



## ***The Controversy at Galatia***

Wenatchee Conference

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### **Overview:**

The purpose in what follows is to focus on the key issue behind the controversy found in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. Because of time constraints I will touch on a few key points from the Letter without addressing all related issues.

The goal is to better understand where Christians stand regarding the Law of Moses. What is the believer's relationship to the Law? Is the Law or portions of it still in force for followers of Jesus? If so how do we know which laws are applicable? Is the dividing line between the "moral" and "ceremonial" laws? If we are under grace and not law as the Apostle Paul teaches, how do we reconcile other statements that exhort Christians to obedience and good works? If Christians are not under the Law will this not result in moral anarchy and libertinism?

Galatians is often read as a theological treatise constituting the Apostle Paul's broadside against legalism, the notion that right standing with God is "earned" through a system of works righteousness and human effort. This is partly due to the influence of Reformation theology. At times this traditional approach tends to portray Divine Grace and obedience as being in tension with each other if not antithetical.

Galatians is a letter in which Paul responds to a specific situation that greatly concerned him. It is not an exhaustive theological study composed at his leisure but rather his sharp reaction to an immediate problem. My proposition is this: a close examination reveals that the issue was narrower than a general or abstract debate over unmerited grace versus human efforts or works righteousness.

None of what follows is meant to argue that Paul did not believe in God's grace or that one's right standing before God is not entirely dependent on it. Paul's letters make clear his firm belief in Divine grace and his own story provides ample evidence of God's mercy granted to one most undeserving. The references to "Jews" in this paper for the most part do not refer to Jews in general or even to Jewish believers in Jesus, but to a specific group of Christian Jews who objected to Paul's gospel of grace.

### **Background: The Purpose of the Law:**

In Western Society individualism is highly prized. A result is that conversion to a different religion is seen as a matter of individual conscience. To join a new church or sect can involve little more than signing a membership card and acknowledging the group's Statement of Beliefs. Religion is often seen to consist of moral codes and ethical principles that enable individuals to live better and more moral lives.

The Law given to Israel by Yahweh through Moses was much more than a statement of theological principles or a set of moral codes designed to regulate individual behavior. In the classic summary statement of God's covenant with Israel in EXODUS 19:1-6 we read:

“...Now, therefore, if you will indeed hearken to my voice and ***keep my covenant***, then shall ***ye*** be mine as ***a treasure beyond all the peoples*** for mine is all the earth. But you shall be mine as

a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak unto the sons of Israel.”

God designated Israel as the people He had chosen to be His treasure above all other nations of the earth. The Law given on Sinai was not simply a collection of moral precepts for devout individuals but *a covenant* between Yahweh and *the entire nation of Israel*. Note that the second person pronoun in the passage (“*ye*”) is plural, not singular. In subsequent passages it is not individual Israelis who one-by-one accept this covenant but the entire nation will proclaim, “all that Yahweh has commanded we will do.”

The Law of Moses was given to Israel and NOT to any other nation. The Law was specific to Israel and her obedience to it was vital to the continuing possession of the Promised Land. The Law certainly included moral commandments and absolutes but it was much more than that. It was a national contract between Yahweh and Israel that included a sacrificial system, dietary restrictions, laws of inheritance, civil regulations, penal codes and so on. Some of the Law's regulations were specific to Israel living in the Promised Land such as the establishment of Cities of Refuge.

One purpose of the Law was to keep Israel holy and separate from the surrounding pagan nations. For example, the dietary restrictions regarding “clean” and “unclean” meats were designed to make Israel distinct from its pagan neighbors and maintain its ritual purity:

LEVITICUS 20:24-26, “You shall inherit their land and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Yahweh your God *who has separated you from the nations*. *You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean*; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I, Yahweh, am holy and *have separated you from the nations that you should be mine*.”

This is not to say that the religion of Israel was closed to all but ethnic Hebrews. The Law itself provided the means whereby a Gentile who was attracted to the faith of Israel could join himself to it. This would include circumcision in the case of males as well as taking on all the obligations of the Law. In effect the Gentile “convert” would become a member of the nation of Israel. Since circumcision was THE fundamental sign of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel it was not optional.

