

THE GALATIAN HERESY: WHY WE NEED TO GET IT RIGHT

BY RICH LUSK

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Misunderstanding “Galatianism” has caused several problems in the Reformed church. Because circumcision is at issue in the Galatian epistle, some have fallen into thinking that ritual per se, rather than anything uniquely Mosaic or Jewish, is the object of Paul’s critique. Likewise, his polemic against “works of the law” is not read in terms of the *temporary* function of the law in God’s purposes, but as a timeless, abstract critique of moralism and human merit. The redemptive-historical specificity of Paul’s argument has been lost. The narrative substructure of his theology has been overlooked. The result has been misapplication — or perhaps I should say missed applications — of Paul’s language.

First, I want to deal first with the supposed anti-ritualism in Galatians. In the background of Galatians is the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. (This council actually took place after Paul wrote Galatians, for if it had already happened Paul almost certainly would have appealed to it in his argument against the Judaizers. But the situation described in Acts 15 sheds light on the kind of problems and pressures the Galatian church was facing.)

From Acts 15, we learn that certain Jewish brethren were claiming that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Circumcision, of course, was not the only issue, but it stood as the most prominent and most distinctive mark of Judaism. However, the apostles did not argue in the council that salvation is by grace rather than by works in the way that would have if their target had been a form of semi- or full-blown Pelagianism. Rather, the entire debate revolves around whether or not Gentiles as such can be admitted to full membership in the covenant. (Gentiles as such could be saved in the Old Covenant, as God-fearers, but their relationship to God was rather undefined. Presumably they were saved under the terms of the global Noahic covenant, not the Abrahamic or Mosaic covenants. At any rate, that status of the Gentile believers is clearly the cause for the assembly.)

Peter’s speech declares that salvation has come to the Gentiles apart from Torah observance. The Spirit did not come upon only those who possessed the Torah of Moses, but the Gentiles as well. God made “no distinction” between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Therefore, the Gentiles should not *ex post facto* be made to submit to the yoke of Moses — that is to say, they should not be brought under the regulations and customs of the Old Covenant because in their case the Spirit bypassed that preparatory stage and brought them directly into the New Covenant. If they were already members of the Christian covenant apart from Jewish customs, how could such customs be imposed on them as necessary for full covenant membership? When Peter says salvation has come in the same manner to Jews and Gentiles (15:11), his point is not merely that salvation comes by faith in Jesus, but that it comes apart from Jewishness. That is the key: the entire debate centers around the limits and terms of covenant membership, not accumulating merit in order to attain salvation by works.

James then clinches the argument in Acts 15 by appealing not to a passage that declares salvation is by grace through faith, but by appealing to a text that prophesied the inclusion of the Gentiles in the worship of the renewed, eschatological people of God (Amos 9:11-12). The Gentiles, too, have been formed into a “people for his name” (15:14). The decree of the council, then, is not a condemnation of Pelagianism (“Do not attempt to earn your salvation by submitting to circumcision as though it were a meritorious work”) but a call to Gentile believers to adhere to a few basic Mosaic regulations during this time of transition (“We should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” – laws taken directly out of Lev. 17-18). The Gentiles were called to bear with their weaker Jewish brethren for a short period and make concessions to their customs for the sake of unity (cf. Rom. 14-15). Jew-Gentile solidarity is the goal.

(For a discussion of what the prohibitions meant as well as their Levitical background, see James Jordan, "The Mosaic Dietary Laws and the New Covenant: Studies in Food and Faith No. 12." Jordan suggests the directives in view Acts 15 stem from Lev. 17-18 and are binding. For example, the dietary regulations of Acts 15 merely reinstate the Noahic dietary model and are not peculiarly Jewish.)

Furthermore, the letter from the apostles did not release Gentiles from the burden of attempting to earn their own salvation, as though that had been at issue. It simply removed the burden of having to carry out *all* the directives of the Mosaic law as a part of Christian living, something which not even the Jews had succeeded in keeping. (Trying to get only kosher foods and observe the Sabbath and feast days and cleanness laws was quite difficult in an otherwise pagan culture, far removed from Jerusalem and the temple.) The four aspects of Mosaic legislation the Gentiles are advised to uphold are presented as a relatively lighter burden (15:28-29). But those four laws are not part of a *reduced* Pelagian program, for no Pelagian system was ever in view at any point in the discussion. It's not as though the disciples are saying the Gentiles can now buy salvation at a bargain price of law-keeping in just four areas, whereas the Jews were claiming the *whole* law had to be kept to earn salvation; that kind of debate simply wasn't on the radar screen.

