

Galatians: Notes for Theology Students

Luther is reputed to have said that he was married to the book of Galatians. It was his Katherine. This is not a bad parallel. His marriage to Katherine was held for centuries as the model for true Christian German marriage, until the onslaught of modern western feminism rejected the idyll of the hard working wife staying at home to faithfully support her (more important) husband. Similarly a Protestant viewpoint held sway in which Luther and Paul fled, terrorised from the crushing condemnation of the Law, into the sweet liberty of free justification in Christ. Such a view has wilted under the late twentieth century onslaught of what is known as the New Perspective on Paul. While the old view fits with Luther's struggles as he often explains them, don't forget that he offered two different accounts of his conversion, dating them at 3 years apart. Again, didn't Paul portray his conversion in the light of release from suffocating legalism? Maybe not. The trouble is that some of us were reared on sermons which waxed eloquent about the burden of the Law, and about Luther's fight (together with his co-reformers) against the Roman Catholic doctrine in which the believer had to obtain his or her salvation by works and more works. Except that it wasn't like that. And Luther was perfectly aware of it. His fight was against any suggestion that we are co-authors of our salvation. Salvation always depended on faith, always depended on grace. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant agreed on that point. They still do. But Luther's blinding light of revelation was that it is only our faith which counts. *Sola fide*. His co-reformers, Karlstadt especially, but also (I think) the Swiss reformers in general very quickly moved away from Luther's position and redefined faith more sharply as needing a regenerated lifestyle to authenticate it. But let's not digress. The point is that the preacher's stereotype of Luther doesn't fit, so why should we trust the stereotype of Paul? Would he have sat in Straight Street and recognised Bultmann's description of his moral conflict?

"Who could be sure he had done enough in this life to be saved? Would his observance of the Law and his good works be sufficient? For in the day of judgement all his good works would be counted up and weighed, and woe to him if the scales fell on the side of his evil deeds?"ⁱ

So what is the New Perspective on Paul? Most accounts stress the importance of E. P. Sanders who rejected the concept of a legalistic Second Temple Judaism.ⁱⁱ He argued that first century Jews believed themselves to be integrated into the Covenant from birth/circumcision and they stayed in until some kind of wrongdoing placed them out. If that happened restitution was required and they would graciously be readmitted by a merciful God through sacrificial atonement. Judaism was more about grace than Law. This understanding has been dubbed *covenantal nomism*. For our understanding of Paul this is crucial. The Damascus Road encounter, then, could not have been a release from the curse of the Law. The Law was friend, not foe. So, the sea change in Paul's life must have been something else.

Put another way, Christ was not the immediate solution to Paul's problem because he didn't have a problem in the first place. So he did not rush joyfully into the arms of the Saviour. He could not possibly have understood his need for a Saviour at that moment. The Law wasn't a problem until he became a Christian so belief in the crushing curse of the Law must have come later. He only realised his problem afterwards. And then, of course, he realised that Christ was, indeed, the solution. This is quite an attractive argument because I have seldom encountered people who became a Christian out of a crushing sense of sin. It is quite an existentialist portrait of Paul. But is it a true one?

Let's get back to the Damascus Road. What was the impact of that day on Paul? If it wasn't release from sin, could it have been 'moving of boundary markers'? Up to that point Paul had seen the Gentiles as excluded from God's covenant. He had persecuted the Hellenistic believers and cooperated in the martyrdom of Stephen, accused of denying the place of the temple in the national religion. Rather than a conversion Paul had received a call. Now he saw gentiles as co-heirs with Christ in the new messianic age. The boundary markers which had separated Jews and Gentiles had been removed by Christ. Out goes his prejudiced nationalism, in comes a new inclusiveness. The argument, then, is not "what place does the Law have?" but, "which of the Law's demands must the gentiles obey?" Paul's epistles are then to be read as defences of the exclusion of Sabbath observance, dietary rules and circumcision. The Judaizers of Galatia were not guilty of preaching the necessity of legalistic works for salvation but of a misplaced nationalism, insisting that as the gentiles had been graciously brought into the blessing of the Covenant, they must now adopt the blessing of the Law in order to stay within it.