### **Gentiles in the Early Church:**

Originally the church consisted of only Jewish believers in Jesus. Very likely they did not view themselves as a new religion but rather as a messianic movement or sect within Judaism. Jesus had not abrogated the faith of ancient Israel but rather fulfilled it. In the first chapters of Acts the new “way” spread among Jews beginning in Jerusalem and quickly advanced to surrounding regions.

It is only in ACTS chapter 10 that the Gospel is opened to Gentiles after Peter’s visit to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius is called “a centurion of the band called Italian,” clearly a Gentile in service to Rome but he is also described as “*devout and fearing God*...doing many alms to the people and supplicating God continually.” Though he was a Gentile he was an adherent to the precepts of Israel and loved that nation. Yet he was still uncircumcised, not yet a Jewish proselyte. Technically he remained an “uncircumcised” Gentile despite his well-attested devoutness.

The opening of the Gospel to Gentiles necessitated divine intervention by means of visions given to both Cornelius and Peter. It had to be clear that the initiative came from God Himself. Peter saw a vision of a

sheet descending from heaven filled with ritually unclean animals. Peter was commanded to “rise, slay and eat.” This he refused to do. As a devout Jew “at no time had he eaten anything common or unclean.” To his reply a voice from heaven responded, “what things God has cleansed be not thou making common” (ACTS 10:9-16).

Following the vision two men from Cornelius arrived in Joppa. They told Peter, “Cornelius, a centurion, ***a man righteous and fearing God, well-attested by the whole nation of the Jews***, has been instructed by an angel to send for you to his house and to hear words from you.” Cornelius, though an uncircumcised Gentile, had an excellent reputation among many Jews. God did not choose just any Gentile but one known for his righteousness. Despite the man's excellent reputation Peter's first words to Cornelius were, “You well know how it is unlawful for a Jew to be joining himself or coming in to one of another race.” This statement demonstrates the obstacle to be overcome and why divine intervention was necessary. Despite a Gentile's righteousness he or she was still outside the covenant, still “beyond the pale,” so to speak, because of his or her status as a Gentile. He or she was outside the Law and hence “lawless.”

Peter went on, “yet to me has God pointed out that I should be calling no man common or unclean...of a truth I find that God is no respecter of persons but ***in every nation he that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him***” (verse 35). During Peter's sermon the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles “who were hearing the word” causing those who had come with Peter, they “of the circumcision,” to be “amazed ***that upon the Gentiles*** also the free-gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out.”

Those of the “circumcision” were amazed because God gave the very same gift of the Spirit to ***uncircumcised Gentiles***. Only now does Peter realize that people from every nation are acceptable to God if they fear him and live righteously whether or not they are members of Israel. ***The underlying issue was the acceptability of Gentiles AS GENTILES into the new faith.***

Some Jewish believers in Jerusalem found fault with Peter's actions at Caesarea because “he went in to men ***uncircumcised and did eat with them***” (ACTS 11:2-3). They did not criticize Peter for engaging in some moral depravity or gross sin, or even for fellowshiping with debased sinners, but simply ***for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles.***

To his critics Peter responded by relating all the events beginning with the vision he received in Joppa. Peter's justification for his actions was that “if therefore the like free-gift God gave to them as even unto us ***when we had believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ***, who was I that could withstand God?” The fact that God had given the Spirit to Gentiles while still in an uncircumcised state constituted irrefutable proof that ***He had accepted Gentiles as Gentiles on the basis of their faith in Jesus.*** After hearing Peter's defense the church at Jerusalem “glorified God, saying, ‘***even unto the Gentiles has God granted repentance unto life***’.” Throughout this Gentiles are treated as a category distinct from Jews.

## **In Galatia:**

In GALATIANS chapters 1 and 2 Paul details how he received his Gospel for the Gentiles by divine revelation, a commission later confirmed by the leadership of the Jerusalem church. He goes on to describe how certain “false brethren secretly introduced, slinked in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus” during a previous controversy at the church in Antioch (GALATIANS 2:4-5). There certain Jewish believers from Jerusalem were infiltrating the church with disruptive teachings. This included a claim that it was inappropriate for Jewish believers in Jesus to have table fellowship with Gentile Christians, to participate in communal meals with Gentile followers of Jesus. The pressure brought to bear was so great that even Peter and Barnabas were caught up in it (GALATIANS 2:11-13).