All of these facts from Acts must serve as presuppositions in our study of Galatians. Because we do not have an epistle or sermon from the Judaizers, we have to surmise what they believed from Paul's side of the conversation and from the record of Acts. But nothing anywhere indicates they were telling people to earn salvation apart from grace. Rather, every indication is that they insisted on submission to the yoke of Moses for full rights and privileges in the covenant community. Circumcision was most prominent because it was the sign of initiation into Mosaic discipleship. As Paul himself said, if you submit to circumcision, you are obligated to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:3). For Paul, the true (eschatological) intent of the Torah will be "fulfilled" (note that this is an eschatological term, not merely a moral term) if the Jews and Gentiles in the Galatian community practice love in the power of the Holy Spirit (5:13ff).

Paul does not want the Galatian Christians to submit to circumcision because to do so would fundamentally negate the work of Christ. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has abolished the law, with its barriers to God's presence (think of the veils in the temple) and its barriers between God's people (think of the graded levels of access in the temple system). To go on circumcising as a sign of covenant membership would imply a defect or incompleteness to Christ's work. Thus, circumcision was not to be practiced. Jesus had opened the door to full covenant membership to Gentiles as such, in accord with the ancient promises (Gen. 12:1ff, etc.).

This raises an important point, one made quite clearly by Tim Gallant in his article "[What Saint Paul Should Have Said: Is Galatians a Polemic Against Legalism?](#)" Tim points out that Paul is not just critiquing the *attitude* with which the Galatians were approaching circumcision. Paul does not write, "You foolish Galatians! Don't you know good works like circumcision cannot earn salvation? It's by grace, not by meritorious acts of obedience, that we are saved." Paul never says that because it's not what he was confronting.

Again, as Gallant points out, the Judaizers' demand for circumcision could have been interpreted in similar fashion to the Christian demand for baptism. The Judaizers might have said, "We aren't suggesting that circumcision is meritorious. After all, it was given as part of the gracious covenant with Abraham. It's not a work done by a person — it's something done to him by someone else. But it is the mark of membership in the covenant that God requires of his faithful people as a sign of their gratitude for his gracious redemption." If Galatians is an argument against Pelagianism, not only has Paul argued poorly, but he has left himself unprotected against powerful and persuasive rejoinders from the Judaizers!

So then, why is Paul against circumcision in Galatians? While some have acknowledged circumcision was not necessarily part of Pelagian system, they have pointed to ritualism per se as the problem. In Mark Baker's intriguing work *Religious No More*, he comes quite close to claiming that there must be no ritual badges of Christian identity (77, 177f). He reads Galatians as a critique of "religion." It's hard

to see how Baker can carve out room for the practice of baptism or the Eucharist – or anything else that might distinguish the church from the world – but he is quite certain that any community rituals and badges create a “religious boundary line fraught with . . . potential for self-righteousness and division” (178). Don Garlington (a Baptist) comes close to making the same mistake in his *Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance* (153n38): he collapses Paul’s anti-circumcision polemic into an argument against baptismal efficacy. Circumcision is treated as a stand in for any ritual or ceremony of initiation.

But ritual is inescapable. Without ritual there is no publicly identifiable covenant community. A ritual-less religion is impossible, just as a ritual-less life is impossible. Ritual and routine are necessary and unavoidable structuring devices, without which our experience of the world would be a disordered, buzzing, chaotic mess. Emphasis on ritual is not the Galatian heresy; the Galatian heresy is emphasis on the wrong ritual – in particular, on ritual that creates boundaries among the people of God where there ought not to be any. Whereas Old Covenant rituals created a divided covenant community, with priestly privileges distributed unequally, according to gender, ethnicity, and tribal ancestry, the rituals of the New Covenant form a royal priesthood in which all share evenly in sanctuary access and saintly privileges (cf., e.g., Heb. 10:19ff). The rite of initiation and the sacramental meal belong to all New Covenant members in the same way. This is the point of Gal. 3:27-8: Whereas the Old Covenant took into account these polarities of Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female, in the new creation, those who have been united to Christ and clothed with him through baptism share equally in the same status and inheritance. In the Old Covenant, rituals imposed a kind of partiality; not so in the New Covenant. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper create a fellowship of love, unity, and impartiality among all covenant members.

