say to them is the Cross of Jesus Christ. Nothing must be allowed to undermine the revolutionary character of the message of the Cross. It is really the end of traditional religion. But these Jerusalem missionaries want to domesticate it, to take the sting out of it. They want to get you circumcised so that you will fit back again into the traditional religious picture.

This means that they simply want to ‘make a good show in the flesh’; that is to say they want to make it appear that what is happening is a very successful piece of missionary work. They want your names to be added to the statistics of gentile proselytes in the next annual report!

And they want to avoid the scandal of the Cross. Jewish believers in Jesus who continued to practise their Jewish religion were not persecuted; if Jesus is simply the Messiah expected by the Jews, and those who accept him remain within the framework of the Law, then there is no cause for absolute opposition. But when Paul said that the Cross is the end of the Law, the end of religion, so that a man comes into the right relation with God simply by faith in Jesus apart from the traditional religious observances – then there is relentless persecution.

The heart of the matter is this: the Cross of Jesus. That is the only thing that can provide us with our unshakable standing ground. Don’t try to take your stand anywhere else. Don’t take your stand on anything you have done or intend to do. Don’t take your stand on the fact that you are a Christian, or a Protestant, or an Evangelical or a Catholic or an ‘Ecumenical’. Don’t boast of anything except the Cross. The Cross is the place where the whole world is brought under the judgment and mercy of God. The Cross is the place where we know that the whole world is in rebellion against God, and that God has bound the whole world to himself with an undying love. To those who understand and accept it, the Cross is the beginning of a new kind of life, a life of faith working through love, a life of free loving service to all men for Christ’s sake. The Cross is the place where I and all things come to the end of the road and are put on a new road.

It is not a question of putting uncircumcision against circumcision, Gentile Christianity against Judaeon Christianity,

Paul against Peter, Antioch against Jerusalem. It is not a matter of a party or a ‘school of thought’. It is a matter of a new creation, of a dying and being born again, of the end of the road and the beginning of the road that leads to the City of God.

Upon all who march together by this rule, let there be the peace of God – that all-embracing blessing promised by God to the Fathers. And let there be mercy also on the Israel of God. (This at least seems the most probable rendering of this verse.) Paul has spoken hard things about those who tried to bring the Galatian believers under the bondage of the Jewish Law. But he can never forget God’s own people Israel, and he prays also for them, that God may have mercy on them.

Now he has said his say. His opponents wanted to have them marked with the marks of circumcision on their bodies. Paul too, had marks on his body. A slave was often branded with a mark to show who was his owner. Paul had the marks of his owner on his body – the scars that he still bore after the stoning at Lystra and the other sufferings he had endured. He has the marks of a servant of Jesus on his body. That is enough. He does not ask for anything else, for any other dignity or for any other security except this: to belong to Jesus. Those who have that, have enough.

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