

## The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology

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N. T. WRIGHT

The dense and dramatic argument of Galatians excites and baffles by turns. Sometimes perceived as a flamboyant younger sister of the more settled and reflective letter to Rome, this epistle has provoked endless controversy at all levels, from details of exegesis to flights of systematic theology. Nobody reading it can be in any doubt that it all mattered very much indeed to Paul. But what it was that mattered, and why, and why it should matter to anyone two thousand years later — these are far harder questions to answer. Nor can this chapter do more than restate the questions and hint at possible answers. Our aim here is not to solve the problems in question but to discuss and illustrate the task.

Our aim is to discuss, particularly, what might happen when we allow questions of exegesis and theology to stare each other in the face. It is of course generally recognized that anyone grappling with the exegesis of Galatians must do business with “theological” questions. One must, that is to say, know something of the grammar of theological concepts, how God-language works (particularly, how it worked in the first century), how justification might relate to law and faith, and so on. One must, in particular, be familiar with how Paul uses similar ideas in other letters, in this case especially Romans. It is not that one should allow Paul’s meaning in one place to determine ahead of time what he might have said elsewhere, but that even if development, or a change of mind, has occurred, we are still dealing with the same person talking about more or less the same things. Equally, no systematic or practical theology that would claim to be Christian can ignore the central and foundational texts of the NT. Particularly, anyone offering a theological account of, say, justification would feel bound at least to make a visit to Galatians and to fit it somehow into the developing scheme. And anyone wanting to offer a serious Christian account of central topics on contemporary applied theology — liberation, for instance, or postmodernity — ought, if such theology is to be fully Christian, to ground their reflections in the NT.

However, a good deal of historical and exegetical scholarship on this letter, as on others, has in fact proceeded in recent decades with only minimal attention to theological discussion — an omission sometimes justified on the grounds of maintaining historical neutrality, though sometimes in fact masking the historian’s unawareness of the deeper issues involved. Likewise, many systematic theologians, in this and other fields, have become impatient with waiting for the mountain of historical footnotes to give birth to the mouse of theological insight, and have proceeded on the basis of an understanding of the text that simply reflects, it may not be too unkind to say, either the commentary that was in vogue when the theologian was a student or the pressing contemporary issues that condition a particular reading of the text.<sup>[1]</sup>

I intend in this essay to approach the problem from both ends, and to examine the bridge that might be thrown between these two now traditional positions. This task is not to be thought of as one element in the wider project of bridging Lessing’s Ugly Ditch. Such a project presupposes that which ought to be challenged — namely, the existence of such a ditch in the first place. To be sure, a ditch between the historical and the

theological task does indeed exist within Western consciousness, and the rise of historical scholarship owes something to it, since in that context the ditch has acted as a moat, protecting the historian from the prying eye and the heavy hand of the theological censor. But the question always arises as to who is being protected from whom. The ditch is equally useful to those who want to maintain a traditional faith within a pure ahistorical vacuum. But the idea that there is a great gulf fixed between historical exegesis and Christian theology — this Enlightenment presupposition is precisely what ought to be challenged, not least when commenting on a biblical text.

One way of hinting at answers to the wider problems is to read a particular text without bracketing off any of these questions — or, to put the matter another way, one might propose putting to the text the questions that have accrued, and those that are newly emerging, out of the long history of the church's engagement with its own faith (and, one should say, with its God) — and giving the text a chance to answer them, or at least to insist on their rewording. With this in mind, I offer here (1) a brief account of the major exegetical issues that meet us in Galatians; (2) a suggestion of which major theological questions might profitably be put to the letter, and what answers might arise; and (3) some proposals about how these two tasks might be brought into fruitful interaction with one another through the work of a commentary and the further work (not least preaching) that a commentary is supposed to evoke.

## 1. Exegetical Issues

The basic task of exegesis is to address, as a whole and in parts, the historical questions: What was the author saying to the readers; and why? These questions ultimately demand an answer at the broadest level in the form of a hypothesis to be tested against the verse-by-verse details. One may, perhaps, allow the author some imprecision, particularly in such a heated composition, but if even a small number of details do not fit the hypothesis, it will be called into question. Exegetes of course have ways of making things fit. A puzzling verse can be labeled as a pre-Pauline fragment or an interpolation, or perhaps a mere “topos” in which a well-worn phrase, whose history-of-religions ancestry can be shown with an impressive footnote, should not be pressed for precise or powerful meaning. (As though Paul, of all people, would be content to write a letter that was merely a set of conventional noises whose meaning could thus be reduced to a set of evocative grunts!) Failing that, one can suggest that a puzzling verse simply reflects a moment where either Paul or his amanuensis lost the train of thought. But I take it as a general rule, consonant with the wider rules for hypotheses and their verification, that the more moves like this one makes, the more one's hypothesis stands condemned for lack of appropriate simplicity. One must assume that there is a train of thought, “that the text has a central concern and a remarkable inner logic that may no longer be entirely comprehensible to us.”<sup>[2]</sup> One must get in the data, and one must do so without undue complexity, without using that brute force which swaggers around the byways of a text arm-in-arm with ignorance.

At the level of large-scale exegesis, this problem meets us when we ask the questions normally thought of under the heading “Introduction.” What was going on in Galatia that made Paul write the letter? Which “Galatia” (north or south) are we talking about anyway? When did Paul write the letter? What relation, if any, did the episode have to the so-called “apostolic conference” of Acts 15? Who were Paul's opponents, the shadowy “agitators” who flit to and fro through the undergrowth of the epistle?

One well-worn path through these thickets has been made by those who insist that the agitators are legalists: proto-Pelagians who are trying to persuade the Galatians to seek justification by performing good moral deeds. Among the many problems this view faces is the question, Why then does Paul spend so long, in chapter 5 in particular, warning the Galatians against what looks like antinomianism? It will scarcely do to say (though many have) that he has suddenly focused on a quite different problem, with perhaps a quite different set of opponents or agitators. A different basic analysis seems called for — one that will hold the two emphases of the letter (if that is what they are) in a single larger context, and that will perhaps question whether what appear to our post-Enlightenment and post-Reformation eyes as two separate, almost incompatible, emphases, would have appeared like that to either Paul or his readers. And any such analysis must face the question from the theologian, and from those (such as preachers) who look to theologians' work for help: Of what use are these “introductory” questions for theology? Since two hundred years of research has failed to solve them, is there not something to be said for bracketing them and going straight into reading the text?

A similarly large-scale question to be addressed is, Why does Paul spend so long recounting his early visits to Jerusalem and his meeting with the apostles there? Almost one-quarter of the letter (1:10-2:21, 36 verses out of 149) is devoted to this subject, and there may be further echoes of the subject elsewhere (e.g., 4:25). Many readers have, of course, bypassed this question, regarding material prior to 2:11 as “introduction” and seeing what follows as the beginning of a systematic theological exposition of the doctrine of justification. But Paul at least reckoned it necessary to preface the body of the letter with *this* introduction rather than something else; and, since his introductions are normally good indicators of the main thrust of the letter, we should at least make the attempt to investigate the possible integration of the first two chapters with what follows.

A question that relates to this but has recently taken on a life of its own (particularly since the appearance twenty-five years ago of the commentary by H.-D. Betz) is, To what rhetorical genre does the letter belong?<sup>[3]</sup> Is it deliberative, apologetic, or what?<sup>[4]</sup> It has, I believe, been good for Pauline exegetes to be reminded that Paul wrote from within the wider world of Greco-Roman late antiquity, where there were well-known literary forms and genres that would, in themselves, give off clues as to what the writer thought he (or, less likely, she) was doing. But it is important not to let the literary tail wag the epistolary dog. Paul was an innovator, living in two or more worlds at once, and allowing them — in his own person, his vocation, his style of operation, and his writing — to knock sparks off each other (or, as it might be, to dovetail together in new ways). Consideration of literary genre must always remain in dialogue with the question of what the text actually says. Neither can claim the high ground and dictate to the other. The same is true of the various forms of structural, or structuralist, analysis.