Second, What about Paul’s critique of “works of the law” in Galatians? The traditional post-Reformational reading suggests “works of the law” mean meritorious attempts to earn divine favor and salvation. “Works of the law” was Paul’s code phrase for Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Any attempt at garnering divine blessing through human effort falls under Paul’s critique.

Some key distinctions need to be made here. It is one thing to say Galatians is not an anti-Pelagian polemic; it is another thing altogether to suggest that Pelagianism is somehow acceptable as a theological program. In other words, denying that Paul is battling Pelagianism is not the same as endorsing Pelagianism. Personally, I think Paul would have condemned both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism in the harshest possible terms. In that sense, Paul is a monergist – indeed, an Augustinian or Calvinist, to speak anachronistically.

But if Paul was really combating Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, I suggest his argument would look quite different. For example, the entire discourse on the function of the law in Israel’s history as a tutor to lead them to Christ would have been unnecessary and, in fact, out of place. Paul simply could have appealed to the Creator/creature distinction: “You know you cannot earn anything from the Creator since all you are and have comes from him. No one has ever given anything to God that indebted him” (cf. Rom. 11:35). He could have simply stated his monergism: “Surely you Galatians know that salvation is by God’s grace alone and not human efforts. God is absolutely sovereign – nothing can be done apart from his enabling power” (cf. Rom. 9:18-21). He could have argued from human sinfulness – that is, from “total depravity”: “Don’t you know that by nature you are dead in your sin, spiritually speaking? Don’t you know that by nature you are a slave to sin, and unable to please God in your flesh? Don’t you know that you can do nothing to change your spiritual condition?” (cf. Eph. 2:1ff). Paul could have reminded them of indwelling sin: “Don’t you know, even your best works are still morally imperfect, and therefore subject to God’s judgment and wrath?” Yet, this is never the exact shape that Paul’s arguments take in Galatians. He has a different agenda, and therefore is facing a different kind of problem. The only time he explicitly defines the gospel in the letter (in 3:8), he does so in a way that opposes the universality of grace to Jewishness, not the sovereign nature of grace to works-righteousness. He believed in sovereign grace, to be sure, but the former is the point under dispute in the epistle.

Galatians simply doesn’t function as a polemic against Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism. It can be used to defeat those false soteriologies, quite obviously, but that isn’t its first order meaning. Exegesis

must not be confused with application. Paul's arguments about grace have more to do with the *who* and *where* of salvation than the *how*. That is to say, he is more concerned with delineating *the sphere* of Christ's grace and of the Spirit's work, showing this sphere is now considerably larger than the sphere in which the Torah functioned, than he is arguing that salvation cannot be achieved through meritorious works. For Paul, the point of the gospel is that it is offered to all nations and families (Gal. 3:8), not just the Jews. Thus it is fair to say that Galatians is more about the global purposes of God's grace (as revealed in the Abrahamic covenant – Gen. 12:1ff) than the fact that grace is not earned by human efforts or merits.

Interestingly, Paul even takes justification by faith as a presupposition he has *in common* with his Jewish opponents in Gal. 2:15-16. No one was claiming that human effort could accomplish justification. Every Jew knew the story of Abraham. Torah itself taught that the father of the covenant was justified by faith (in Gen. 15:6) apart from and before his great act of obedience on Moriah (in Gen. 22). Paul's critique of justification by works of the law is not about Pelagianism.

Rather, the debate was, "*Who* are the justified? Those who have faith in Jesus, sealed by baptism? Or those who believe in Jesus, and maintain the traditional Jewish sign of circumcision?" The issue on the table — or perhaps it would be more to the point to say the issue *dividing* the table — concerned the definition and demarcation of the eschatological covenant community. Who are the true sons of Abraham? Who are the heirs of the promises? Who belongs at the communion table? Those are the questions Paul answers in the core of the letter.

What was Galatianism then? What was Paul opposing with all his vigor as a denial of the true gospel? What was the nature of the false gospel the Judaizers were pushing? Paul seems to oppose the Judaizers for two reasons. We have already examined these, but will look at them more fully here.

