

Letting Paul be: A Radical Interpretation of Galatians

by Wan Chee Keong

Martin Luther's discovery that by 'the righteousness of God,' 'Paul was not talking about righteousness as a part of God's nature but as what God gives to Christians: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are now made righteous by his grace as a gift"' (Tomkins, p. 136) initiated the Reformation. His insight is bequeathed to us in the Protestant doctrine of justification as summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith (11:1-2). Briefly 'justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ *imputed* to us, and received by faith alone' (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 33). While this is generally true of the occurrences of the word and associated words in Paul's letters, it may not be the case with Galatians. The new perspective on Paul (NPP) has overturned the traditional understanding of the letter and consequently unearthed an important aspect of the doctrine.

The first time Paul uses the word 'justification' in his letters is in Galatians 2.16. The immediate context of the verse is the controversies over Titus' circumcision in Jerusalem and over table fellowship in Syrian Antioch (Gal. 2), and the mention of Jews and Gentile sinners. The issue then is about covenant membership; about who are the 'righteous' (members) and who are the 'sinners' (non-members). So justification has to do with the covenant: whether getting in, staying in or to be found in, on Judgment day. The King James Version has correctly translated *pisteos Christou* as 'faith *of* Christ.' The contrast then is not between 'the works of the Law' and faith in Christ but 'the works of the law' and 'the faith *of* Christ.' Of course, faith in Christ is crucial but that is not uppermost in Paul's mind. He is contrasting 'works of the law' with Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

To Paul, James, Cephas, John, Barnabas and the other Jewish Christians it is an either/or issue: either covenant membership is on the basis of 'works of the law' or it is on the basis of the crucifixion, for both Jew and Gentile alike. For the false brethren at Jerusalem, the men from James at Syrian Antioch and the 'troublers' of the Galatians it is, however, a case of both/and: both the crucifixion *and* 'the works of the law,' particularly but not exclusively, circumcision, food regulations and Sabbath. What they are saying is Gentile Christians are *not* members of the covenant, until and unless they observe the 'works of the law,' especially circumcision (Cf. Acts 15.1).

In 2.19 Paul seems to have a low view of the Law in the matter of living to God; the Law comes between him and his living to God. Living to God is possible only through Christ's love and sacrifice for him (2.20). The KJV has therefore translated *pistei tou huiou tou theou* correctly as the faith *of* the Son of God and not faith *in* the Son of God. The law then is not contrasted with faith in Christ but *Christ's* faith in God, which faith embraces love and sacrifice for Paul. Christ's faith is faith at its truest for faith works 'by love' (5.6) and Christ's love encompasses even the cross. In 2.21 the law is not contrasted with faith but the death of Christ. We are to understand 'righteousness' in 2.21 as covenant membership. Although the law is a gift from God, in this matter of covenant membership, the Law is strictly not of the grace of God. So also 5.4, 'you who would be justified by the law; you are fallen away from grace.'

Again in 3.1-5 the KJV has rendered *ex akoes pisteos* correctly as 'the hearing of faith.' This can mean both 'hearing the message of Christ's faith in God and his crucifixion' (NEB mg.- the message of faith) and 'hearing with faith' (RSV). In my view *ex ergon nomou* (the works of the law) is primarily contrasted with the first meaning, the message of faith or better the hearing of Faith (i.e. Christ and his cross). So then 'the works of the law' is *not* contrasted with faith in Christ although 'the hearing of faith' involves faith in him.

From 3.7 through 3.29 there is a marked shift to the human response characterized by ‘works of the law’ or by ‘faith.’ The issue, however, is still the covenant: Who are the true children of Abraham? Those who are ‘of faith’ (*hoi ek pisteos*) are contrasted with those who are ‘of the works of the law’ (*hosoi ex ergon nomon*). ‘Faith’ in this passage refers to ‘trust in and openness to God in Christ’ or ‘humble and grateful acceptance of God’s grace in Christ.’ Exception is in verses 22 through 25 where faith of Jesus Christ and faith is practically identified with Christ himself, although the human response of faith is not altogether excluded. The contrast is between ‘trust in and openness to God’ (of faith) and ‘doing’ the law (of the works of the law). Paul is saying that the true children of Abraham are those who believe in Christ and not those who observe the law. NPP scholars have noted pertinently that the heathen with faith are not merely blessed like faithful Abraham but are blessed *in* him. If Abraham disbelieved God the history of Israel would have been very different!

Why are those ‘of the works of the law’ not children of Abraham? (Here I disagree with the view of the adherents of the NPP.) The reason is: they are under the curse. This is because it is impossible to keep the law completely, due to sin. Verse 3.22 is crucial: But the scripture consigned all things to *sin*. ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by *all* things written in the book of the law, and do them’ (3.10). Compare also 5.3: ‘I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the *whole* law’ (my italics). Yes, there is a hidden premise in 3.10. Those ‘of the works of the law’ are under the curse because the law does require *complete* compliance.