Similar points need to be made about the current burgeoning of social-scientific reading of Paul's letters.<sup>[5]</sup> To be sure, Paul and his readers lived within a social context in which all sorts of pressures and presuppositions operated that are quite unlike those in modern Western society. A good many things that have traditionally been read as abstract ideas or beliefs did in fact come with heavy agendas attached in the areas of social grouping, organization, and culture, and we ignore this at our peril. Equally, recognizing the existence and nonnegotiable importance of the social-scientific dimension of Paul's letters does not mean denying that these same letters set out a train of thought that cannot, or at least cannot *a priori*, be reduced to terms of cryptic social agendas. Just because every word and phrase carries a social context and dimension does not mean that Paul is

not setting out a train of thought, a sequence of ideas. We must beware, here as elsewhere, of false antitheses.

These are exactly the sorts of questions, once more, that will tend to make the theologian impatient. Of what relevance, people sometimes say and often think, are these questions for the major and urgent issues that crowd in upon the church and its proclamation to the world? The answer is that each of them demonstrably affects how we read the key texts for which the theologian or preacher is eager. The question of justification by faith itself is intimately bound up with them. Ernst Käsemann's caustic remark, that those eager for "results" should keep their hands off exegesis, comes uncomfortably to mind.[\[6\]](#)

The influence of social context upon exegesis and theology is most obviously the case with the passage where many will feel that the letter finally "gets going" — namely, 2:11-21. The brief and dense statement about justification in 2:15-21 is part of Paul's description of what happened between Peter and himself at Antioch; we cannot assume, as many have done, that because we think we know ahead of time what Paul meant by "justification," we can deduce that precisely this was the subject of the quarrel (imagining, for instance, that Peter was arguing for a semi-Pelagian position on the question of how people go to heaven after death). Paul's description of the altercation pushes us in quite another direction. The question at issue was not, How can individual sinners find salvation? but rather, Are Christian Jews bound, by the Jewish kosher laws, to eat separately from Christian Gentiles, or are they bound by the gospel to eat at the same table with them? We may and must assume, indeed, that reflection on these questions would not only be influenced, in the minds of Peter and the others, by "pure" intellectual and theological arguments; Paul was asking them to break the habits not only of a lifetime but of a tightly integrated social grouping that had survived, precisely by maintaining these habits, for hundreds of years. The detailed exegetical debates that have swirled around these verses have, as often as not, been caused by a sense that the traditional reading does not quite work, does not quite fit the words that Paul actually used. Attention to the wider context on the one hand, and to theological issues of how the basic concepts function in general and in Paul in particular, may provide fresh ways forward. And if that is so, a Careful reading of this passage in Galatians might well send shock waves through the reading of other Pauline texts, such as Romans 3-4 and Philippians 3.

The long argument of 3:1-5:1, which forms the solid center of the letter, offers almost endless puzzles for the exegete, down to the meaning of individual words and particles and the question of implicit punctuation (the early manuscripts, of course, have for the most part neither punctuation nor breaks between words). And it is here that the larger issues of understanding Galatians, the questions that form the bridge between exegesis, history, and theology, begin to come to light. Where does Paul suppose that he stands in relationship to the covenant that Israel's God made with Abraham? And to that with Moses? And to the Torah, the Jewish law, which, though giving substance to the historical Mosaic covenant, seems to have taken on a life of its own? What, in short, does Paul wish to say about what he himself, surprisingly perhaps, calls "Judaism" (1:13)? Does he see it as a historical sequence of covenants and promises that have now reached their fulfillment in Jesus? Or does he see it as a system to the whole of which the true God is now saying "no" in order to break in, through the gospel, and do a new thing? A further important question, not usually considered sufficiently: Does Paul's actual handling of the Jewish Scriptures, in terms of quotation, allusion, and echo, reflect the view he holds, or do the two stand in tension?[\[7\]](#)

These questions can, of course, only be resolved by detailed examination of the text, verse by verse and line by line. But it is important to notice here the way in which, classically within the discipline of Pauline scholarship, two questions, in principle separable, have in fact been fused together in uncomfortable coexistence. (1) What is Paul's *theological* relationship to Judaism? (2) What is Paul's *historical* relationship to Judaism? The two have often been allowed to spill over into each other. Thus, if Paul is perceived to have criticized "Judaism" (e.g., for its belief in justification by works of the law), it is assumed that he cannot have derived his basic ideas from Judaism — and that therefore the historical origin of his theology is to be found not in Judaism at all, but either in the Christ event as a totally new and essentially non-Jewish irruption into the world or in the pagan systems of religion, cult, and moral philosophy. Conversely, if Paul is perceived to stand in a positive relation to Judaism at the historical level — i.e., if one supposes that Paul's basic thought structure and beliefs remained Jewish after his conversion — it is often assumed that therefore he can have had no real critique of "Judaism." Both of these questions, of course, need integration with wider issues, not least Paul's actual practice in its social setting.

Anyone who wishes thus to skate to and fro between history of religions and theological analysis should be warned that the ice here is dangerously thin. Among the key characteristics of Paul's Judaism were precisely critique from within on the one hand and confrontation with paganism on the other. The fact that Paul criticized some aspects of his native Judaism and that he announced a gospel to the Gentiles does not mean that he broke with Judaism in order to do so. On the contrary; by his own account (to hint for a moment at the solution that I prefer), he claimed to be speaking as a true Jew, criticizing — as did many who made similar claims — those who embraced other construals of Judaism, on the basis that Israel's God had now acted climactically and decisively in Jesus, the Messiah. For the same reason, he was now announcing to all the world that the one true God was addressing, claiming, and redeeming it by the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world.

This discussion should be sufficient to show the way in which the exegetical and theological issues that arise from Galatians 3 and 4 are bound so closely together that it is impossible to separate them. But we should also note the way in which such deliberations have also invoked, from various angles, the wider contexts both of theology and of contemporary meaning. In the church's preaching, the assumption that Paul was straightforwardly distancing himself from "Judaism" has had, notoriously, disastrous effects at social, cultural, political, and theological levels. Equally, if it is supposed for a moment that Paul simply saw himself as a good Jew who merely knew the name of the Messiah, but otherwise had nothing to add to his Jewish heritage, all chance of understanding him is lost. The only way of dealing with Galatians 3 and 4 is for all these issues to be on the table at the same time.

The exegetical problem(s) of Galatians 5 and 6 grow out of, and contribute further to, these questions, but add extra ones of their own. Lulled perhaps by a belief that Paul follows the Enlightenment's division of theory and practice, of theology and ethics, many have simply supposed that the "theology" of the letter is now finished and that all that remains are some guidelines as to how to behave. But to approach the chapters thus is to be further puzzled. Paul does not say quite what (from this perspective) we would expect. His key statements are not of the form "this, then, is how to behave," but instead things like "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law" (5:18) and "those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh" (5:24). The detailed instructions of 6:1-10

(which, if they have a connecting theme, are still not so tightly sewn together as the previous argument) continue to refer not to a general need for the Galatians to behave in a proper fashion, but rather to a particular social situation within which certain styles of behavior are particularly appropriate. And the letter closes with a strong statement of the basic point that, arguably, Paul has been making all through: Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, since what matters is new creation. What, then, does Paul's "ethics," if we should call it that, have to do with the fundamental thrust of the letter as a whole? This exegetical problem is of course of huge interest to theologians, but it will not be solved by broad generalizations that sit loose to the detail of the text, or to its historical and social origins.

## 2. Contributions to Systematic Theology

After this brief review of the exegetical problems of the letter, it is now time to approach the matter from the other end. What theological issues might we hope to see advanced by the study of this text, and what problems face us as we press such questions? We shall maintain, for the purpose of this article, a traditional distinction between "systematic" and "practical" theology, although in today's practice such things are increasingly merged together. In both cases all we can do is to note some possible questions out of the many that could arise, and to suggest some possible answers. The object of the exercise here is to be exemplary rather than in any way exhaustive.