Of course, I have simplified. I must commend Bruce W. Longenecker's book on Galatians to you, which not only explains in depth what I am about to say, but also has the virtue of being in the Main Arts library for us to borrow.ⁱⁱⁱ Linked with all of the above is another question: What is the connection between Old Testament election, the Covenant with Israel, and the spiritual status of the gentile believers? One opinion is that the Galatians had fallen victim to the view that their inclusion in God's kingdom was just an extension of the previous grace of God to Israel, Logically, then they need to adapt their lifestyle to enjoy the spiritual benefits of that inclusion, by obedience to the Law. Faced with so powerful an argument Paul is forced to stress that God has done something completely new. He has skipped the old Covenant completely and included the gentiles directly in the promise to Abraham. Beker claims that for Paul:

"Abraham can only be maintained in salvation-history as a figure of promise . . . The 'Jewish' dispensation of circumcision and the Torah has only been a curse and an obstacle . . . an interloper that inserted itself illegitimately between the promise to Abraham and its exclusive fulfilment in Christ."^{iv}

Martyn claims that in Galatians Paul shows no inclination to acknowledge the existence of a covenant between the time of Abraham and Christ. Covenant is not a theme he introduces himself, because he sees no linearity between the gentile's inclusion in God's people and the Jews under the Law.^v

Other theologians, squeeze Paul more deeply into the line of covenantal nomism and argue that Paul did indeed find lines of connection between the Law and the Christian Life. Dunn argues that Paul's argument against the Judaizers of Galatians was that they were too ethnically minded.^{vi} The Law expressed God's will, but should not be used to exclude the Gentiles. The non-Jews were now invited into the Covenant relationship. N. T. Wright takes a similar view, arguing that gentiles are now invited into the "eschatological phase" of Israel's history which will result in the final victory of God over all gods and nations.^{vii} It is worth mentioning that Longenecker agrees with neither side completely. For him, Paul in Galatians deliberately holds back from arguing that the gentiles have been included in the continuing story of Israel's salvation history (although other epistles like Romans affirm that Paul believed in such a continuation) because he wanted to cut the ground away from under the feet of the Judaizers. The term "Israel of God" is "stripped of

“any potential to signify an ethnic group . . .” Yet the divine triumph at the end of the world depends on the restoration and revival of an ethnic Israel.^{viii}

You will probably be saying something like, “yes, Peter, we can read those books too, but what is your view?” Well, I largely agree with the covenantal nomism theory. Some have argued that Judaism of those days was more complicated than the New Perspective admits. Mark A. Seifrid argues that first century rabbinic thought could argue for both a full blooded covenantal view in which Israel was elected unconditionally by grace, and also teach the possibility of attaining salvation by good works. They allowed the views to stand in contradiction rather than oppose each other.^{ix} Nevertheless the weight of opinion rejects the older Protestant interpretation of Paul groaning under the weight of sin before his encounter with Christ.

Secondly, Seifrid argues that the cross is lacking from the New Perspective of Paul. Galatians confirms what we know from other epistles, that Paul was overwhelmed by the cross:

“May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14)

To reduce his Damascus Road experience to a call is to propose that at the time he knew nothing of the cross or the early church’s identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God who died for our sins. I find that hard to accept. He met the crucified Christ on the road to Damascus and received Him as such. In all my life I have only ever met two people who were called to ministry at the time of their conversion. But it happens, and Paul’s conversion was both a submission to the cross of Christ and a call to free himself from the ethnically binding view of God’s grace which had turned him against the church. Justification for Paul was an event, not a process.^x Some of the proponents of the New Perspective do seem to diminish the need for a crucified when there is so much grace around, but the more evangelical proponents of the understanding, such as N. T. Wright do stress the importance of the cross and the atonement.

