

Perspectives

explorations in theology and practice

Paul's Gospel in Galatians

Volume 1 (February 2023)

Perspectives: explorations in theology and practice continue in the theme of the 'explorations' series of books. On a given subject they are designed to provoke thought as well as presenting a perspective.

This first volume is a quick run through the book of Galatians; a very early piece of Pauline writing and written in a direct style. It could be argued that Romans is a better book to wrestle with when considering Paul's gospel, but I consider Galatians being less developed presents us with an ideal 'lens' to view Paul's beliefs.

Freedom is centre-stage; right at the start of the letter Paul presents the cross as bringing deliverance from the oppressive powers of 'this present evil age', and this brings another aspect into view. The future age is not something merely in the future, but this 'new creation' reality changes everything. He seems to interpret everything from that perspective, hence what can appear as a very negative interpretation of the law. The law does not belong to the future and so is inadequate to 'save', to deliver from the powers and even to define what can be termed 'transgression'.

Biblical texts quoted are from The New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, unless noted otherwise.

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Introductions

I have always enjoyed the Galatians letter. It is an early presentation of Paul's gospel in the context of conflict involving 'Judaisers' who are insisting on the necessity of all converts needing to continue in Torah obedience; he writes to Gentile converts and in a reactionary mood he gets right into it, sending his letter without any niceties. He insists that Torah obedience is not required and that it could even separate those who submit to it from their connection to Jesus. Not everything is nuanced as he writes to the Galatian believers with a very direct, 'listen to me, I am going to straighten all this out' approach. Being direct his arguments are succinct and so those arguments are not so involved as the much fuller version of his 'gospel' that we find in Romans; Galatians is an early letter and the conflict within the letter makes the writing narrowly focused.

To whom and when written?

One of the issues surrounding the date is whether it comes before or after the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 (AD50). He refers to a visit to Jerusalem (2:1) and of conflict with Peter (2:15-14... perhaps where he provocatively refers to Peter as Cephas). Did all this predate Jerusalem or come after? I consider it came before and would date Galatians as very early 48/49AD. Peter's behaviour being confronted by Paul prior to the letter that went out to the churches from Jerusalem. Even if the Galatian letter comes after the Council the event that Paul relates almost certainly predates the Council meeting. This reveals Paul's depth of convictions to confront Peter before there had been a council to resolve those issues (though I personally think Acts 15 was a compromise that did not go far enough – all encouraging to us, where God takes a step back

with a 'you work it out'. Maybe all of this (date / who are the Galatians) is incidental but I like the idea that they were working things out as they went along).

Freedom - a central theme

An obvious theme in the letter is that of freedom / slavery.

- Set us **free** from this present evil age (1:4).
- Spy on the **freedom** we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might **enslave** us (2:4).
- Scripture has **imprisoned** all things (3:22).
- Now before faith came we were **imprisoned** (under the law!) (3:23).
- No better than those who are **enslaved 4:1**.
- We were **enslaved** to the elemental principles (*ta stoicheia*) (4:3).
- You were **enslaved** to beings that by nature are not gods (4:8).
- [Now] you turn back to the weak and beggarly elemental principles (*ta stoicheia*)... to be **enslaved** by them (4:9).
- Children of an **enslaved** woman or of a **free** woman (4:22).
- She is in **slavery** (4:25).
- She is **free** (4:26).
- Child of the **enslaved** woman... child of the **free** woman

(4:30).

- For **freedom** Christ has set us **free**... do not submit to a yoke of **slavery** (5:1).
- You were called to **freedom** (5:13).
- Become **enslaved** to one another (5:13).

To that list of freedom / slavery we could of course add words such as gospel, justified and grace; and also specific texts such as where we read that 'In Christ there is neither...', or where Paul states that only 'new creation' counts.

Paul is heavily biased toward freedom, indeed his first description of what happened as a result of the cross is that we are 'set free... from this present evil age'. Freedom wins the day!

He navigates a line between 'submit to no-one... do not give up your freedom' and when recounting his meeting with those in Jerusalem he says he did submit his revelation to them to ensure he was not running in vain; he almost describes the law in negative terms, seemingly indicating that the law (for Israel) and the gods of the nations were in the same category (**ta stoicheia**)¹. He comes close to putting the spirits over nations and the law over Israel in the same category. He comes close, but the law came from God... yet he certainly seems to suggest that when the law is approached as law in order to be justified the same result follows; the law cannot deliver the freedom that is in Christ.

¹ 'Elemental principles / spirits'; that which orders, structures and shapes a society, hence it certainly spills over into the demonic spirit world; I suggest it includes the demonic that shapes society, culture etc. and is perhaps a summarising word for everything that shapes and holds a culture / nation back from finding maturity and freedom.

Alongside the freedom / enslavement theme we will note how Paul is shaped in his response by the belief that the coming of Jesus has changed the era in which we are alive. He is very aware of the (OT) story that Jesus fulfils, but understands everything from **an eschatological stance**. From the perspective that the future has broken in he then views and re-configures all present and past scenarios.

Galatians 1:1-5

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers and sisters with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul an apostle – I maintain that Paul does not use the term ‘apostle’ as a title: ‘Apostle Paul’ or as we often say ‘the apostle Paul’, but he simply says Paul an apostle. If it was used as a title there would be an inherent hierarchy. If someone carries a title it indicates position, and position over those who do not have that title;

it enables the one with the title to relate to others as being 'above' them. But as a description of ministry or calling it indicates that submission and accountability is first from Paul to the Lord. As an apostle he has to be accountable for that calling, he has something to live up to. And if an apostle there has to be signs that indicate the calling.