Paul then relates his confrontation with Peter: “when I saw that they are not walking straightforwardly regarding the truth of the gospel I said to Cephas in front of all: ‘If you, being a Jew, are living like Gentiles and not like Jews, **how are you compelling the Gentiles to Judaize?**’” The conflict was over the status of Jewish versus non-Jewish believers, between circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles.

The key phrase in GALATIANS 2:14 is: “**compelling Gentiles to Judaize.**” The Greek verb used is a strong one and means just that: “to compel, to force” (*anangkazō*). The infinitive translated “to judaize” (*Ioudaizo*) occurs only here in the New Testament and is from a Greek word meaning **to live like a Jew, to adopt a Jewish lifestyle**. Herein is the crux of the problem: some at Antioch (and later in Galatia) were “compelling” Gentile believers in Jesus to conform to Jewish customs and practices, at least to certain ones. The act of refusing to eat with Gentile believers would insinuate that there was something defective in their faith, that on some level they were not yet full-fledged members in good standing of God's covenant people.

While the dispute in Antioch was over table fellowship the controversy in Galatia was primarily over circumcision. In GALATIANS 5:2 Paul declares that, “if you are getting circumcised Christ will profit you nothing” and in verse 12 he complains how his opponents were “**compelling you to get circumcised,**” once more using the same strong verb “to compel.”

Rather than an abstract theological debate over unmerited Divine grace versus meritorious human works, the controversy at Galatia was focused on questions about Gentile standing in God's covenant people and the immediate bone of contention was circumcision. In order to be members in good standing of God's covenant must Gentile believers also add circumcision to their faith in Jesus?

This sort of controversy in the early church is not surprising. The first disciples were all Jews and initially the new “way” was open only to Jews. It was only after the events recorded in ACTS chapter 10 that the Gospel was opened to Gentiles. The early church did not view itself as a new religion distinct from the faith of Israel but rather as an extension and fulfillment of their ancestral faith. Jesus was the promised Jewish messiah in whom all the promises of the Hebrew scriptures were fulfilled. Sooner or later the question would arise: what is the basis on which Gentile believers are acceptable as members of God's covenant people?

The movement begun by Jesus was descended from the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was only natural that some Jewish believers would look to the old covenant requirements for parameters on what defined and delimited the covenant people of God now that Israel's messiah had arrived. Inevitably circumcision would become a key question since it was the original sign of Yahweh's covenant with Israel. It even predated the Law of Moses having been given to Abraham. Indeed proponents of circumcision had strong scriptural proof texts such as GENESIS 17:1-13 on their side and had not the Law of Moses previously made provision for Gentiles to join Yahweh's covenant people by undergoing circumcision?

### **Paul's Response:**

Paul does not charge his opponents with compelling Gentile believers to keep the entire Law of Moses. He does not accuse them of repudiating faith in Jesus. There are indicators that Paul's Jewish opponents were only insisting that Gentiles conform to certain requirements of the Law such as circumcision. The opponents were Jewish believers in Jesus. They were not denying their faith in him or the necessity for such faith. In effect they were arguing for faith in Jesus PLUS circumcision and perhaps some other regulations.

Paul's main proposition is found in GALATIANS 2:15-21. Paul first lays out what he holds in common with his Jewish opponents (verses 15-16) then summarizes the main areas of disagreement (verses 17-21). He begins by spelling out the basis on which a man or woman is set in right standing before God:

***“We ourselves*** by nature Jews and not sinners from among the Gentiles, having known that man is not set right ***from the works of the law*** but ***through the faith of Christ Jesus***; ***even we*** believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be set right ***from the faith of Christ*** and ***not from the works of the law***; because from the works of the law will no flesh be set right.”