First, their exclusivism limited the circle of covenant blessing to those who were under Torah either by birth or voluntary submission. For Judaizers, to be under Torah = under grace. But for Paul, the circle of Torah is not co-extensive with the range of God's grace. In Christ, grace is also available to those who are *not* under Torah. Whereas, for the Judaizers, the gospel is for all Israel, for Paul, the gospel is for all the families of the earth (Gal. 3:8). For the Judaizers, the Mosaic law, made exclusively with ethnic Israel, trumped the Abrahamic covenant, made with Abram while he was still an uncircumcised Gentile. For Paul, the Abrahamic covenant defined the global scope of God's salvific purposes, and the Mosaic covenant simply set one nation aside for a temporary period during which God prepared the way for that salvation to break into history in the fullness of time. For Paul, Israel had a monopoly on God's grace (more or less) that expired with the coming of Christ and the Spirit.

The Judaizers might have responded to Paul: "We are not restricting salvation to only those who are Jews ethnically, by birth. Gentiles can be saved too, but they have to enter through the gate of Moses. We're not being exclusive — we're just maintaining the age old boundary marker and initiation rite of the covenant." But for Paul, to insist on circumcision was to define the church in a fleshly way. The Judaizers were doing more than hanging on to an outdated, obsolete covenant sign. In its very nature, circumcision tended to generate a fleshly form of community. They wanted the Gentile Christians of Galatia to submit to circumcision so their foreskins could be a kind of trophy of their sectarian triumph (Ga. 6:12-13). The desire to promote circumcision as the sign of the covenant brought with it a desire to please men and to make others jealous (6:12). The Judaizers pushed circumcision as a way of avoiding persecution from the Jews and softening the offense of the cross (5:11). A circumcision-based community is inherently divisive (2:11ff), prideful (6:13-14), and prone to the works of the flesh, almost all of which have to do with relational sins (Gal. 5:19ff). In short, as Israel's sad history proved, whatever kind of community is formed by circumcision, it isn't the kind of community God ultimately desires — a community of love, peace, and joy, a community that can only be created by the indwelling of the Spirit.

In summary, the New Covenant community must be defined by Christ, not by Torah. This Torah-based exclusivism found in Galatians is just the kind of issue Paul addresses elsewhere in his epistles. For example, in Rom. 10:3, the Jews are ignorant of God's eschatological righteousness, so they go on attempting to establish their own righteousness, a covenant membership so to speak, that belongs

exclusively to them apart from the Gentiles. They have preferred their own righteousness as defined by the Sinai covenant to God's righteousness as revealed in the gospel of Christ, who is the end (goal) of the law for believers (Rom. 10:4). Israel will not confess Christ as Lord precisely because it means she will have to forgo her special privileges.

Next time some critic of the NPP tries to bait you by claiming justification is soteriological rather than ecclesiological, ask them: "So, are you telling me that justification is only for the Jews?" To admit that justification is also for Gentiles to admit that it is an ecclesial doctrine. Justification is about *more* than a catholic ecclesiology, uniting Jew and Gentile, but it certainly is not about *less* than this.

Second, Paul opposes the Judaizers because of their false eschatology. For the Judaizers, the old creation was too good to let go of without a fight. When word got round that Paul was including Gentiles as Gentiles in his communal meals, they reacted with hostility. After all, they thought, circumcision was a badge of the covenant given long ago. God commanded Abraham to circumcise his children and if the Gentiles wanted to become sons of Abraham, they would need to submit to circumcision as well.

But for Paul, circumcision was not part of the original Abrahamic covenant. It was added later, when Abraham began to take up more formally his special priestly calling on behalf of the nations. (Notice that circumcision is instituted in Gen. 17. In the next chapter, he intercedes for Sodom. A few chapters later, he intercedes for Abimelech and the king's family is spared.) Because circumcision was not part of the original Abrahamic covenant, Paul lumps it in with the Mosaic covenant. Abraham, in fact, was justified while he was still a Gentile, that is, while he was still a "sinner" (cf. Rom. 4). Circumcision was a sign to the uncircumcised of a righteousness that comes by faith apart from circumcision. That is to say, circumcision was a sign that the promised seed (cf. Gen. 3:15, 15:1-6) would bring in everlasting righteousness for believers. Circumcision was eschatological in orientation, practiced by the people through whom the seed would come in due time, with a built-in obsolescence once he did come.