After the common greeting of 'grace and peace' he then presents a (perhaps I should suggest 'the') central effect of the cross. It is for our 'sins' **so that we might be free from this present evil age**. It is possible he pulls this one aspect of the cross to the fore in the Galatian situation, but I suspect this was central to Paul regardless of the situation. The problem is that our sins (our corporate failure to be human) mean that there are powers that dominate and we end up captive to those powers. In failing to be truly human we yield the future to 'powers' that far from releasing a future, hold us captive within a present and ongoing evil age. This theme is present throughout the letter; deliverance comes through Jesus who comes at the 'fullness of times' when the powers were at their extreme.²

'Forgiveness of sins', 'justified', 'redeemed' could all be used to describe what results from the cross but Paul chooses to major on the deliverance from the powers. He uses it as he addresses the Galatians for the issue that he confronts is of a people who are being pulled back to servitude. Paul indicates that if they were to submit to an obedience to the law they would simply put them on a

² Powers are expressed as 'heavenly' powers and their influence over 'this present evil age' and they are the very real 'earthly' power of the all-but one world government of Rome that shaped culture. The tower of Babel / Babylon as type of imperial rule was never absolute, being an unfinished yet substantial process. All the 'antiChrist' language fits into the context of the 'fullness of times'.

path that would bring a separation from Christ and a submission yet again to the elemental spirits / elements (*ta stoicheia*).

For Paul this 'freedom' is more than a 'theological' truth, more than something positional. Freedom was real, affected relationships, touched deeply into practice. That is very clear in how he introduces himself. If we were to read the opening words without realising there is some nuancing that has to take place we would have to assume Paul was all-but saying: 'stuff anyone human, regardless of who they are, I am totally independent and my apostleship is direct, so I have no plan to submit to anyone!' Thankfully he nuances that but emphasises in these opening verses his own personal freedom and even independence. He was set free and there was no one, regardless of who they were, nor system, regardless of its source that would enslave him.

We know as we go on to read that this explicit insistence that he submits to nothing of human origin is not quite as strong as those opening comments, yet it would seem that the freedom in Christ that he insisted was his (and by implication was the freedom for the Galatian believers and therefore for us too) has to mean that we must be able to say 'no' at a human level, for I consider if we lose that ability there will soon come a point where we will not be able to give a wholehearted 'yes' to God.

This freedom though is far more than a freedom to say 'no' to someone. It is freedom from the powers that are shaping this 'present evil age'. Powers that tell us to conform, to fit in. Powers that shape culture, economics, national identities and the like. Our passport does not define us – citizenship in heaven is what defines, and God has always had a global concern.

The gospel is much more than a response in a meeting where we raise our hand, pray a prayer and are told that we have received a ticket to the cloudy place by and by. It is freedom from powers **NOW**. That is the door we enter through, the journey is life-long discovering what that means. Sanctification is not about becoming spotless but about engaging with a process where I can be observed to be free, or at least manifesting an ever-increasing freedom.

Galatians 1:6-10

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The style of the letter is blunt and there are no 'normal' niceties up front. There is no 'so good to see you, I simply want to bring up something with you for your consideration...' There is not much to

be added to what Paul has to say. He clearly views that he brought them the gospel and in contrast what they had been hearing was, a different gospel, the gospel had been perverted through what they had recently received. The strength of his feeling can be seen when we read that even if an angel **from heaven** were to bring something different to what Paul had brought then let that one be cursed. He writes this as a servant of God. We are not left in any doubt about how strongly he believed this.

The language is remarkably strong. I am challenged by what might qualify as a 'different gospel'. A while back a couple met Gayle and I for coffee and they explained their approach. They had a strategy of offering English lessons as a second language, a few weeks in to the course and they would then use the language lessons to 'share the gospel', If the student did not respond or show some serious interest, it would then be time to move on to someone else as that particular student was obviously not good 'soil'. Given also that the couple were strongly Calvinist in theology, maybe it was God's fault that some of their students were bad soil?

At the end of our time the question came – would you work with us and support us. The answer was a one word answer and the shorter of the two possible words. Are they presenting a different gospel? Certainly with respect to their approach we could not put the word 'good news' to it. Perhaps we all have a 'sub-' / 'not complete' gospel, but there has to come a point when the gospel we hold on to and present is so 'sub-' that it is a different gospel, even if some of the words coincide. And when our message is too far away from what Paul presented, maybe the 'God' we claim to serve might be a different god to the one that is 'God'.

In the context of the letter in front of us 'different' has to be

measured by how much freedom or bondage is brought. We are likely to move toward error when the result is any level of burdens placed on someone... as has been said elsewhere:

The offence of the Gospel is not an offence of who is excluded, but the offence is an offence of who is included.

The door of entry is wide open. Indeed in some senses the door is a wide door. The narrow gate that Jesus spoke of was what he presented to Jews, those who really thought that favour with God was exclusively theirs. We should not take Scriptures that were spoken historically to a specific context and suggest we can apply them in every situation. The door to the Jews to avoid calamity (to be saved) was narrow, and that narrow door was not to be found in their ethnicity, nor even as custodians of the law, but in the person of a soon-to-be-crucified Messiah.