This passage is a continuation of Paul's statement in verse 14 to Peter. The passage begins in the Greek with an emphatic pronoun, ***“we ourselves.”*** With no pressing reason to do otherwise we should allow the pronoun its full force. Rather than a rhetorical statement Paul is stating something with which Peter and other Jewish believers agreed, namely that a man is not put in right standing with God “from the works of the Law” but rather on the basis of faith. This understanding was common ground between them though wittingly or not some were adding things to it. As Paul points out even Jewish believers such as he and Peter responded to the Gospel message by exercising faith in Jesus (***“even we*** believed in Christ Jesus”). The opponents were not advocating legalism (at least as we typically understand it) but faith with additions.

Christians can instinctively read this passage as a rejection of justification on the basis of ***good works and human effort in general***. While that principle may be true here Paul qualifies what “works” he means, specifically ***“the works of the law.”*** In the context of Galatians “law” must refer to the Law of Moses. The Greek preposition used with “works of the law” is *ek*, meaning “out of, from,” and it stresses source. It can be rendered idiomatically “on the basis of.” Paul is stating that a man or woman is not set right with God on the basis of works as defined in the Law of Moses. Instead a man is justified “through the faith of Christ Jesus.”

Precisely what Paul means by “the faith of Jesus” is not stated here but the response by the believer to it is to believe in Jesus. What Paul means is made clearer in verse 20: “I live by faith, that of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up on my behalf.” The phrase is likely shorthand for the faithful self-sacrificial obedience of Jesus especially as demonstrated on the Cross. That is what established the basis for justification, not the Law. The contrast in Paul's statement in verses 15-16 is between two different ways of being justified before God: either “from the works of the law” or “through the faith of Jesus Christ.” One is not set right through faith in general but through a specific faith, the faith of Jesus Christ. This contrast becomes sharper in verse 21 where Paul states, “if righteousness is through the law then Christ died in vain.” If a man or woman is set right with God on the basis of the works of the Law (such as circumcision) then Jesus died for nothing.

In verses 17-21 Paul lays out the key areas of disagreement:

GALATIANS 2:17-21, “Now if in seeking to be set right in Christ we ourselves also were found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if the things that I pulled down these again I build I prove myself to be a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. With Christ have I been crucified; and I am living no longer but living in me is Christ, as long as I now do live in flesh I live by faith, the *faith* of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up in my behalf. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if through the law is righteousness then Christ died without cause.”

It is probable the opponents claimed that if the Law does not regulate the Christian's life then sin and moral anarchy will result. This line of reasoning would make Christ responsible for the consequent sin.

This Paul emphatically denies. The charge that a Law-free Gospel leads inevitably to more sin is simply false. To return to the Law after having been freed from it is the true transgression. By rebuilding the old way one transgresses because one effectively states that Jesus died in vain, that his death failed to accomplish what God intended. This is transgression of the worst sort.

The purpose of the law was to ‘work its way out of a job’ by bringing us to a position wherein we can live unto God (“I through the law died to the law that I might live unto God”). The place where the Christian “dies to the Law” is on the Cross of Christ. In Paul’s parlance to die to something is to cease to have relevant relationship to it. It is the crucifixion of Christ that has released believers from the Law’s jurisdiction and its potential curse.

In the remainder of Galatians Paul works out his proposition in detail.

### **GALATIANS 3:1-5 - Arguments From Experience:**

“O senseless Galatians, who has bewitched you to whom Jesus Christ crucified was openly portrayed? This only I wish to learn from you: received you the Spirit from the works of the law or from a hearing of faith? So thoughtless are you? Having made a beginning in the Spirit are you now to be made complete by the flesh?...Therefore he who is supplying you the Spirit and energizing mighty works among you, is it from the works of the law or from a hearing of faith?”