We have already mentioned justification, and the interrelation of theology and ethics (with its subset, the interrelation between justification by faith and life in the Spirit). These are not the major questions that systematic theologians have struggled with throughout the history of the church; indeed, Paul himself is capable of writing letters in which one or both play little or no role. But we cannot imagine Paul writing a letter in which Jesus Christ played no part, or in which the purpose and nature of the one true God were not under consideration; and these are of course the central subject matter of traditional Christian systematic theology.

What, first, does Paul have to say in Galatians that will address the traditional questions about God? Such questions concern, for instance, the identity and description of God, or a god; how knowledge of this god is to be had (whether innate in humans, specially revealed, or whatever); the relationship of this god to the world; the power and operation of the god, not least his or her activity within the world; what one can say about evil in the world, and what (if anything) this god might be doing about it; the nature of human being and existence; the question of appropriate human behavior. Allowing Paul to address these questions from his own angles, we can at once make the following observations, which, though quite obvious, are not always highlighted.

First, the god of whom Paul speaks is without question the one God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This God is the creator of the world, and pagan idols are shams, or demons in disguise. Even if Paul sometimes seems to be saying that the God of Israel has behaved in an unforeseen, perhaps an unpredictable, maybe even an unprincipled, fashion, it is still the God of Israel he is talking about. We should expect Paul therefore to be on the map of first-century Jewish thought about God — and this is indeed the case, though not always in the ways one might imagine. When we glance across at the other Pauline letters, and out into the rest of the NT, we find at this point a remarkable unanimity. Despite two millennia of Jewish protest to the contrary, the NT writers, with Paul leading the way chronologically, firmly believe themselves to be

writing about, worshiping, and following the will of the one God of Israel, and rejecting paganism.

Second, in line with this, Paul believes that this God has a purpose for the created world. More specifically, he believes that “the present evil age” will give way, in God’s good time, to “the age to come,” in which Israel and the world will be redeemed from the power of the false gods. This apocalyptic belief was widespread in Paul’s Jewish world, certainly in sectarian Judaism but also in groups that would not have thought of themselves in that way. This belief is not, or at least not necessarily, “dualistic”; indeed, insofar as it envisages the present world being set to rights rather than being abandoned, it emphasizes the goodness and God-giveness of creation, while allowing fully, perhaps too fully sometimes, for creation’s having been invaded, taken over, distorted, and deceived by forces of evil and destruction. Paul’s understanding of God in Galatians includes the belief that the true God has broken into the world, in the person of Jesus and the power of the Spirit of Jesus, to usher in the long-awaited new age and so to redeem Israel and the world (cf. esp. 1:4). Here too Paul is in fundamental agreement with the other NT writers.

Third, this God is revealed and known in the Jewish Scriptures, in actions within history through which the scriptural promises are fulfilled, and climactically in the coming of the Messiah. The apocalyptic intervention of God in Israel and the world, sweeping aside all that stands in the way of the dawning new day, is paradoxically for Paul the completion, the fulfillment, and the climax of all that God had done and said to and for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>[8]</sup> The dense and difficult discussions of the Jewish law in Galatians owe their very existence to the fact that Paul is unwilling to declare, as many theologians since his day have done, that the Jewish law was shabby or second-rate, or even demonic and dangerous. He is determined to insist, despite the problems he is storing up for later readers, *both* that God gave the law and accomplished his purposes through it *and* that the Galatians must not submit to it, *since it was given a specific role for a certain period of time that has now come to an end*. Eschatology, not religious critique, is what counts. To dissolve the resultant paradox one way or another is a sure way of misunderstanding Paul.

It is sometimes said that Galatians has a negative view of the law, and Romans a positive one; it would be truer to say that in both letters Paul wrestles mightily with this paradox, to address very different situations and contexts. It would be truer, thus, to find a deep compatibility within the two that, when discovered, will reach out further to embrace such other statements as 2 Corinthians 3 and Philippians 3. This eschatological reading of Paul’s understanding of the Scriptures in general and the law in particular is the necessary corrective to any idea that Paul is speaking in the abstract, either about “law” in general or about the Jewish law in a timeless way. His thought is controlled throughout by the sense of God’s purpose within and beyond history, and of where he and his readers belong within that story.

All of this leads, of course, to the second area of major importance for systematic theology to which Galatians might be supposed to make some contribution. What does Paul say about Jesus? Merely collecting the relevant isolated verses does not address the question. We need to discover what role Jesus plays within Paul’s ongoing *arguments*. As I have urged elsewhere, the basic answer for Paul is that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, in whom the promises made to the patriarchs have finally come true.<sup>[9]</sup> In particular, his death has solved the problem of evil that lay heavily upon the world in general and, because of the warnings and curses of the covenant, upon Israel in particular. Though

Paul mentions the death of Jesus dozens of times in his writings, he never says exactly the same thing twice (though the phrase “died for us” or something similar is a regular refrain); he allows the specific needs of each argument to determine what particular meaning he will draw out in each case. Underlying each of these, however, is Paul’s deeper meaning of messiahship, visible in (for instance) Galatians 2:17-21: The Messiah represents his people, so that what is true of him becomes true of them. His death becomes their death, and they find their new life within his. Underlying this, and I believe foundational for Paul’s thinking about what we call “atonement” theology, is the belief that what God does for Israel is done not for Israel only, but for the whole world. Israel’s Messiah is the world’s Lord; the crucified, saving Messiah who brings Jews out of their real exile is the crucified Lord who by the same means rescues pagans from their bondage to nongods. This, I suggest, is the clue to that “incorporative” Christology that is so frequently discussed, and of which 3:23-29 provides such a good, though complex, example.

Hidden within the category of messiahship, in Paul’s construction of it, is a deeper belief about Jesus which, so far as we know, was not held by any non-Christian Jews in relation to any of the would-be Messiahs who make their brief appearances in the tragic story of first-century Judaism. Drawing on the occasional but important biblical statements about the Messiah being the adopted son of Israel’s God (e.g., Pss. 2:7; 89:27; 2 Sam. 7:14). Paul describes Jesus as the unique son of God, sent from God to effect the divine purpose — i.e., the purpose that in Scripture Israel’s God reserves to himself — of redeeming his people and thereby saving the whole world from destructive demonic powers. Thus, almost casually within this letter, written within at most twenty-five years of Jesus’ crucifixion, we come upon what with hindsight we may see as the first steps toward trinitarian language (4:1-11). The God whom Christians worship is the Jewish God, the God of Abraham, of the exodus (exodus language, and the retelling of the exodus story, permeate this context), and of Wisdom (the figure of “wisdom” is of course in some Jewish texts — e.g., Wis. 10:15-21 — a way of talking about the God of the exodus); but this God is now to be known as the God who sends the Son, and who then sends the Spirit of his Son. And it is to this God alone that the Galatians must give full allegiance; otherwise they will slide back to a state similar to what they were in before. You must either have the triune God, Paul is saying, or you must have a form of paganism.

This early form of proto-trinitarian theology thus appears *as a variant within Jewish monotheism*, not a form of crypto-paganism. Exactly like classic Jewish monotheism, it stands opposed both to paganism and to dualism. Just as Israel’s God made himself known as such in the exodus, fulfilling the promises to Abraham and calling Israel his son, so this same God has now revealed himself fully and finally in the new exodus of Jesus’ death and resurrection, fulfilling the promises to Abraham in their widest sense, challenging and defeating the pagan powers that had kept humanity as a whole under lock and key. To go back to allowing one’s self-understanding, corporately or individually, to be determined by ethnic boundary markers rather than by the new life given in the Messiah is therefore to embrace again a form of paganism, however paradoxical this may seem when what one thought one was doing was taking on the yoke of the Jewish Torah. A good case can be made for seeing this critique underlying many of Paul’s other statements about the Torah, not least in Romans.