Galatians 1:11-24

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin, for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the

traditions of my ancestors. But when the one who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the gentiles, I did not confer with any human, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterward I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days, but I did not see any other apostle 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 unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

The gospel Paul was bringing to the Imperial world was straight from heaven, it did not have a human origin. Having again stated the source of his understanding and commission he begins to recount his journey from how he excelled in Judaism to a level 'beyond many among my people of the same age'. But heaven had broken in on him; he did not even go to those who had been Jews but had been commissioned by Christ. (Later he will say he submitted what he had received, but he avoids that aspect here. He is still establishing his 'independence' from human influence and authority while insisting his total 'dependence' on heaven.) The conflict in Galatians was surrounding the need for the believers there (Gentiles) to fully submit to the Jewish law – he is all-but saying that those people who want to impose the law on these believers are lacking in any level of understanding. What do they know in comparison to him; he is fully

credentialed: as a Jew he excelled and the shift in his understanding came from heaven. He (Paul) was previously the authority on all this, and given that he met with Cephas (Peter: maybe Paul is a little cheeky using his Jewish name here?) and with James, he is setting the scene for the conflict that he had with Peter when he acted in a hypocritical way after being intimidated by those who came from James (Gal. 2:11-14).

Tradition of his ancestors – if these opponents were insisting that the Christian faith was an outworking of Judaism (something Paul would have agreed with) and so all converts should also come in line with those traditions by keeping the law (something he was vehemently opposed to) how much more was he (past tense) zealously committed to protecting on God's behalf what he perceived God had given. Tradition, the God given way, can be so difficult to navigate. Paul is willing to defend the 'tradition that was given to him' (to quote from another letter), but here is incredibly forthright in condemning should even an angel from heaven come with a different message, with the implication of a message dependent on a previous tradition! In these verses he is setting the scene as to why he cannot defend what he used to defend, indeed to defend it he would become a sinner (as opposed to his previous understanding that in defending those traditions he was 'righteous according to the law'). Everything had changed with the coming of Jesus and his heavenly encounter.

The coming of Jesus did not tweak what was understood previously, it turned everything on its head. It is not as if we start with what we had (call it the OT for simplicity's sake) and then draw a straight line forward and go 'see, now here comes Jesus, it all makes sense'. Rather the past is understood from the future. We cannot say 'this

will mean that in the future', but when the unexpected future takes place we can say 'this is that'. This understanding continues in the NT approach – a new creation has come so now we figure out from the future the world around us. This is why, though I am very conservative about eschatology I am also very cautious. We don't get there from here, but 'there' and 'then' should shape our thinking 'here' and 'now'.

Excursus: A difficult phrase in the middle (difficult for me at least!)

But when the one who had set me apart before I was born (Gal. 1:15).

In the passage above there is a little tough area for the likes of me (I am referring to the 'predestination' bit). Set apart from before birth. Very reminiscent of Jeremiah (1:4). So what do I say about this, other than I would write those parts very differently(!)? But not being allowed to do that here are my comments.

1. If this is close to suggesting something along the lines of traditional 'predestination', these verses make it applicable to Paul, not necessarily to you and me. Paul claims **he** was the one set aside in that way.
2. We do not have here a reference to salvation but to calling.

This is very key in all of Scripture. We tend to make everything about 'in / out', 'get your ticket to be on the bus of salvation', 'eternal destiny' etc., but calling and purpose seems to me the centre. To suggest (OT-wise) Jews are saved and Gentiles are damned seems to miss it, rather we have purpose at the heart of Israel's call, being uniquely chosen to be an access point for heaven to earth.

3. Any calling was not understood to be automatic, for Paul himself said that when the time of his calling was made manifest he 'was not disobedient to the heavenly vision' (Acts 26:19); the grace of God was not in vain when it was applied to him (1 Cor. 15:10). Nothing seemed to be predetermined and irresistible.
4. If applicable to all of us, we can only make it apply to our calling / purpose in life. Paul's calling was to proclaim Jesus among the Gentiles. We are all set apart for the reason for which we are born (indeed sin is to miss the reason for which we are born); that calling being innate is within us 'before we were born'. There is only one 'me' (as Oscar Wilde said 'be yourself, all the others are taken').

If we pull Scriptures like this out and simply connect them to others we can end up with a strong 'predestination' line. However, for me, the weight of Scripture is to hold firm to human responsibility and the possibility of 'being disobedient' to who we are (God's calling if you like). Predestination is for someone to be the unique person that they are, becoming that as they respond to the image of Christ that is within them... Jesus, being the one true human, enables us to become our true human self as we yield to the work of the Spirit in such a way that we increasingly become who we truly are to be.

[If you disagree with the above, of course you might have been predestined to do so... or maybe I am predestined to be an awkward customer!!]

Galatians 2:1-10

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not 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 brothers and sisters secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us—we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who

worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognised the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

Paul met the Lord on his way to Damascus, not in the place where one might expect. It corresponds with the major point in Stephens's speech in Acts 7 of how God showed up historically outside of the 'holy land'. He is to be found but not always where we expect. Paul states that only after 14 years he went up to Jerusalem, not immediately after his heavenly encounter. There he met with those were **supposedly** acknowledged leaders, not exactly a great strap line for the line up of ministries for the next world changing conference. Paul does seem to have a way of cutting through religion and other such barriers. He is not a respecter of titles but of authenticity.