Paul’s first argument appeals to the original experience of the Galatians. When they responded to the Gospel they received the Holy Spirit. This occurred before the present controversy and its question about circumcision. This is reminiscent of Peter’s pivotal argument in ACTS 11:1-18. Like Peter Paul points to the gift of the Spirit as evidence of God’s acceptance of the Galatians in their uncircumcised state. The means by which the Spirit entered their lives was faith, not the works of the Law. His statements about “beginning in Spirit” and going on “to be made complete by the flesh” indicate the line of reasoning of the opponents: *now that you have come to faith and received the Spirit you need to add circumcision (and perhaps other deeds of the Law) in order to complete your faith.*

### **GALATIANS 3:6-14 - Arguments From Scripture:**

Paul next appeals to scripture in particular to the example of Abraham. He refers to passages from Genesis that link Abraham to *faith, righteousness* and *blessing* for Gentiles. Paul continues the theme of faith but now has the faith of Abraham in view. Paul introduces new topics including, who are the true “sons of Abraham,” the bringing in of the Gentiles was foretold to Abraham and the curse of the Law. This section is linked to the previous one by the reference to the Spirit in verse 14.

Abraham was reckoned righteous before God on the basis of faith (“just as Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness”) therefore those who are “from faith, the same are sons of Abraham.” In His covenant with Abraham God promised that in Abraham “all the Gentiles will be blessed.” From the beginning God’s purpose was “that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Jesus Christ in order that the promise of the Spirit we might receive through the faith.” Here Paul links the “blessing of Abraham” to the “promise of the Spirit.”

In contrast to those who are from faith those who are “from the works of the Law” inevitably place themselves under the Law’s curse. The Law itself pronounced that those under it are obligated “to continue in *ALL* the things written in the Book of the Law, to do them” (DEUTERONOMY 27:26). Paul will refer to this idea again in GALATIANS 5:3 (“every man getting circumcised is a debtor to do *the whole law*”). *The Law is not a pick-and-choose menu but an all-or-nothing proposition.* Those Gentile

believers who are considering getting circumcised need to understand whether much more is involved beyond that singular act. This indicates Paul's opponents were not insisting that Gentiles must keep the whole Law but only portions of it, otherwise his argument loses its force. But the Law itself does not allow for such an option since it requires members of the covenant to do all that is written in it.

Paul concludes this section with the word “promise,” which leads into the next section and is its key theme.

### **GALATIANS 3:15-18 - The Original Covenant & the Promise:**

In verses 15 to 18 Paul argues that the covenant with Abraham represents God's original intent and his irreversible will. A covenant once ratified “no one voids or appends” therefore the law that “came into being four hundred and thirty years later does not invalidate so as to nullify” the previous promise. The promise was not spoken just to Abraham but also to “his seed,” singular, and that “seed” is Christ. The promised inheritance, which included blessings for Gentiles, is not therefore “from the law” but through “the promise to Abraham.” Paul's line of reasoning here is *covenantal*.

### **GALATIANS 3:19-25 - The Purpose & Duration of the Law:**

Paul begins the next section with an obvious question: “why, then, the law?”

First, the Law was “added” meaning it was brought in *after* the original covenant and promise, therefore the Law is supplemental and subordinate to the covenant. Second, the Law was added “because of transgression” probably meaning the Law was intended to identify sin to God's people. Third, Paul places a time limit on the Law: “until the promised seed should come.” Fourth, the Law was mediated to Israel by angels. This idea is derived from a Jewish interpretation of DEUTERONOMY 33:2, a tradition that angels were involved with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. While the Law was given through angels the covenant promise to Abraham came directly from Yahweh. Fifth, the Law was given by the “hands of a mediator” likely meaning Moses. Verse 20 is notoriously obscure (“Now a mediator implies more than one; but God is one”). In verse 19 Paul is demonstrating the relative inferiority of the Law in comparison to the original promise. The sense of verse 20 seems to be that a mediator implies a plurality of persons (in the giving of the Law) whereas God, who is one, regarding the promised redemption acted directly and unilaterally.

Verses 21-22 point out the Law's function: *to identify sin and condemn the sinner*. Verses 23-25 describe the Law as a custodian assigned to supervise the life of the nation of Israel. This supervisory function was only temporary until such a time as “the faith is revealed” and that faith is defined as “the promise from the faith of Jesus Christ,” which is to be “given to those who believe.” With the coming of the promise we are no longer “under the tutor.” To his covenantal line of reasoning Paul has added a *temporal* aspect.