Talking about God and Jesus in relation to Galatians has thus inevitably embroiled us in talking about the plight of Israel and the world. Paul, in this letter and everywhere else, takes it as axiomatic that all human beings are under the power and rule of sin, and that

the Jewish Torah, so far from releasing people from this state, merely exacerbates it. It is quite wrong to say, as has often been done in recent scholarship, that Paul's thinking about Jesus preceded his thinking about the plight from which people needed rescuing. To be sure, the revelation of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus gave new shape and direction to his thinking, on this and on everything else; but the pre-Damascus Paul was well aware that there was a "problem" to be addressed. This was not, perhaps, the problem of an unquiet conscience wished on him by theologians from Augustine to Luther and beyond, but it was, certainly, the problem of the pagan world under the power of evil, and the problem that so much of the Jewish world seemed hell-bent on compromising with paganism. For himself as a zealous Pharisee, there was the very specific problem that, even if he and some others were "blameless concerning the law" (Phil. 3:6), Israel's God had so far not acted within their history to send the Messiah, to fight the decisive battle against evil, to reveal his "righteousness" — that is, his faithfulness to the covenant promises with Israel, to redeem his people, to judge the wicked world, and to set up the long-awaited kingdom of justice and peace. That was the problem the pre-Christian Paul possessed. His conversion deepened it, pointing at himself the accusing finger that he would formerly have pointed at almost everyone else; but it did not create a problem out of nothing.

The solution Paul embraced, which emerges clearly though briefly in Galatians, to be elaborated in different situations in the other letters, can be summed up in two closely related words: "Christ", "Spirit." In Jesus the Messiah Israel's God has dealt with sin and established the new world, the "age to come," calling the Gentiles to belong to his renewed people. Paul's theology of the cross, which receives repeated emphasis in Galatians, stresses both the solidarity of Jesus with his people and the unique weight of sin and its effects which were borne by Jesus himself. Though, as we saw, Paul never articulates a single "theology of atonement," his many rich statements of Jesus' death, in this letter and throughout his works, together form a many-sided doctrine that must be seen as central to his whole thinking.

One of the many ways Paul can refer to this whole achievement of Jesus is in terms of Jesus' "faithfulness" to the covenant; this, I think, is the correct interpretation of the much-controverted *pistis Christou* problem.<sup>[10]</sup> As with so many issues, linguistic study by itself will not solve the problem of whether, when Paul says *pistis Christou*, he means "faith *in* the Messiah" or "the faith(fullness) *of* the Messiah." Both ideas play a role in his thought. In Galatians 2:16, after all, he does say "we believed in the Messiah, Jesus," and in Romans 5:15-19 the "obedience" of Jesus the Messiah is the key category that sums up all that Paul said about Jesus' death in 3:21-26 (Phil. 2:5-8 confirms that this is the correct interpretation). Romans is, indeed, the key to understanding the concept; in Romans 3:1-8 the problem that faces God, as well as the whole human race, is that Israel has been "faithless" to the commission to be the light of the world (cf. 2:17-24). How then is God to reveal his own covenant faithfulness? Paul's answer is that God's faithfulness is revealed in and through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, the representative Israelite. Confusion arises not only because this is not the train of thought readers of Romans in much church tradition have been expecting — it is too Jewish by half for that — but also because Paul also says, sometimes in the same breath, as in Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:16; 3:22, that the beneficiaries of this covenant faithfulness of the Messiah are precisely those who in their turn "believe" or "are faithful."

By the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, this God has called and is calling Jews and Gentiles alike to belong to the one family of Abraham, and equipping them to believe the

gospel (such faith being the one identifying badge of membership within this family) and to live in love one to another and in witness to God's love to the world around. Like the texts from Qumran, Paul's letters articulate an inaugurated eschatology in which the new age has already begun but is yet to be completed. "We by the spirit and by faith wait for the hope of righteousness" (5:5). The Spirit is the power of the new age breaking into the present, but future hope remains vital for the complete picture. This, though briefly stated in Galatians, points toward wider statements of the same theology elsewhere in Paul (e.g., 1 Cor. 15) and indeed, though sometimes differently stated, in the rest of the NT. For Paul, of course, as most Christian theology has always insisted, the Spirit is the same Spirit through whom God spoke and acted in the history of Israel; the key difference in the new thing that has come about through Jesus is that the Spirit is now poured out on all God's people, Jew and Gentile alike.

God, Jesus, Spirit, plight, and solution: the final question the systematic theologian might want to put to Galatians would be about theology and ethics. Here again the letter restates the question, and answers it in its own way. Earlier readings of Galatians, particularly in the Reformation tradition, had so emphasized the wrongness of "justification by works," understanding that phrase in a Pelagian or Arminian sense, as to make it difficult to articulate any sense of moral obligation or moral effort within the Christian. There are signs that Paul faced similar problems (e.g., Rom. 3:7-8; 6:1,15), but this does not seem to be why, in the final two chapters of Galatians, he provides such a lengthy discourse on Christian behavior (the term "ethics" is itself loaded, belonging already to the too-sharp distinction between theory and practice of which I spoke earlier). Though he undoubtedly wants his converts to avoid what he calls "the works of the flesh" and to exhibit what he calls "the fruit of the Spirit," the actual argument in which those phrases and the things they denote occurs is more subtle than simply exhortation. It has various overtones and echoes of that classic passage on the law, Romans 7, and may, like that passage, be deliberately doing several things at the same time (see, e.g., Gal. 5:17: "spirit and flesh fight against each other, so that what you wish you cannot do"). It is an argument about the law, and about how, though the law is God's law, it cannot give the thing to which it points, and about how, nevertheless, those who discover that to which it points are in line with what the law intended, even though they may be neither possessors nor, in its boundary-marking sense, keepers of it.

He is saying, in effect, "If you insist on embracing the Jewish law, and particularly on getting circumcised, you are declaring that you belong in the realm of the 'flesh'; but if you go and live in that realm, you must look at the company you will be keeping, and the sort of life into which you will be drawn." (The only sort of "fleshly" behavior he thinks the Galatians are actually exhibiting is factional fighting, as 5:15,26 suggests; these angry divisions in their community, he is saying in effect, are a sign that they are in fact living according to the flesh, confirming the analysis he is offering of their desire to get circumcised.) The pagans who live in that fashion are heading for destruction, but those who live and walk by the Spirit, whose first fruit is love, find that although they are not behaving this way in order to conform to the Jewish law, so that they may thereby be defined as ethnically the people of God, they are not condemned by the law. "Against such there is no law" (5:23). With this we are back once more at 2:17. Just because we have come out from under the rule of the Torah through baptism and faith, through dying and rising with Christ, this does not mean that the Torah (by which Paul presumably means the God who gave the Torah) is displeased with us. That Paul is working with this same train of thought is indicated in 5:24: those who belong to the Messiah have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (compare 2:19-20; Rom 7:4-6).

“Ethics,” then, understood as Paul’s arguments about Christian behavior, function within Galatians not as an appendix to “theology,” nor simply (as in Luther) as a *tertius usus legis*,<sup>[11]</sup> nor as an awkward concession after an antilegalistic “justification by faith,” but rather as part of the inner working of the gospel itself. Through the gospel events of Jesus’ messianic death and resurrection, the God of Israel delivers Israel and the world from the rule of evil and the “powers” who perpetrate it. Through the Spirit-inspired proclamation of the good news of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, this same God calls into being the redeemed family he had promised to Abraham, whose distinguishing mark, over against those of Judaism, is “the faithfulness of Jesus” — i.e., Jesus’ own faithfulness, reflected now in the faith/faithfulness (would Paul have distinguished these two?) of Christians. Precisely because this family is the Christ-and-Spirit people, they are set free from the destructive powers and solidarities (including social solidarities) of evil, and are under the obligation of freedom, namely, to sustain this life by Spirit-given love for one another. That they are free to do so is given in the fact that they have been crucified with the Messiah (5:24; 6:14; 2:20). This is Paul’s answer in Galatians to the question of “ethics,” and it conforms well to his other similar treatments elsewhere.