Here though we get a little nuance to the boldly stated position of not submitting to earthly powers: we read, 'to make sure I was not running in vain'. He had never mentioned this aspect until this point. Underneath all the 'no-one gave me this gospel' presentation he is submissive. He is over-the-top strong as he wants to shock these readers (actually hearers) about their easy compliance and over-yieldedness to those who have come among them, and having done that he now balances out what has been emphasising in his letter to them.

The two he brings with him are illustrative also of how he navigates this situation. Barnabas, the bridge builder, the encourager, the one who sees the best in every situation. Someone useful to have in any situation where there might be fall out and disagreement. Helpful to build a path of understanding between polarities and help facilitate reconciliation. Maybe essential to have alongside Paul who, as we read in this letter, was never slow at coming forward with what he believed. Barnabas and... Titus! Titus, a Gentile. The issue under discussion was over the gospel to the gentiles, and in the spotlight was Paul's refusal to have converts submit to the law, and in particular the 'works of the law' marked by circumcision, food laws and Sabbath-observance. Titus was present. This meant that there could be no discussion without it being personal. It can be so easy to make decisions about people, situations (right / wrong) but once we meet the person; once we talk and listen to the 'other' any judgement has to be mellowed. I have been challenged when I have sat with people who are different to me, such an experience has been the beginning of a change for me, a change even of previously held beliefs. Theology is not abstract but deeply relational, and relationships require a true meeting of one another.

Bridge building, listening, and presenting a human face to a tricky situation, that is what Paul initiated. Such a meeting might not resolve every situation but it will certainly be a huge element in making space for the Holy Spirit.

Another aspect that comes through is Paul's sight of those he has a responsibility for – he says that some false people came in to spy on their freedom (that indicates that their freedom was NOT hidden, but visible) but he refused to give way **for the sake of the Gentile converts**.

In this encounter they found a way of endorsing one another. Not of conforming each other to the other, but of agreement. They saw that there was apostleship to and for a people group. In every generation, every situation there is the need for a new apostleship, the outworking of the **ETERNAL** gospel into a temporal or cultural setting. I might not understand what someone is doing in their setting (and in our world we have to also think beyond ethnic people groups, but into the very spheres of society) as they will have to be bold for the eternal gospel to enter, and they will have to do so without simply copying what they have seen elsewhere. There are new expressions of the one gospel always... and a huge unifying part will always be present: 'do not forget the poor'.

Galatians 2:10-20

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood self-condemned, for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with 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?"

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Now we have some fun verses. Followers of Jesus, first Century believers having a good old dust up. The person that was a central character within the original 12, and the central character beyond the 12 who has shaped our faith more than probably anyone else. They don't agree! Surely on some of these issues Jesus could have put down some clear guidelines for them, it was pretty obvious the whole Jew / Gentile issue would come into play very soon, and before the Fall of Jerusalem that Jesus spoke so accurately into. He, as Risen Lord, had spent days teaching on the kingdom of God, so I can only presume he taught in such a way that did not mean they would forever avoid difficulties, disputes and disagreements. Unity of agreement seems to me to be overrated.

So in simple terms Peter was willing to eat with Gentiles (and eating of course was much more than satisfying hunger but demonstrating their oneness together) until some people came down from Jerusalem claiming to represent the Jerusalem view: we might even say the view of the headquarters. Peter conforms to the newly presented case and pulls back; and then we read of something that is supposed to shock us; **even** Barnabas pulls back. Paul saw all this behaviour as **hypocrisy** – of presenting something that was an ‘act’ that was not true. Paul was deeply disturbed and confronted Peter publicly (oh to be a fly on the wall!).

Peter knew there was to be no division, so what on earth caused him (and Barnabas!) to pull back? Fear is mentioned, people pleasing also I am sure was involved, but I think there must have also been a convincing argument, and I consider it had to be a ‘missiological’ argument.

Building bridges, not offending, even compromise for the sake of the gospel is all part of missiological principles, so here is my plausible suggestion:

The argument that those who came from Jerusalem went as follows.

If you eat with Gentiles, and show no respect for the law you will make our task in Judea all-but impossible. How will we communicate this to our law abiding people who have found faith in Jesus as Messiah. They will be offended as your behaviour in eating with the Gentiles presents our faith as something in opposition to our historic faith, the faith of Abraham. Some of them might even lose their new found faith in Jesus. The offence to those who have found faith will be enormous and when we come to share our faith in Jesus

with our fellow-Jews we will have no entrance there; they will immediately reject everything we have to say. Peter, your compromising behaviour will become public knowledge, so pull back now, FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOOD NEWS.

A missiological argument!

On the foundation of the missiological argument could be built other aspects, such as the historic continuance of the covenant with Israel, thus all Gentiles need to submit to that covenant and the law. That clearly was part of the thrust of where they were going with their revelation. They moved from the past to the future... Paul was moving from the future to critique and understand the past.

In contrast Paul was on his mission throughout the empire with the message to those who responded, 'You are grafted into the historic people of God, and grafted in without needing to conform to the law'. Two missiological principles; two clashing arguments.