### **GALATIANS 3:26-29 - The Promise Redefines Relationships:**

“For you are all sons of God through the faith in Christ Jesus; for you, as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ: there cannot be Jew or Greek, there cannot be bond or free, there cannot be male and female, for all you are one in Christ Jesus. Now if you are of Christ by consequence you are Abraham's seed, according to promise, heirs.”

This passage is pivotal to Paul's overall argument. It emphasizes the oneness of God's people, that the old divisions are wholly inappropriate now that the Promise has come. To pursue a Law-observant

lifestyle will serve to re-erect the old barriers, in particular the division between Jew and Gentile. Several times Paul emphasizes the word “ALL” in this passage. Both Jewish and Gentile believers have been made “sons of God” through their oneness with Christ. It is now “in Christ” that believers become true sons of God and “Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise.” This does not mean that at present ethnicity, gender and the like play no role in our daily lives, but in regards to one’s standing with and relationship to God they no longer matter.

### **GALATIANS 4:1-7 - Analogy of Guardianship:**

“But when the fullness of the time came God sent forth his Son, who came to be of a woman, who came to be under the law, that those who were under law he might redeem, that the sonship we might duly receive; and because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts exclaiming, 'Abba! Oh Father!' So that no longer are you a servant but a son; and if a son, an heir also through God.”

Paul uses an illustration from everyday life to show how the Law was assigned a guardianship role over Israel *for a set period of time* to supervise them during their time of “spiritual minority.” With the coming of Jesus the set time has ended and the sons of God, the “heirs,” are now free from their former custodian.

### **GALATIANS 4:8-20 - Paul's Personal Concern:**

This section expresses Paul's personal concern for the Galatians and what will result if they take the path they are contemplating. He likens pursuing the works of the Law to the Galatians' pagan past and refers to it as “turning back to the weak and beggarly elemental principles;” in short, apostasy, an abandonment of what God has done in Christ. Paul saw true danger if Gentile believers were to add a Law-observant lifestyle to their Christian faith, at least if done as something mandatory.

### **GALATIANS 4:21-31 - An Allegory Using Hagar and Sarah:**

The allegory about Hagar and Sarah illustrates that it is the physical line of descent from Abraham, Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael, that is associated with slavery, while the line of promise, Isaac, the one born from Sarah according to the promise of God, is linked to freedom and promise. It is not the physical descendants of Abraham who are free but the children of promise.

### **GALATIANS 5:1-12 - Hold Fast to the Freedom In Christ:**

“With her freedom Christ has made you free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not again be held fast with a yoke of servitude! See, I Paul say to you if you are getting circumcised Christ will profit you nothing. *Yea, I bear solemn witness again to every man getting circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law.* You have been set aside from Christ, you who are to be declared righteous from the law; you have fallen out of his grace... for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails anything nor uncircumcision, but faith energizing through love.”

Paul even more explicitly argues that if one is circumcised he is obligated to keep the entire Law of Moses. If one is obligated to keep a portion of the Law one must keep the entire Law.

### **GALATIANS 5:13-18 - Live by Love and the Spirit:**



“Only turn not your freedom into an occasion to the flesh but by means of your love be serving one another; for the whole law is summed up in one word: you shall love your neighbor as yourself...be walking in the Spirit and fleshly coveting you will in nowise fulfill...and if by the Spirit you are being led, *you are not under the law.*”

One of the charges against Paul's Law-free Gospel was that detaching oneself from the Law leads inevitably to sin (“if in seeking to be set right in Christ even we ourselves were found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin?”). Paul now addresses this charge. In the first place believers are to live according to the rule of love. They are to serve one another. True love of neighbor forbids one to do anything that will hurt his or her neighbor. The love command is the summation of the whole Law and ironically Paul derives it from the Law. Second, Christians must walk “in the Spirit” and thereby they will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. Those who do so are “NOT UNDER THE LAW.” Here is an explicit statement that those who have responded to Christ by faith are not under the Law of Moses.

### **GALATIANS 5:19-26 – Flesh Versus Spirit:**

Paul gives two catalog lists: the “works of the flesh” and the “fruit of the Spirit.” The works of the flesh include “fornication, impurity, wantonness, idolatry, enchantment, enmities, strife, jealousy, wrath,” etc. Those who practice such things “will not inherit God's kingdom.” This demonstrates that Paul's law-free gospel is not a formula for moral anarchy. He believes that sin has consequences. Each of these sins was condemned under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant established in Christ has both continuity and discontinuity with the Old. Paul was not opposed to right living or obedience. In contrast the “fruit of the Spirit” includes “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, graciousness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control.” Against such things there is no need of law.