### 3. Galatians, the Church, and the World

What then has Galatians to say to the large debates that concern Christian theologians today, living often at the interface of church and world? Again, we can present some sample questions only, with some tendentious possible answers.

The question that hangs over all contemporary intellectual discourse in the Western world concerns the very foundations of all knowing and being. The great project of the last two or three hundred years, sometimes known as “modernity,” has given way in many quarters to “postmodernity.” Modernism claimed to know things objectively, at least in principle; postmodernism applies a ruthlessly suspicious understanding to all such claims, showing in case after case that, as Nietzsche argued a century ago, claims to knowledge are in fact claims to power. The correlate of this was that modernism claimed that there was a real world independent of the knower. Postmodernism collapses this claim; all we are left with are the prejudices of the would-be knower.

Likewise, modernism told a great story of progress, enlightenment, and development, and insisted that this story — in which, of course, the Western world of the eighteenth century and subsequently was the hero — be imposed on the rest of the world, in a secular version of the Christian missionary enterprise that was burgeoning at exactly that time. Postmodernity declares that all such large stories — “metanarratives” is the word usually employed to denote the stories that stand behind or above the smaller stories people tell and live — are destructive and enslaving, and must be deconstructed. All we are left with are the various smaller stories by which individual communities order their lives, and even they are constantly under suspicion.

What about the individual himself or herself? Modernity vaunted the great individual, the lonely and lofty “I” — the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. Postmodernity has deconstructed this figure, too. Each of us, we are now reminded, is a shifting mass of impulses and feelings, without a stable center that can be held up and inspected. Impressions to the contrary are just so much posturing. These are the main elements of postmodernity, which filter through into popular consciousness in thousands of ways even among those who know nothing of the technical terms of the discussion.

How can a Christian theologian, with Galatians open before her or him, address these questions? Galatians is, after all, concerned with truth (2:5, 14; 4:16; 5:7); with claims and counterclaims to knowledge, including knowledge of God (e.g., 4:8-9); with a great story that began with Abraham, climaxed in Jesus the Messiah, and is moving outward to embrace the world (3:6-4:11; etc.). The most fundamental answer, I believe, is that in Galatians Paul is concerned precisely with the breaking of the bonds of slavery and the setting free of captives. He retells the exodus narrative, in 4:1-7 in particular, showing how in Jesus the Messiah and by the Spirit those who were enslaved to nongods have been liberated (4:8; cf. 1:4). The story he tells certainly is a grand overarching narrative, beginning with Israel and reaching out to embrace the world, but it is a story that leaves no human being, organization, or ethnic group in a position of power over others. It is the Jewish story, but it is not the typical Jew who says, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me." This is the story precisely of how those who were kept as second-class citizens are now welcomed in on equal terms. This is a metanarrative like no other.

The same text (2:19-21) is Paul's answer to those who would see the individual deconstructed into various shifting forces and impulses. Paul goes further. The individual, especially individuals who pride themselves on their status, must die in order to live. And the new life they are given is not their own, is nothing to be proud of, is nothing to give them status over others; it is the life of the crucified and risen Messiah. This is an individuality like no other.

And the result of the gospel is that those who are liberated from slavery have come "to know God" (4:9) — or rather, as Paul quickly modifies it, to be known by God (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-6). Just as the Israelites were granted a fresh revelation of the true God in the exodus, so the events of the new exodus have truly revealed this same God in a new way. But the whole idea of "knowledge," and with it of truth itself, is hereby set on a new footing. No longer is it the brittle and arrogant knowledge of the post-Enlightenment world, making the hard sciences its primary paradigm and "relationships" simply a matter of "feeling." Nor is it the soft and fuzzy knowledge of the postmodern world, where "feeling" and "impression" are all that there is. The primary knowledge, declares Paul, is the knowledge of God — God's knowledge of you, and yours of God in grateful answer. This is a relationship, one that produces the deepest feelings ever known, but it is true knowledge nonetheless — both in that it is knowledge of the truth and in that it constitutes the truest mode of knowing. All other knowing is first relativized and then, when and as appropriate, reaffirmed in new ways from that point. This is a knowing like no other, because it is knowledge of a reality like no other.

This account is, of course, so brief as to be no more than a signpost. But it makes the point that the issues Paul is addressing in Galatians can provide us with starting points to address the major issues of our own day. The opponents, after all, whoever they were, were seeking to establish a way of being, a grand story, a form of knowing, a type of identity, upon the converts. The pressure to get circumcised was precisely an insistence on establishing one kind of ethnic or para-ethnic identity over against others. Paul deconstructs these claims, showing that they themselves are dehumanizing, based on "the flesh." In particular, he shows — a point that must be reemphasized both in the clash between modernity and postmodernity and in the dawning of a new millennium — that the single moment by which history was changed forever was the moment when Jesus the Messiah died and rose again. Modernity, postmodernity, and various sorts of millennial speculation all offer their own counter-eschatology, but to take Galatians seriously is to

insist that the real turnaround, the real moment of liberation, occurred not with some great cultural shift in the Western world of the last few centuries, but when Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, having “given himself for our sins” (1:4).

Of course, it is fatally easy for Christians to embrace Paul’s gospel as a new way of being in control of the world, a new power game, a new way of establishing one’s identity as a matter of pride. To what extent this has happened and does happen in different churches and their claims is a question that cannot be ignored. But the key thing about Paul’s gospel is not power, but love: the Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20); “faith working through love” is the sign of true life (5:6); love is the first fruit of the divine Spirit, a love that leads to mutual service (5:22,13). Paul offers no encouragement to those who want to go back to modernity. He agrees with the postmodern critique of all human pride; but when all is said and done, God is creating in Christ a new world built on love and characterized by love. Postmodernity preaches a stern and judging law against all human pride, but those who walk by the Spirit “are not under the law” (5:18).

One of the great crises in the contemporary world, which brings to a head the sense of uncertainty within the formerly all-too-certain Western world, is the situation of global security on the one hand and long-running tribal or geographical conflict on the other. A century ago many in the West believed that war was a necessary part of human development, leading through conflict at the societal level to the survival of the fittest, on a loose analogy with Darwin’s theory of evolution. Two world wars and hundreds of smaller ones later, few believe this anymore; and the “Cold War” that hung over the world for nearly half a century reflected this growing uncertainty. But the modernist paradigm still remained in place, and when the West effectively won the Cold War, a victory symbolized by the destruction of the Berlin Wall, there was a widespread assumption that this would mean the worldwide triumph of so-called “Western” values. What has happened, of course, is very different. The Balkans, the Middle East, many African countries, and many other parts of the world are a grim reminder that hatred and violence based on tribe, race, and geography have not disappeared overnight, and remain deep-rooted. The world is full of evidence for Paul’s warning: “If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not destroyed by each other” (5:15).

It will not do simply to say that into this world must be spoken the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel Paul articulates and defends in Galatians. This is of course true, but what will it say to the Serb and the Croat, to the Tutsi and the Hutu, to the Palestinian and the Israeli? Will it simply say, If only you would all believe in Jesus, none of this would be necessary? (If it did, it might find further problems: the Serb and the Croat, the Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland, all in theory believe in Jesus; and to modify the statement to say “if only you would believe *in Jesus the same way I do*” would stand revealed as a new sort of tribalism.) The most powerful statement it can make must be made symbolically, through the coming together in a single worshiping family, eating at the same table, of all those who belong to Jesus the Messiah, despite their apparently irreconcilable racial, tribal, or other tensions. That is the powerful message of Galatians 2:15-21. That is a first step.