Paul's approach is so definite – he does not reflect that they sat down to discuss how the two opposing views might work out... he simply wades in with 'you are in the wrong and I am calling it out'. For Paul it was the freedom of the Gospel that gave him his strength. Maybe his approach did cause some issues in the home land of Jerusalem (and we can read in Acts of how nervous they were when he showed up back there!) but the coming of Jesus, for Paul, meant the whole world was now re-ordered and this had implications not only for Gentiles, but also for Jews, and for the law that had defined them. Jews, as chosen, were no longer the centre, but Jesus as chosen was the centre. Both ethnic groups had to realign themselves around him, and that meant freedom was the watchword and the two peoples had to learn how not to offend one

another (a big theme in Romans) but he insisted that in the big world there could be no calling for Gentiles to conform to Jewish practices (works of the law) and Jews could no longer look to pull back because of viewing Gentiles as unclean. They were to eat together with all the challenges that meant for the laws that had previously defined what a Jew could / could not eat. The coming of Jesus had changed everything.

There is so much in this conflict that could be explored, but at least again we see that 'freedom' and togetherness based on freedom was the guiding principle. Not offending those who were hiding behind religion was not an option that Paul entertained.

The latter verses in the section above could still be the continuation of what Paul said to Peter as it is hard to work out where the 'I said to Cephas' ends. That section also involves some strange, convoluting language and arguments – strange at least to us in the way that we approach logic. Specifically I refer to the words we read from Paul,

But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down,
then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.

He is referring to an approach where hypothetically if he were to build / implement again the law (what Peter had done out of intimidation) then he would be a transgressor. Given that transgression was measured by the law this indeed sounds strange; but if we realise that for Paul the coming of Jesus changed everything we can make some sense of it. The law had stipulations about what food was clean and what was unclean. In the situation Paul refers to in Antioch to uphold the law meant the Jews could not eat with Gentiles. Division and hierarchy, distinctions between who

was in and who was out were the results. To rebuild the law in that way would be a denial of the one new humanity that had to come to place through Christ. To rebuild the law would be to transgress, to transgress the higher 'law' (way of viewing the world and humanity) that was now the reality in Christ.

The future in the coming of Jesus caused the past to be re-calibrated, the future was not to be understood from the past. For some theologians the shift was so remarkable that they suggested that Paul was so impacted when he found Jesus that he discovered the 'solution' and from there had to work back as to what the 'problem' was. The problem was not 'guilt' (as per Martin Luther) with Jesus taking his guilt away. The problem was much deeper; Paul had found the solution but as he was already 'righteous according to the law' the problem had to lie elsewhere. There has to be a great element of truth that he worked from the future and then looked backward to assess everything else, including his former life and the whole chosenness of Israel and the giving of the law. The coming of Jesus caused a disruption to everything. We might well wish to read the Old Testament as pointing forward, but at a very real level we read the New Testament and it points back, it recalibrates what was prior, and even nullifies some of it ('I died to the law' for example).

Life now for Paul was the life of Jesus. Nothing else counted. If Peter, Barnabas and others have responded to Jesus, then they can no longer act from any previous grid; should they do so they would be living an act (hypocrisy), and if pushed I guess he would have to say they, through their supposed compliance with the law, had become transgressors!

Galatians 3:1-14

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for “the one who is righteous will live by faith.” But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— in

order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul is coming to the end of his reporting of the history with his, 'I confronted this person... I went to Jerusalem... so that you might be free...' Now he turns his focus directly to his hearers. 'You are stupid for even listening to these people who are calling for you to submit to the Jewish law'. He suggests they have been subject to witchcraft (control, domination, manipulation etc.) and goes on to point out the path that these Judaizers have set before them will far from be a blessing but will turn out to be a curse on them.

Excursus: a couple of notes

The **miracles** being done among them is not past tense but **present** tense. It is not referring to when Paul was with them, but that they had an ongoing charismatic experience.

The **works of the law** are not the typical understanding that has survived from Reformation times that Judaism maintained that if we do good works then we will be saved (as per Martin Luther who lived with intense guilt and then discovered that Paul said we were justified by faith and his guilt was relieved). That understanding leads to a contrast between law (Jewish faith) and grace (Christian). The contrast though, in Paul, is not that of law and grace but it is of eras. The coming of Christ ends an era and a new one begins. Pre-Christ 'salvation' was also by grace (covenant), and those who

were saved by grace were marked out by being 'led by the law', the law being the guiding path for them. One could tell who was of the 'chosen people' by their Torah observance. They did not obey the law to be accepted, but because they were accepted (covenantal grace) they followed the law. In Paul those who are the children of God were those who were led by the Spirit. Jewish faith (then and now) was not a faith of works in order to be accepted, but the works of the law were simply the markers that set them apart as those who were accepted by grace. The contrast was not law and grace, but law and Spirit. It is a contrast due to the incredible shift of eras.

Both the Jewish faith and the Christian faith were based on grace. This does not mean there were not Jews who twisted the faith and in effect their acceptance was (in their minds / hearts) based on doing what was right, in obedience to the law. Such an approach meant it was easy to describe those of Jewish ethnicity as 'sinners'.³ In the same way (then and now) there are those of the Christian faith who reduce their faith to 'doing what is right' and never fully embrace acceptance.

The works of the law are understood to be observance of the food laws, observance of the Sabbath and circumcision for males. Here in Galatians there is certainly a spill over to a legalism, but the argument that was being presented to these Gentile believers was along the lines of – your faith takes you so far; Christian faith is not non-Jewish, so to be truly descendants of Abraham you have to embrace the faith he had and so, like him, you have to submit to the Jewish law.