Christ’s death bore both the curse of the Law on ‘those of the works of the Law’ (i.e. the Jews) *and* the curse of the Law on those ‘without Law’ (i.e. the Gentiles), 3.13. ‘Christ in his death had put himself under the curse and outside the covenant blessing (cf. Deut. 11.26; 30.19-20) – that is, put himself in the place of the Gentile!’ (Dunn, p. 230). So the ‘we’ of 3.14, ‘that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’ must mean ‘we Jewish and Gentile believers.’

‘Righteousness’ in 3.21 therefore is to be understood as membership of Abraham’s family. ‘Membership has its advantages,’ as they say. To begin with, to be a member is to have ‘life.’ Compare with ‘live unto God’ in 2.19. As contrasted with life under the impersonal Law, to have a personal ‘walk’ with God is life indeed!

Second, it is to receive the blessing of Abraham, which is the gift of the Spirit (3.3, 14).

Third, it is to have God working miracles among us (3.5).

Fourth, it is to be children of God and heirs of God (3.26, 29; 4.5-7).

Fifth, it is to be free (4.22-5.1). In this passage Paul expounds the law (Gen.16.15; 21.2, 9). The law itself, says Paul, tells you Galatians that you are children of the free woman through promise, that you are children of the Jerusalem above, which is free. Why then do you want to be under law, to ‘submit again to a yoke of slavery’?

Why then the Law? It was a ‘prison guard,’ so to speak, to keep Israel in protective custody, until Faith (i.e. Christ) should be revealed (3.19-23). It was a *paidagogos* to tutor the Jews ‘unto Christ, that (they) may be justified by faith’ (3.24). It was a ‘guardian’ and ‘trustee’ until the son comes of age and enters into his inheritance (4.1-2).

To Paul ‘faith in Christ Jesus’ and baptism into Christ are but the two sides of a coin. The first is in 3.26 and the second follows immediately after in 3.27. Baptism following close after belief in Christ seems to be the norm in the

early Church (Acts 2.38; 8.12, 36; 9.18; 10.47; 16.15, 33; 18.8; 22.16). This is in marked contrast to our usual preaching and practice.

Very likely ‘the elements of the world,’ *stoicheia en nomou* (4.3, 9) refers to ‘the elementary stages of religious experience (whether Jewish or Gentile) through which they had gone in the past, but which are now out-dated by Christ’ (Cole, p. 114). Paul calls them ‘weak and beggarly’ (4.9). Under this category would be the Law and ‘them which by nature are no gods’ (4.8). So the ‘we’ of 4.3, 5 would mean ‘we Jews and Gentiles.’

How could Paul have called the Law ‘weak and beggarly’? We need not be surprised. In this matter of covenant membership Paul had already contended that the Law is not ‘truly’ grace. See also 5.4, ‘you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace.’ In 3.19-20, ‘Having admitted the mediatorial work of Moses, Paul seems to be claiming that this is a *weakness* (italics mine), rather than a strength of the law.’ (Cole, p. 104).

If this is correct then the ‘days, and months, and times, and years’ (4.10) would refer to the ‘liturgical calendar of orthodox Judaism with its “new moons” and “sabbatical years”’ (Cole, p. 118). The ‘troublers’ of the Galatians had hoodwinked them into these observances as a foothold and prelude to compel them to comply with that irreversible and ‘fatal’ statute of circumcision.

In verse 5.5 ‘the hope of righteousness,’ if the interpretation is correct so far, would mean believers in Christ, on Judgment Day, entering fully into their inheritance as children of Abraham and finally and perfectly realizing their sonship and freedom.

In 5.13–6.10 Paul sets out the ethical implications of covenant membership. Christian freedom is freedom to love (5.13-15, cf. 5.6: faith works ‘by love’). Having the gift of the Spirit means we are to ‘walk’ by the Spirit, to fulfil the law of Christ (5.16-6.10).

To conclude this essay: who are the ‘troublers’ of the Galatians? These persons have unworthy and ulterior motives. All they are concerned about is seeking favour from and to please men, not God (1.10). This shows their worldliness (6.14). They had a hidden agenda behind all that talk about observing the Law and covenant membership and trying to compel the Galatians to be circumcised, for they themselves though circumcised, do not keep the Law. Their real motive is so that they can boast that the Galatians, through receiving circumcision, would have acknowledged Jewish ethnic and national one-uppance and to avoid persecution on account of the cross of Christ (5.11; 6.12).

References:

Bible quotations are from KJV and RSV

Stephen Tomkins, *A Short History of Christianity* (Eerdmans)

A. Cole, *Galatians – TNTC* (IVP)

J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, ch. 7, 8 (Westminster/JKP)