### **GALATIANS 6:1-10 - Actions Have Consequences:**

“Be not deceiving yourselves! God is not to be mocked; for whatever a man sows, the same shall he also reap because he that sows to his own flesh, out of the flesh shall reap corruption, whereas he that sows to the Spirit, out of the Spirit shall reap everlasting life. And in doing that which is honorable let us not be fainthearted for in due season we shall reap if we faint not.”

Paul demonstrates his conviction that human actions have consequences, either good or bad. Paul is not opposed to good works or obedience. How one lives today will determine what one will reap in the future. That Christians are not under the Mosaic Law does not mean that they are lawless or unaccountable for their actions.

### **GALATIANS 6:11-18 – Concluding Arguments:**

“As many as are wishing to make a good show in flesh, *the same are compelling you to get circumcised*, only that for the cross of Christ Jesus they may not be suffering persecution! For not even they who are getting circumcised are themselves observing the law but are wishing you to be circumcised that in your flesh they may boast themselves. With me, however, far be it to be boasting except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ whereby to me a world has been crucified and I to a world; for *neither circumcision is anything nor uncircumcision*, but a new creation.”

The conclusion to the letter summarizes the basic issue: *compelling Gentile believers in Jesus to get circumcised*. Paul waxes bold by attacking the motives of his opponents. They did so to avoid

persecution. Possibly he means that by getting their Gentile converts circumcised they would remove an offense to non-believing Jews who may have been criticizing Jewish Christians for their interaction with uncircumcised Gentiles. Circumcision would make them Jewish proselytes, at least technically, and bring them within the sphere of the Judaism. It is not clear what Paul means when he says his opponents do not “keep the law.” Based on his previous statements about the obligation to keep the whole law this probably means his opponents were not in fact keeping the entire law themselves despite their insistence on circumcision.

Because of the Cross of Christ Paul's former way of life has been brought to an end. In the light of the Cross to those who are now new creatures “in Christ” circumcision or uncircumcision no longer matter. Regarding one's standing before God such things are matters of indifference.

### **Some Conclusions & Summary Points**

The issue that occasioned the Epistle to the Galatians was circumcision. Some Jewish believers from Jerusalem were insisting that Gentile believers must go on to become circumcised. They were “compelling them to Judaize,” to adopt a Jewish lifestyle. Such claims insinuated the original saving faith of the Gentile Galatians in the crucified Jewish messiah was defective. To the opponents their continuing status as uncircumcised Gentiles made them inadequate to be full members of God's covenant people and “sons of Abraham.” Intentional or not this was an argument that the Cross of Christ was insufficient for right relationship with God. ***Gentiles AS GENTILES were deficient.*** They needed to get circumcised and become Jewish proselytes. It is likely Paul's opponents were not insisting that Gentiles must keep the entire Law, only certain ones. Possibly the opponents had not thought out the full ramifications of their line of reasoning. Paul saw clearly where things would lead. The opponents were not denying Jesus or the necessity for faith in him. Instead they were arguing for faith in Jesus plus something more.

#### **Key Points:**

- 1) Part of Paul's argument is ***covenantal***. He appeals to the original covenant with Abraham and makes the later Law of Moses supplemental to it. Now that the promise had arrived there was no more need to remain under the old system.
- 2) Paul also uses ***temporal*** or “salvation history” arguments. The Law came 430 years after the promise. It was an interim stage in Redemptive History. It was to continue only until the Seed of Abraham arrived.
- 3) Paul answers the question: why the Law? The Law came because of transgressions. One of its purposes was custodial to supervise Israel for a set duration until the promise should come.
- 4) Paul argues that the Law is a package deal. If one is obligated to keep portions of it one is obligated by the Law itself to keep the whole law. This invalidates artificial solutions such as dividing the Law into “ceremonial” and “moral” components.
- 5) Paul states explicitly that now that Christ has come we are no longer under the Law.
- 6) Paul addresses charges that his Law-free gospel results in sin. Paul is not opposed to obedience or good works, or necessarily to law as a general principle. Elsewhere he even speaks of the “law of Christ” (1 CORINTHIANS 9:15-23). Continuing in sin will result in a deadly harvest for the sinner. There is

continuity and discontinuity between the Old and the New. The New is epitomized by love especially as manifested in Christ's obedience on the Cross.