³ 'Sects' in Judaism (and in other faiths) are formed where there is a 'right way' of being a Jew with the claim that they are either more faithful to the faith, or even that only they are faithful.

There are of course implications in this with regard to an embrace of grace, and an implication for what the gospel means for Jews as well as what it means for Gentiles. The law in this era has nothing to do with acceptance before God ('salvation' if we want to use that term). If one (a Jew) wishes to abide by it it cannot be used to elevate them to a higher level, and cannot be used as a proof that they are 'chosen'. Faith (in Jesus) is the only criterion, and faith without any law element; if faith is embraced then that person (Jew or Gentile) is descended from Abraham. Paul himself, a Jew who believed in Jesus, did not insist on others keeping the law and clearly based his personal life on a law-free expression.

All of this emphasis is from someone (Paul) who had an impeccable background as a Jew. The change of era, something truly apocalyptic had taken place in the coming of Jesus. Nothing could ever be the same again.

If these Gentile believers were to go back and seek as Gentiles to live under a former era something would kick in at a very significant level. It would no longer be adopting acceptance through grace but expressing the outworking by obedience to the law, it would mean they were to be judged by their obedience to every part of the law (and not simply the three markers above of 'the works of the law')! The shift was because of the change of era.

The cross... Jew then Gentile

In verses 10-14 we come to the cross, and there is a very strong Jewish element to the cross. Take the law out of the context of covenant and then any reliance on the law is doomed to failure, and

in reality historic Israel had indeed failed. The sign of it was the exile (to Babylon) and the ongoing bondage / exile to Greek powers and subsequently to Roman oppression. They were no longer a free people for the sake of the nations, but had become one of the nations (this being their request to Samuel when they asked for a king, leading to the deep irony when the chief priests confessed that the nation's king was none other than Caesar - John 19:15); not only the Gentiles were in bondage but Israel too was under the condemnation alongside all other nations, locked up under the power of sin. This can be summarised as Israel is under 'the curse of the law', they were no longer the head but now the tail. They were suffering everything that Deuteronomy said they would suffer should they become disobedient.

Jesus, therefore died in Israel's place, 'he became a curse for **us**' (Paul often uses 'us' when he is identifying himself among Israel, and 'you' when he is drawing out the contrast of the 'Gentiles').

He seems to set it out in three steps. First for 'us' Jesus became a curse, and it is clearly for 'Israel' for it is not some general curse but it is **the curse of the law**:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us

This was one of the reasons the cross was a 'stumbling block for Jews'. How could someone cursed be the Messiah? To claim that would be nothing less than a blasphemy – little wonder Paul was blind for three days. Three days... that was the journey time he needed to go from cross to resurrection, the resurrection being God's affirmation that Jesus was marked as the son of God by power (Rom. 1:4). 'Son of God' not being a term denoting divinity but

being a term associated with humanity and in particular with Israel, as called to be the means of God's redemption. If Israel was to be the nation that brings light to the world, but had descended into darkness, into bondage then there was no hope for the world. Hence Jesus dies as a Jew, born under the law, to deliver Israel. He becomes Israel, so that Israel might be redeemed (and redefined, not as all in Abraham are Israel, but all in Jesus are descendants of Abraham).

The second element then comes in to view:

in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles

God chooses Abraham / Israel for the Gentiles, the purpose was so that the blessing of Abraham would be present throughout the world (hence 'salvation' is not to be thought of in a narrow way of a 'ticket out of here' but of being set apart for the world; to be a doorway from heaven to earth). Israel as we have suggested are now far from that, hence the need of the cross (more will follow in Chapter 4). Now that Jesus has become the curse and that God has vindicated him the blessing of Abraham can be released. What was locked up, the original promise can be again set in motion, and that setting in motion is defined for Paul in the summarising phrase:

so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

And now Paul uses 'we' because the 'we' is everyone, Jew or Gentile. In this era there is only one 'we'. (Later we will read 'neither Jew nor Greek'.) In this new era (and Paul began the letter with freedom from the powers of this present evil age / era) Jesus is the

doorway in, the door for Jew and for Gentile. He alone is the means for the promise of the Spirit to come to all, regardless of ethnicity.

If we drop the question related to 'who then is saved' in the sense of 'I have my ticket so am saved' and understand salvation is 'salvation from powers' and 'salvation to purpose'; if we put Jesus at the centre and then accept that there is only one people in the new era, hence they must eat together (please remember this Peter... and Barnabas) we will understand Paul's fire. The new era is here. There are loose ends for the old era is still around us; but in this letter he is not looking to tie up loose ends, he is calling for a break with any and all aspects of the former era that perpetuate wrong divisions, that enable control to flourish and defined in / out lines can be drawn. The loose ends do not clarify the central element; that central element being a call to live by the Spirit, and all who do so are descendants of Abraham. As Paul in the final chapter puts it:

Only 'new creation' now counts for anything (Gal. 6:14).

Galatians 3:15-29

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many, but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. My point is this: the law, which came four hundred

thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise, but God granted it to Abraham through the promise. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made, and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party, but God is one.