Circumcision, on other words, was not a sign of salvation to the one who was circumcised. Rather it was a sign of salvation through the promised seed to *all* believers, Jew and Gentile. Being excluded from the Messianic line did not exclude one from hope of salvation in the Old Covenant, provided one trusted God to bring the seed into history and accomplish redemption in the fullness of time.

But then it becomes obvious why the practice of covenantal circumcision must cease once the seed has in fact come. The purpose for which God gave the sign of circumcision, and in fact the rationale behind the entire Mosaic apparatus, has been fully realized in the definitive circumcision ("cutting off") of Christ on the cross. To continue the bloody, sacrificial rite of circumcision after the final blood sacrifice has been offered at Calvary is to indicate there was something less-than-final and less-than-perfect and less-than-adequate about Christ's work. Jesus did not enter history, live, die, rise again, and return to heaven so that things could go on as they always had before in earthly history. He did not come from his Father, and then return, so that it could be "business as usual" in the world. Rather Jesus came to restore the cosmos, to make all things new, to bring in the promised messianic age, to make the blessings of salvation flow as far as the curse had been found, to pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, whether circumcised or not.

Thus, for Paul, what counts is not whether one has the old creation sign of circumcision, but whether one has entered the new creation through baptism (6:15). In the new creation, there is no special redemptive-historical role for the circumcised to play. The promised Adamic/Abrahamic/Davidic son has come and fulfilled all righteousness. All that matters is union with him and faith in him and obedience to him.

Because the Old Covenant ceremonial laws were laws of exile and exclusion rather than access and intimacy, laws of promise rather than fulfillment, for Gentile converts to come under these laws would be to take a major step backwards, just as for Jews to remain under them would be to stay in the old age. In fact, in Acts 10-11, Peter learns this lesson. For Peter to refuse to fellowship with Cornelius would have been equivalent to forsaking his office as an apostle of the New Covenant. For him to

impose Mosaic restrictions on Cornelius would have been to "defile" him (e.g., make him unworthy, and cause him to lose the sanctuary access he had in Christ).

To summarize this point: the essential difference between Paul and Judaism was not "grace" vs. "legalism" as usually understood; rather the essential difference was Paul's realized eschatology in Christ vs. the Judaizers commitment to ongoing practice of Torah. Paul could say, and his Jewish opponents could not say, that the promised, final, eschatological age has arrived in history, opening the gates of covenant blessing, not merely to all the genetic sons of Abraham, but ultimately to all the genetic sons of Adam. The basic problem in Galatia was a Jewish nationalism, or exclusivism, rooted in a defective understanding of God's redemptive-historical timetable. Israel turned Torah, which should have been a means to the end of Christ's coming (cf. Rom. 10:4), into an end in itself, and therefore into a form of idolatry (Gal. 4:8-9; cf. Rom. 2:22).

The cash value of getting "Galatianism" right should be plain when we re-consider the traditional reading. One example will suffice. In J. Gresham Machen's commentary on Gal. 2, he writes,

If Peter had never begun to hold table-companionship with those Gentile Christians, it is not all certain that Paul would ever have blamed him But then Peter had once accustomed the Gentile Christians to hold table-companionship with him, his withdrawal from such table-companionship would tend to lead them to seek a continuance of their table-companionship with him by keeping the ceremonial law [From Machen's *Notes on Galatians*, 143-4].

With all due respect to Machen, he has missed the real import of the text badly. Because Machen reads Galatians as a tract about individual soteriology, he misses Paul's broader frame of reference. Machen is simply wrong that Peter could have maintained a for-Jews-only communion table without censure. Moreover, Machen is so focused on polemicizing against merit theology, he misses the real tragedy in the text: the division of the church. For Machen, Paul did not confront Peter because his action was divisive, but because it suggested that Gentiles needed to earn their salvation by obeying Moses. Peter is challenged because his actions have led others into thinking there was some "meritorious work which [a person] needed to perform in order to win the favor of God." But that is simply horrific exegesis. The issue is not merit, it's the divided table. Peter has denied the gospel by making it "for Jews only," not by turning it into a system of accumulating brownie points.

By focusing on the wrong issue, Machen left himself and his followers vulnerable to the actual evil Paul confronted. Perhaps this is why Machen's theological descendants have a history of fighting over one issue after another, rending the fellowship of Christ's body, all for the sake of preserving an ideology. Getting "Galatianism" wrong has badly skewed our agenda the American Reformed church.

It's time to get it right.