But second, the gospel as articulated in Galatians points to the hard double-task described brilliantly in a recent book by Miroslav Volf.<sup>[12]</sup> Himself a Croatian, reflecting on the conflict in his native land, Volf wrestles mightily with the gospel imperative toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and inclusion, on the one hand, and the absolute need to name

and expose evil, and to deal with it, on the other. One cannot have the embrace of reconciliation without also having the exclusion of evil. The older liberal agendas that insisted only on the former, and the tribal agendas that name as “evil” all that the other tribe does or seeks to do, must be challenged by a larger vision, a harder agenda. And those who read Galatians must, I suggest, be in the forefront of those presenting this agenda and vision to governments and policy makers, often at a loss as they are to know where to turn for guidance now that the old rules of modernity have let them down. The church must not only symbolize in its own life God’s victory over all the powers of evil, the powers that keep peoples locked in their own separate stories, fighting all others. The church must present the world and its rulers with ways of “excluding” that will lead to “embrace” — just as Paul, confronting Peter and the others at Antioch, and the opponents in Galatia, named as clearly as he could the antigospel forces to which he saw them succumbing, with the aim that all those who named the name of Jesus should be able to share in the one family meal.

The particular conflict in our world to which Galatians must be addressed is, of course, that which disfigures to this day the land of Jesus’ birth. The story is so complex, presenting analysts with a huge tangled ball of wool to unravel before a coherent solution can even be thought of, that it is presumptuous, almost dangerous, even to raise the question in a context like this. [\[13\]](#) Yet there are two points on which Galatians would insist, and which could have a profound effect on the way people regard the situation and act, individually and corporately, in relation to it.

The first is the insistence, once again, that all Jesus’ followers belong together in worship and table fellowship. In the Middle East, at the moment, it is sadly true that most indigenous Christianity seems to be dying out. The old monasteries, many of which have maintained unbroken their traditions of worship for fifteen hundred years or more, are almost empty, and many have been demolished by hostile authorities. [\[14\]](#) The small Palestinian Christian communities, which trace their roots back to the first century and have lived in the land ever since, find themselves caught between the self-righteous “settlers” on the one hand — Paul would, I think, have called them “unsettlers” — and the increasingly strident Islamic militants on the other. Many have simply left, and do not expect to return. The tiny Israeli Christian communities live, theoretically, in daily risk of losing their citizenship for renouncing their Judaism. There are reports of many meeting in secret. But there are few, very few, places where Israeli and Palestinian Christians can meet and worship together and share in trusting fellowship. And the immigrant Christians — the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, with their multiple subdivisions — are no better, but instead play similar territorial and other battles with one another. How can one even glance at Galatians and shrug one’s shoulders at this situation? Jesus is not Lord where churches divide along ethnic, tribal, or geographical lines. That was “the truth of the gospel” for which Paul contended in the first century, and it remains the truth of the gospel today.

The second point is that, despite the extravagant claims of some, there is no biblical warrant whatsoever for the suggestion that the reestablishment of the state of Israel in the 1940s constituted the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that, as such, it should be supported by right-thinking Christians. Galatians is one of the biblical books that most strongly gives the lie to this. Paul is at pains throughout to distance himself from any geographical or territorial claim; these things are done away with in Christ. “The present Jerusalem is in bondage with her children; but the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is the mother of us all” (4:25-26). Nor is this a mere assertion. Paul’s whole argument is

that “the Israel of God” (6:16) consists of all those, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe in Jesus the Messiah.<sup>[15]</sup> “If you belong to the Messiah, you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.” How then can the “inheritance” of the “heirs” be translated back into terms of a few square miles of sacred land, kept for the descendants of Abraham “according to the flesh”?<sup>[16]</sup>

The greatest question, of course, which hangs over all Christian thinking and speaking in our day, and which poses an equal challenge to systematic and practical theology, is: How can we speak truly and appropriately of God within a world that has forgotten most of what it thought it knew about God and has distorted much of the rest? And what weight, what “authority,” can such speaking command?

We may remind ourselves of the problem. Most people rooted in contemporary Western culture assume, unless they have been specifically shaken out of this way of thinking, that the word “God” refers, more or less univocally, to a being who is detached from the world, living at some great ontological remove (most know that Christians and others do not believe in God as a being literally “up in the sky,” but most assume a similar detachment in some other mode of being). They then tend to assume that when Christians talk about God becoming human in Jesus, about God addressing individuals or the world, or about God active within the world, this must be a matter of God’s “intervening” from a distance. They assume, moreover, that all religions are basically trying to be about the same thing; this idea is frequently supposed to be a very recent innovation or discovery, but was of course the common coin of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and indeed has roots much further back in some aspects of classical paganism.

And they assume that this general thing — which may as well be called “religion” for want of a better term, though that word is so over- and ill-used that one wonders if a moratorium would not be a good idea — has basically failed. It has collapsed, so it is thought by those who think about these things, under the critique of Marx, who said that talking about God was what those in power did to keep the rest quiet; of Darwin, who said that we were all descended from the apes anyway, and that the world could be understood successfully without a creating or sustaining God, since it works on the basis of competition; of Freud, who said that God-language was projection of a latent father image; and of Nietzsche, who despised Christianity for being wet and wimpish while also exposing its truth claims as power games. Of course, as C. S. Lewis used to say, if people really *thought* about these things, it might become clear that the attacks, though sometimes interesting and important, are not ultimately valid. But most people in western Europe, and many in North America, do not think very hard about such issues. They assume, not least because the media tell them so, that “God” and “religion” are somehow out of date. Within the postmodern world it is feelings that count, not arguments; and there is a general feeling, widespread in much (though not all) Western culture, that all that sort of thing has had its day — certainly in any form that the culture has known for the last several hundred years.

Of course, this is not the only side of the story. New Age movements have brought “religion” of a sort back into fashion; and the oldest form of Christianity in Britain at least, that of the Celts, who evangelized much of Britain before the Romans arrived and effectively took over, has had a revival as well. Celtic Christianity was earthier, less authoritarian, more in tune with the created order than the Roman variety, and this has made its appeal powerful. But at a time when hardly anybody thinks about the niceties of theology (they are prepared to think about nuclear physics, about economics, about

anything the media bombard them with, but not usually about theology), it is difficult for many to sort out the difference between the God-language of the New Age movement and the God-language of mainstream Christianity.

The God of whom Paul speaks in Galatians, of whom I have already written at the start of the previous section, is not a private God, to be worshiped by initiates but kept secret from the outside world. This God must be spoken of in the public arena. This God claims the allegiance of all, because this God is both creator and lover of all. This God is the reality of which the idols of the world are the parodies (4:8-11). But how can one speak of this God without being instantly misunderstood? If one uses the word “God,” people will suppose one is speaking of the detached, deist God of popular supposition. If one even pronounces the name and title “Jesus Christ,” one will at once send half one’s hearers off down the wrong street. Among those to whom the phrase is not simply a meaningless swearword, many will simply hear it as another signal of that “religion” which is assumed to be out of date and irrelevant.

Paul, we know from Acts, faced similar problems, and he got around them by telling the story of Jesus, perhaps with visual aids to show what he was talking about (“You before whose eyes Jesus the Messiah was publicly portrayed as crucified” [3:1]; did Paul draw one of the first-ever “crucifixes” as an aid to evangelism?).<sup>[17]</sup> The story itself, climaxing with Jesus’ death and resurrection, and his enthronement as Lord of the world, carries its own power (Rom. 1:17; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). The story must be told faithfully, accurately, and Jewishly (it only makes the sense it does in its Jewish context).<sup>[18]</sup> However, even this needs a hearing. Paul seems to have obtained his not least because of his original appearance in Galatia, which aroused their sympathy and showed them that he was already living by a different way when compared to other teachers and wandering philosophers they might have met.<sup>[19]</sup> Paul was *embodying* the message he was announcing. The story of Jesus was being recapitulated through his own actual life — which was why, Paul would quickly have said, the power of the Spirit of Jesus was at work when he told them of the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world. If there is a lesson for Christians today in all this, it is the one that is both obvious and also still sorely needed. Those who name the name of Jesus must be seen to be living the life that results from worshiping the true God. Their own genuine humanity, resulting from worshiping the God in whose image they are made, must be recognizable. The fruits of the Spirit, when we meet them, are impressive, particularly in our cynical age. If we are to get a hearing to tell the story of Jesus, this is the only way to start.