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through the faith of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Paul has confronted the opponents and their message head on. He has insisted on a law-free gospel which raised the question, 'so what about the law?'. In response we come to this section, and in reading

it we should note that logic and argument in the first Century world does not always accord with what we might consider a reasoned argument. Paul pulls on the singular ‘offspring’, and as per English the word could be singular or ‘seed’ as in referring to many actual individual seeds. The word itself does not determine that the promise was to ‘one person’, but even if we say that the logic seems a little thin we remember that for Paul it is the radical inbreaking of a new era that means he can now put (for him) the definitive reading on the promise. The promise was to Abraham and to his one seed – Jesus. The argument is beyond the use of the singular word, it is the self-evident reality that the many ‘seeds’ of Abraham did not bring in the promised era.

The law was added later, after the initial promise to Abraham, but Paul presents it not simply as something that came later but as a temporary element. It came 430 years after the promise, but only in place **until** Christ came... and **only** for the Jews (note again the ‘we’ word: ‘our disciplinarian’). The law is not opposed to the promises of God, because it is not an alternative – salvation by Jesus or salvation by law would never have been something that Paul would have considered! And at one level, the law as law, simply makes plain that the Jews too are imprisoned under sin. The singular use of the word ‘sin’ indicates that Paul sees sin as a power, not as the collection of all the wrong things that have been done.

At the end of this section we have the ‘in Christ there is neither... nor’ central statement (Gal. 3:28). The NRSV updated edition adds a little to the text with ‘no longer’, but the addition is following the thrust. It is all about the coming of a new era, thus I think the ‘no longer’ is justified, and implicit within the argument. Everything before is placed in a temporary setting, the law having distinguished

Jew from Gentile – then, in that era. But in Christ the law has gone (for the covenant is fulfilled), so the old divide of ‘Jew and Greek’ ceases to stand; the division of ‘slave and free’ is also deeply significant, for the culture within the Graeco-Roman world was all about maintaining class culture. Meals were highly structured, with who sat where, and how one reciprocated being vital. Given that the *ekklesia* of Jesus gathered around the meal table, class structure disappeared.⁴

The in / out divide had disappeared that religion created – and always creates; the political outworking of the very undergirding of Imperial culture was ended; and the careful change of grammar from ‘or’ (‘Jew **or** Greek; slave **or** free’) to ‘male **and** female’ indicates a major eschatological element. The quote is from Genesis – to how it was in the beginning. That original language is now inappropriate for with the change of eras the eschatological frame comes strongly into view, for in the age to come there will be no more marriage. Something ends that belongs to this age, this age where the only covenantal relationship is in marriage; in that age we will be one, all of us. Sex will disappear but the level of intimacy and knowing one another will be what marriage presses in for. Male and female will not mark us out then, and cannot mark out a hierarchical division in the *ekklesia*.

The closing verse of this section sums it up:

⁴ Consider the meal in Corinth where Paul said ‘I can give you no credit’ for what you are doing for they were perpetuating the rich / poor divide, thus it was no longer the Lord’s table they were gathering around but the table of culture; the instruction in James concerning a rich person coming in and being given the best seat, the seat being at the meal table; Jesus instruction not to invite those who can reciprocate. Class divisions could no longer exist in the newly formed body of Christ.

if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring,
heirs according to the promise

Not if you are Jewish you are a descendant of Abraham, but if, and therefore **only if** one is in Christ, can one be a descendant of Abraham, for the inheritance does not come through the law (something temporary that never produced the promised blessings of Abraham to the world, and never could).

As Paul lays out his case one can understand why he was willing to oppose people to their face. The coming of Christ had ended something, had ended division, so they had to eat together, and could not position anyone as a 'less than' person.

The *ekklesia* was not about how many people could be brought in through the door so that the numbers grew (maybe important if the view is 'they need a ticket to be secure', but more often it simply is a measure to confirm how great we are!) but was about the total transformation of the *oikoumene*,⁵ the nicely ordered world that was simply part of the system that imprisoned people (sin). The *ekklesia* had to model a new way of being, embodying the reality of 'no division' as a sign that the old era was no longer dictating the future. Theology and social outworking went together; heaven and incarnation were necessary for 'glory' to come, and if the glory of God was to fill the whole earth, maybe we can understand the boldness (bolshiness?) of Paul.

⁵ This word 'oikoumene' was the common way by which an empire was known, hence the devil offered to Jesus all the kingdoms of the *oikoumene*.

Galatians 4:1-31

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than those who are enslaved, though they are the owners of all the property, but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, 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 principles? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

Brothers and sisters, I beg you: become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible,

you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times and not only when I am present with you. My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

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

“Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs, for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married.”

Now you, my brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say?

“Drive out the enslaved woman and her child, for the child of

the enslaved woman will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.” So then, brothers and sisters, we are children, not of an enslaved woman but of the free woman.

Again a few arguments that Paul uses that probably don't cut it logically for us. The section on Hagar and Sarah for example. Who decides that Hagar corresponds to 'the present Jerusalem'? This is not self-evident. We have to allow the argument of the first century to be just that, and as we do not know all the backstory we are also coming at this a little in the dark. It is possible that the Judaizers were using that very story in the opposite direction that Paul uses it and he is 'forced' into giving the opposite interpretation to theirs. What remains is his beef is over the issue of freedom, and **his sight is from the future**. The current era is no longer his framework, Christ has come and everything else is re-calibrated or annulled.

Here are a few pull-out parts for me.