7) The underlying dispute in Galatia centered on the status of Gentile believers. In the church is a Gentile who exercises faith in Christ and receives the Spirit acceptable in the covenant community AS A GENTILE or must he or she also adopt a Jewish way of life including circumcision?

In Galatians Paul did not exhort Jewish Christians to go out and have their circumcision undone; he did not tell them to cease and desist from all Jewish customs and practices. What he objected to was forcing others, especially Gentile believers, to conform to a Jewish way of life. Since circumcision has no effect on one's right standing before God it is or should be a matter of relative indifference. There is nothing inherently wrong with being circumcised. It is when one compels others to do so that a line is crossed, when someone insists that it is necessary to be a member in good standing of God's covenant people.

Contemporary proponents of mandatory Law-keeping frequently argue that without the Law Christians will have no moral compass to guide their lives. This is a false dichotomy. Paul wrote in 1 CORINTHIANS 9:20-22, "to the Jews I became as a Jew that I might win Jews; to those who were under the law as under law, not being myself under the law, that those who were under the law I might win. To those who were without the law as without law, *not being without law to God but in-law to Christ* that I might win those who were without law." Those who are "in Christ" no longer live under the jurisdiction of the Mosaic Law. Instead they are forevermore "in-law" to Jesus. The Law defined how Israel was to live whereas Christ defines the Christian way of life.

As in his other letters so in Galatians one great reality lies behind Paul's words: Jesus the crucified Messiah. In his opening salutation Paul describes Jesus as the one "who gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us out of the present evil age according to the will of our God" (1:4). The core of the message he first proclaimed in Galatia was Jesus the crucified one (3:1). On the Cross Jesus placed himself under the Law's curse in order to "redeem us out of the curse of the law...so that to the Gentiles the blessing of Abraham might come about in Jesus Christ, in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (3:13-14). At God's appointed time Jesus came in order to redeem those who were under the Law so that we might receive the son-ship (4:4-5). The Cross is the stumbling-block for which Paul suffered persecution (5:11), the very thing his opponents wished to avoid (6:12). Paul's only boast is in "the Cross of Christ" by which the world was crucified to Paul and he to the world (6:14).

Jesus is the risen Lord of All but he is so because of his faithful obedience culminating in his self-sacrificial death on the Cross. He will forever be identified as the Crucified One. The Great Turning Point of History was the Cross. For History this occurred on Golgotha, for Paul on the Road to Damascus. Once Jesus the Crucified Messiah is encountered life is forever changed, one way or another. There is no turning back to the old ways. Even if one apostatizes after meeting Jesus life can never be quite the same as it once was. For those who embrace Jesus in faith the old life is left at the foot of the Cross where he or she is "crucified with Christ." Thereafter the believer lives by faith, "the faith of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up in our behalf" (2:20).

Here is an area where the Orthodox understanding of who Jesus is runs into trouble. Any notion of Jesus as a "god-man," as being half man and half god or the mathematically-challenged "one hundred percent man, one hundred percent god," makes Jesus something other than human. He may be superhuman, suprahuman or even a human hybrid, but he ceases to be a genuine human being, effectively emptying the self-sacrificial death of Christ of substantive meaning and removing the original "offense" or scandal of the Cross, to use one of Paul's terms.

The risen Messiah is none other than the same human Jesus who was born, lived, taught, ministered, preached and suffered a horrific death on a Roman cross. Christians are called to proclaim his teachings and emulate his life example of sacrificial service.

The criterion that defines the true covenant people of God is Jesus, the crucified Messiah. That is the paradigm according to which Christians must conform their lives. Anything that distracts or deviates from this is to be rejected.