But there is more. The church must be active at the places where the world is in pain. The church must be in the forefront of work in the world to alleviate hunger and poverty, to remit major and unpayable international debt, to make peace and prevent war. The church must be on the front line in the fight against crime and the fight for proper punishment and rehabilitation of those convicted of crime, as well as for the rights of the victims of crime. Christians must be active not only in advocacy of the moral standards in which all are treated as full human beings, not as toys or as trash, but also to stand alongside and help those who, having been treated like that themselves, treat others the same way because that is the only way they know. In these and many, many other ways, those who would tell the story of Jesus must first live it, bearing a measure of the world’s pain as they do so.

In the process, though the words of the story remain important and ultimately nonnegotiable, the actions themselves will speak. They will provide, as it were, the

grammar book and the dictionary that will enable people to understand that when we speak of God today we are not using the word in the normally accepted sense; that when we speak of Jesus we speak of a real human being in whom the living God was and is personally present, in whom the love of God was fully acted out. If the story is told with those lexical aids to back it up, it will be understood. People may not like it, but the message will be plain. And to those who respond, the challenge will come to continue with this God: “Then, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. But now that you know God, or rather have come to be known by God, how can you turn back?” (4:8-9).

#### 4. Galatians: Exegesis and Theology

We have now arrived back at the point where the detailed historical exegesis of Galatians and the wider theological reflections may, in some measure and very briefly, be joined together. My overall contention, as will by now be obvious, is that they belong closely with each other, need each other, and are mutually illuminating. It will take an entire commentary to demonstrate this point, but four major features may at least be outlined in conclusion.

First let me raise a point of method. Galatians offers itself to the reader as a text emerging from, referring constantly to, and intending to have serious effect upon a highly complex and many-sided social situation. At no point can we abstract Paul’s ideas from this setting; and this, within an incarnational religion such as Christianity, has almost always been and is undoubtedly a strength, not a weakness. To suppose that one must boil off doctrinal abstractions from the particularities of the letters in order to gain material that can be usable in different situations is at best a half-truth; it always runs the risk of implying that the “ideas” are the reality, and that the community in which they are embodied and embedded (Paul’s community on the one hand, ours on the other) is a secondary matter. Those who, like the present writer, work as theologians within actual ecclesial communities for which they have pastoral, organizational, and teaching responsibilities know otherwise. It is in taking seriously Paul’s struggles with authority, with other apostles, with agitators in a congregation, with division and reconciliation within a community, that we discover what the “doctrines” he seems to hold actually mean. This in no way reduces theology to sociology. Nor does it suggest that theological argument is shadowboxing, pretending to reason something out when what is going on is in fact disguised power play. It is a way of doing justice to Paul’s intention not least, but not only, in the first two chapters of Galatians: to enable his readers to understand what the gospel is, what his own relation to it is, and where they, his converts, belong on this map.

This intention, second, is expressed in Paul’s major concern throughout the letter but particularly in its central two chapters, 3 and 4. Here he tells the story of Israel, the people of God, as the story of Abraham and exodus. God made promises to Abraham, promises that (as in Gen. 15, to which, here and in Rom. 4, Paul refers repeatedly) envisaged God’s future rescue of his people from Egypt. God has now fulfilled those promises, Paul says, in Jesus Christ. His aim throughout is to persuade his hearers to understand themselves within this narrative structure, which I have elsewhere characterized as “covenantal.” He wants them, that is, to think of themselves as the children of Abraham, the heirs of the entire Jewish narrative.<sup>[20]</sup> A good example is 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, written of course to an ex-pagan congregation; the foundation of the argument is Paul’s reference to the wilderness generation as “our fathers.”

His deep-rooted negation of the Jewish Torah as the mode or badge of membership in this family is, of course, the central problem he faces, and hence the central problem of the letter; this rejection of the Mosaic covenant has influenced many contemporary writers to deny that Paul held any “covenantal” theology at all.<sup>[21]</sup> This, I am persuaded, is a radical mistake. Paul utterly discarded the ethnic and Torah-based shape of Judaism in which he had been so deeply involved before his conversion, and to this extent his theology is radical, apocalyptic, innovative, dialectic, and so forth. But all this is held within his conviction that the God whom he now knows in Jesus Christ and the Spirit is the God of Abraham, whose purposes have now taken a decisive turn in which the character of the community as defined by Torah is left behind (not, it should be noted, criticized as theologically repugnant). He tells the story of Abraham, Israel, Moses, Jesus, and himself—Paul himself becomes a character in the narrative, since he is the unique apostle to the Gentiles, a point that is foundational for Galatians—in order to help his readers understand where they in turn belong within the same narrative.

Because the letter indicates this as a very basic aim of Paul all through, I am persuaded that he has not simply introduced Abraham, and allusions to other biblical passages and stories, in order to meet points raised by his opponents. Indeed, even if his opponents had never mentioned Abraham, perhaps especially if they had not, Paul would have wanted to tell this story to address and controvert the point the agitators were urging, that Gentiles who wanted to join the people of Israel had to be circumcised. His way of telling the story of Abraham makes it abundantly clear that the promises God made to the patriarch cannot be fulfilled through Torah. According to Galatians 3:10-14, God promised Abraham a worldwide family, but the Torah presents Israel, the promise bearers, with a curse. God deals with the curse in the death of Jesus, so that the promise may flow through to the world, renewing the covenant with Israel as well. According to 3:15-22, God promised Abraham a single worldwide family, but the Torah would forever keep Jews and Gentiles in separate compartments (exactly the problem of 2:11-21 and, we may assume, of the Galatian congregations). God has done in Christ and by the Spirit what the Torah could not do (3:21-22; 4:1-7; cf. Rom. 8:3-4), so that there now exists the single promised multiethnic monotheistic family, God’s “sons” and heirs.<sup>[22]</sup> According to Galatians 4:21-31, insofar as Abraham has two families, they can be characterized as the slave family and the free; and it is the multiethnic people defined by faith, the people formed through Christ and the Spirit, who are the Isaac children, the free people of God. Paul has other ways of telling the story of Abraham and his family as well (e.g., Rom. 9:6-10:4), but it is this narrative, however articulated, that provides the theological grounding for the formation and maintenance of the community he believes himself called to address.

Third, we can now see that the regular theological dichotomies that have been used in debates about Paul for the last hundred years are in fact inadequate to the task. Schweitzer and Wrede insisted on “being in Christ” as a more central category than “justification by faith.” Sanders, similarly, prioritized “participationist” categories in Paul over “juristic” ones. More recently, Martyn and others have urged “apocalyptic” readings of Paul against “covenantal” ones. Granted that these broad-brush categories are imprecise, there is clearly a strong feeling among Western readers of Paul that one is faced again and again with different kinds of emphases, which may not always be strictly compatible. This works out in Romans, for instance, in terms of the playing off of one of its clear sections (chaps. 1-4, 5-8, 9-11, 12-16) against the others.

I believe, and I hope that detailed exegesis will support this hypothesis, that in each case these dichotomies have failed to grasp the more fundamental structures of Paul’s

socially contextualized and literarily structured theological thought. Once we grasp the covenantal narrative that Paul sets out in Galatians as the world he invites his readers to inhabit, we discover that these elements — which appear disparate when seen from a post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment, or postromantic viewpoint — belong together within the much richer tapestry he is weaving. The story of the new exodus in Christ, and the homeward journey of God's people led by the Spirit, provides the setting for incorporative and participationist language to have its full meaning and weight simultaneously with the juristic meaning of justification. Because of sin, and the distortion of Torah by the people to whom it was given, the fulfillment of the covenant cannot but come about as an apocalyptic event, declaring God's judgment on what has gone before and God's new creation of what is now beginning. But when the dust settles and God's renewed people look around them, they discover that this apocalyptic event is indeed the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. This is how God is faithful to the covenant. It will take all of the letter to the Romans to set this out in full detail and most of the rest of the NT to explore the point from a variety of other angles, but the major components of the argument are already complete in Galatians.