Thirdly, as a Christian preacher in a very relativistic age, I feel we must take care not to dumb down Paul’s moral requirements: the idea that if only we have the desire to obey God and willingness to repent, then we can enjoy a “covenant righteousness” without an Old Testament basis for our morality. There is, it seems to me, a pressure on the church to accept any moral behaviour, even if flies in the face of all that scripture teaches, because to censure someone for a moral lapse is judgemental and unloving. That seems to go firmly against Paul’s teaching of the cross in the life of the believer. God has left us with the Old Testament, and we must learn to use it and interpret it as a guideline, a rule of faith, for our life. There are rules of interpretation to be observed, but these will appear in the course of my studies.

Fourthly, I am attracted to the idea that the Judaizers were preaching a form of covenantal nomism. They certainly managed to make the idea attractive to the Galatians. Paul would not have reacted so strongly if he had felt that he was preaching an easier way. So he fights to free the Gospel from its ethnic limitations and offer it to the gentiles on their own terms (no circumcision, no dietary restriction, no Sabbath observance^{xi}), yet the Gospel brings greater challenges and more imposing moral lifestyle demands such as love, faithfulness, self discipline.^{xii}

There are other problems in Galatians also. Was it written to North or South Galatia (I have always tended to the North Galatia theory)? Where was it written from? These and other questions are covered in all major commentaries and need no further comment from me.^{xiii}

This is a daunting book. Navigating the issues surrounding law and freedom has been difficult since the early church. Trying to grasp Paul's understanding of "law", a word which occurs 32 times in Galatians, is hard. Immediate difficulties arise also when we try, unsuccessfully, to find a clear distinction between the ritual and ethical demands of the Law. We are left wondering where Paul gets his moral demands from. But for all that, the demands are laid out clearly, as is the triumph of the cross in our lives. To borrow a phrase from Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, we need to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling."

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February 2003

ⁱ R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1956), p.70.

ⁱⁱ E. P. Saunders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); also *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66CE* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1992)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 18-20. (Ref. BS2685.2.L66 1998) .

^{iv} J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980) p.51.

^v J. L. Martyn, 'Events in Galatia: Modified Covenantal Nomism versus God's Invasion of the Cosmos in the Singular Gospel: A response to J. D. G. Dunn and B. R. Gaventa' in J. M. Bassler (ed.), *Pauline Theology volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), pp. 160-179 .

^{vi} J. D. G. Dunn ' *The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism* " in Bassler (1991) pp.125-46 . Dunn's commentary on Galatians is available in the Main Arts Library. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A & C Black, 1993).

^{vii} N. T. Wright, 'Gospel and Theology in Galatians', in J.A. Jervis and P. Richardson (eds.) *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, JSNTS 108 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1994), pp. 222-39.

^{viii} Longenecker (1998), p. 177.

^{ix} Mark A. Seifrid, 'The 'New Perspective on Paul' and its Problems', *Themelios* Vol 25. No. 2 (February 2000), pp. 4-18. His book has received good reviews: Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000).

^x Some proponents of the New Perspective suggest that Paul's view of justification by faith was developed in the turmoil of the new church in Antioch. Again, that seems to me to underestimate the effect of the crucified Christ on Paul at and immediately subsequent to his conversion.

^{xi} I once planted a Baptist church in a town with 600 Seventh Day Adventists. Believe me, I am not an advocate for Sabbath Observance in the Jewish sense of the word. One day's rest in seven and worship on the Lord's Day, which I believe the Scripture ordains, are not the same thing (in my opinion).

^{xii} In-Gyu Hon, *the Law in Galatians* (JSTN Supplement Series, 81) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) I would commend this interesting defence of Paul's use of the Law. It available in the Main Arts Library.

^{xiii} For the record I am using the commentaries by:

William Hendricksen, *Galatians* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968).

John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 1992).

Roy Clements, *No Longer Slaves* (Leicester: IVP, 1997).

George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatians*, 2nd ed. (SNTS Monograph Series 35) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).