The Jew / Gentile element of the cross is highlighted. He is born under the law (**Jewish**) as well as being born of a woman (**human**) in order to redeem those who were **under the law** (Jews). Paul is no moderate, to be under the law was to be under 'elemental spirits'. He comes as close as one can to suggesting that the law (defining Israel) was to Israel what the 'elemental spirits' that defined and held Gentile nations in bondage was to them. Certainly it is through the coming of the Spirit that they cross over and become children of God, and it is probable that Paul is viewing the law from that point of view. Now that **the** new era had arrived to continue under any shaping from a former view would mean to be shaped by a former era - even if that element was the God-given law! Although Jews were those who were going to inherit (as physical descendants of

Abraham, thus so different to Gentiles) until the date set (the fullness of times) they were no better than those who were enslaved (Gentiles).

For Paul Jesus is everything, and he writes this as a Jew. The turning of the ages changed everything for him.

Jesus comes at the 'fullness of times'. He comes, not immediately post the 'fall', though the Tri-une God journeys with 'Adam, Eve' and all their offspring down the centuries as they leave Eden, carrying the effects of the Fall with them. He does not come immediately post the Exile when there is a major dislocation at numerous levels from the promises. He comes at the fullness of times. This was when the world was under an all-but one-world government, when Caesar was in Rome making blasphemous claims (exact counter claims to the 'gospel', using the very same term *euangelion* (gospel / good news) to describe the wonderful 'good news' that went from Rome to one and all). Demons were visible and present, even within the synagogue; the one nation that was to be free and lead others to freedom openly confessed that they too had no other king than Caesar. The fullness of times, when there was no hope for the world because the one hope (Israel) was under bondage. Not even the Temple as a house of prayer for all nations (Gentiles) had a semblance of redemptive presence, thus Jesus announced that not one stone of the Temple would remain on another.

Jesus does not come before time, but comes to destroy all bondage when the enslavement was complete. Jew and Gentile, both, all under the rulership of the dark powers, the prince of this world.

In the midst of all this we read a very practical statement:

They make much of you but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them.

Hard-hitting but ever so perceptive. They focus on you, but not to promote you... so that the result is that they are the 'big people'. Gas-lighting; narcissism.

Freedom for Paul was through Jesus; with nothing added.

Galatians 5:1-26

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be reckoned as righteous by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think

otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my brothers and sisters, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Seems Paul thinks he has nailed the issue – ‘stand free, do not come under a yoke of slavery’. Now he puts in a little ‘balance’ (‘Paul balanced?’ we might be tempted to ask!).

Only do not use your freedom for...

Love, live by the Spirit, be led by the Spirit... the freedom is not as a result of telling people where to go, of insisting on our total non-dependence on others; we live in the context of others, we are not islands apart, hence as always a relational dynamic comes into Paul’s ethics. *[I consider that his ethics are eschatological – a new era is our context – and relational. It is never law-based as to ‘right / wrong’ independent of those two elements. He raises the stakes higher, so for example, he does not pull on an ethic such as ‘do not lie’, but calls us not to leave a falsehood, something that can be done without ever lying.]*

There is the strong contrast of ‘works of the flesh’ and ‘fruit of the Spirit’. Paul is a little provocative in using the terms ‘works’ and ‘flesh’ as there has to be more than a passing undercurrent of ‘works of the law’ and ‘circumcision’ in his choice of words. Freedom and imposition of law stood in contrast.

Fruit of the Spirit. Fruit does not mean no discipline, no effort, but the contrast to ‘works’ is marked. Fruit starts with the connection to Jesus, standing in that context to such an extent that any other relationship is secondary, and certainly resisting to come under any aspect of control; from that place we are invited to see others so that we are positioned for them and indeed ‘enslaved to one another’. Freedom has to come first. As per Jesus who laid down his life for the world, but FIRST said no-one can take my life from me.

The battle then is 'flesh' and 'S/spirit'. Lean in to the Spirit... make mistakes... but lean again... and the fruit begins to grow. Freedom to lay our lives down, but never to be enslaved by someone else.

Galatians 6:1-18

My brothers and sisters, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own

hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me, for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Ever so practical (after the breathtaking words full of confrontation, we come to a whole section that is much more peaceful, we might suggest, ‘after the clarity to establish truth in no uncertain terms, some very practical perspectives to consider’).

Bear one another’s burdens, and we must carry our own loads.

Then he picks up the pen himself (v. 11 and following) and brings things back to what I consider is his view on the world, so much so that circumcision, that central sign of Israel’s covenant is not an issue (so can never become an issue, and by implication, neither can the law as a whole be made into an issue), **only NEW CREATION counts**; the change of era is here, that is the **ONLY** issue. Nothing is the same NOW. Everything else is viewed through the new reality of new creation, new creation that has been brought

into being through the cross.

Excursus: The 'Israel of God'

One can argue that Paul always uses the term 'Israel' to apply to ethnic Israel, and that could be true. However here he is using the term and writing of God's Israel in a book where he has stressed who are Abraham's descendants – those of faith where there is no Jew / Gentile divide, hence I favour that he is using the term (and remember he is a Jew) of those of faith, regardless of ethnicity. The sentence that contains this phrase immediately follows that of 'circumcision not counting' and only 'new creation' having value. If he is (and I am not convinced that he is) using the phrase to have an exclusive ethnic content it would be following the typical discussion within Judaism as to who is Israel, as 'not all Israel is Israel'. Either way, he is using the term primarily, or exclusively, as a faith term. And then he ends the letter with 'brothers and sisters, so let it be' which was a normal way to close off but in the context of this letter it was totally appropriate. He, a Jew by ethnicity, and they, Gentiles, are one family.