What, fourthly and finally, about justification by faith? This is the subject that most expositors of Galatians have found to be central to the argument of the letter itself. But what is it actually about? There is no space here for a full exposition of the doctrine. Rather, I wish to pose the question thus: What particular emphases does Galatians, read historically and exegetically, provide in this central matter?

The first point we have already noted. Paul's initial introduction of the topic is embedded within, and seems to be the sharp edge of, the question that was at issue between himself and Peter in Antioch and, we may assume, bears some close relation to the dispute between himself and the "agitators" in Galatia. This was not the general, abstract theological issue of, shall we say, how to go to heaven when one dies. It was not part of a theory of soteriology, understood in this way. It was the question of whether Christian Jews ought or ought not eat with Christian Gentiles. In other words, it addressed the question of the *identity* and *demarcation* of the people of God, now redefined in Jesus Christ — a question that is both sociological, in the sense that it has to do with a community and its behavior, which can itself be understood by the proper application of sociological methods, and theological, in the sense that this community believes itself to be the people of a God who has drawn up quite clear conditions precisely for its communal life.

Paul's answer to the question is complex and dense, but its heart is simple. Because he, and all Jewish Christians, have "died to the law" through sharing the messianic death of Jesus, their identity now is not defined by or in terms of the Jewish law, but rather in terms of the risen life of the Messiah. The boundary marker of this messianic community is therefore not the set of observances that mark out Jews from Gentiles, but rather Jesus the Messiah, the faithful one, himself; and the way in which one is known as a member of this messianic community is thus neither more nor less than (Christian) faith.

Although this account (Gal. 2:15-21) is not itself about soteriology per se, it carries, of course, huge soteriological implications. If one has already died and risen with the Messiah, and if one has been grasped by the grace of God and enabled to come to faith and (by implication, brought into daylight in) baptism (3:26-28), then one is marked out thereby precisely as a member of the renewed, eschatological community of Israel, one for whom the act of God in the Messiah has dealt finally with one's sinful past, one who is

assured of God's salvation on the Last Day. But the point of justification by faith, in this context, is not to stress this soteriological aspect, but to insist that all those who share this Christian faith are members of the same single family of God in Christ *and therefore belong at the same table*. This is the definite, positive, and of course deeply polemical thrust of the first-ever exposition of the Christian doctrine of justification by faith.

I have already provided a summary account of Galatians 3 and 4, seen as a narrative, or part of a larger implicit narrative, about the promises of God to Abraham and the way in which these are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. It remains here simply to note the way in which justification emerges within this structure of thought, which itself is grounded in Paul's sense of the community he is addressing.

His emphasis throughout is that the true people whom God promised to Abraham are defined by their faith. He is not here concerned with how one enters the family, but with how, once one has entered, the family is then defined, assured of its status as God's people. The arguments in chapter 3 about the curse of the law, and how it is exhausted in the death of Jesus, and about the apparent tension between the promise and the law, are not primarily abstract statements about the atonement on the one hand and about the existential or spiritual superiority or preferability of trusting promises rather than keeping moral codes on the other. No doubt they contribute to discussions at these more abstract levels, but such matters were not what Paul was basically talking about. And in the great climactic passage at the end of chapter 3 and the start of chapter 4, the question of justification is set within the narrative about slavery and sonship — that is, the exodus story, in which the key interlocking categories for the present status of Christians are incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. These are not “about” something other than justification. Rather, justification by faith itself, in the letter to Galatia, is all about the definition of the community of the people of the true God.

This is, of course, a puzzling conclusion for those who have learned the word “justification” as a technical term for the way in which someone becomes a Christian. But it is noticeable that when Paul discusses that question (e.g., 1 Thess. 1), he does not use the language of justification. He talks about the way in which, through the gospel proclamation of the crucified and risen Jesus as Messiah and Lord of the world, God's Spirit is at work to bring people to faith, a faith specifically in the God now known in this Jesus. *This process, though, is not what Paul means by “justification.”* Justification, to offer a fuller statement, is the recognition and declaration by God that those who are thus called and believing are in fact his people, the single family promised to Abraham, that as the new covenant people their sins are forgiven, and that since they have already died and been raised with the Messiah they are assured of final bodily resurrection at the last. This, of course, is the argument of (among other passages) Romans 5-8, and in a measure also Philippians 3. In Galatians it is hinted at but never spelled out, for the good reason that Paul's eye is on one thing principally — namely, the unity of the single Jew-plus-Gentile family in Christ and the consequent impossibility of that family being in anyway defined by the Jewish Torah.

Fully to grasp this, I realize only too well, will demand of those who wish to be in tune with Paul, on the one hand, and to continue to preach the gospel and thereby to evoke and sustain Christian faith, on the other, that they think through afresh the language they use, the passages upon which they draw to make their point, and the detailed theology they are presupposing. But I am quite convinced that this essentially “new-look” reading of justification in Galatians does not undermine the traditional theology and spirituality that

former generations, and other ways of reading Paul, have for so long built upon this text. Indeed, when the bricks of the house are taken down, cleaned, and reassembled in the right order, there is every hope that the building will be more serviceable and weather-proof than before.

There are of course many other issues that cry out to be discussed. I have said very little, for example, about the Spirit in Galatians, and the relation of what Paul says on this topic to other NT evidence. But I hope to have shown that the task of bringing together exegesis and theology is valid and fruitful, if demanding, and that a commentary series that attempts such a task has every chance of providing fresh stimulation and insight to a new generation for whom neither dry historical exegesis nor flights of theological fancy will do by themselves. Galatians is a wonderful example of a text that needs history and theology to be working at full stretch and in full harmony. But there is every reason to suppose that the rest of the NT will respond excellently to the same treatment.

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[1] Cf. the remarks of Karl Barth in the preface to the second edition of his famous commentary on Romans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 2-15.

[2] Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: SCM, 1980), p. viii.

[3] Hans-Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

[4] On this see now Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 25-36; he argues strongly against Betz that Galatians is an example of deliberative rhetoric, designed to convince its audience to take a particular line on an issue currently facing them.

[5] See the (to my mind overstated) claims of Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[6] Kasemann, p. vii.

[7] On these questions see, among recent literature, Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998).

[8] The sense in which, according to Paul, Jesus also brings to fulfillment the Mosaic covenant is exceedingly complex, and is, more or less, the subject of N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), chaps. 7-13.

[9] Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, chaps. 2-3.

[10] See the commentaries on Gal. 2:16; 3:22, etc., and discussions in most recent monographs on Galatians. For the debate, see Richard B. Hays, "Pistis and Pauline

Christology: What Is at Stake?" SBLSP 30 (1991): 714-29; James D. G. Dunn, "Once More, *Pistis Christou*" SBLSP 30 (1991): 730-44.

[11] The "third use of the law" was a way of rehabilitating the OT law as a moral guide once one had firmly rejected it as a way to justification. (The "second" use was in relation to civil government, etc.)

[12] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

[13] For a somewhat fuller statement on the Palestinian/Israeli question, see the epilogue to my *The Way of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

[14] For a moving account of the whole situation, with some deeply telling comments on the Palestinian problem in particular, see William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

[15] See the similarly strong statements in, e.g., Rom. 2:27-29.

[16] Were we to bring Romans into the argument as well, there would be more points to make. See Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, chap. 13; for a more popular-level statement, see my *For All God's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), chap. 13.

[17] This is what the word in question means; despite most commentators, we should not be too ready to read the word metaphorically.

[18] On the narrative substructure of Paul's theology in Galatians, see above all Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, SBLDS 56 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1983).

[19] Without prejudice to the meaning of 4:13-15 (was Paul unwell, or did he bear the marks of recent persecution?); see esp. 6:17 ("I bear the marks of Jesus on my body").

[20] Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, passim.

[21] Cf., e.g., J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33a (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

[22] Cf. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, chap. 8.