



The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6

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HARDLY ANY READER OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS ESCAPES AN IMPRESSION of intensity, created by Paul's rhetoric. The impression is fostered immediately in the opening words, carefully delineating and grounding the divine source and authorization of Paul's apostleship. It is heightened by the apparent "deserting" of his typical thanksgiving language for expressions of "astonishment" (1:6 NRSV). This passionate opening makes clear to the reader that the ensuing argument is crucial. Paul's passion is occasioned, we learn, by certain behavior of some in the Galatian community. From the beginning, talk about God is linked with talk about this Galatian behavior, making this argument theological and intensely practical at the same time. Truth claims are made about God and about those Galatians—and thereby about us readers, too, who seek to understand the implications of those claims for the shaping of life in this world. What difference will this talk about God make?

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Far from being a digression from Paul's theological discussion of gospel and justification in the opening chapters of Galatians, the ethical considerations in chapters five and six are inextricably bound to the central argument of the letter. Paul maintains a crucial unity between theology and practical ethics.

I. THE SHAPE OF THE ARGUMENT

A basic truth about God emerges in the opening salutation, an assertion that will continue to undergird and shape the argument and movement of the letter as a whole. This central truth inextricably binds talk about God with the person and work of Jesus the Christ. Specifically, God is the one who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And in accordance with the will of God the Father this Jesus Messiah “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age” (1:1-4).

Joined to this basic truth claim about God is one that has to do with the hearers of this letter. Those who hear are ones whom God “has called”¹ into a new reality by this grace of Christ (1:6). That call of God in grace is explicitly linked in the same sentence to the issue of what it means to live “in” the gospel, an understanding of which has implications both for theology and for the practical exercise of life in community.

A careful reading of Galatians makes clear that these two aspects—the truth about God’s action in Christ and the truth about what it means to be called into the gospel by the grace of Christ—bind together the whole letter. Such reading invites an important recognition about the integrity within the letter of its so-called “ethical” section, chapters five and six. Rather than being a digression or departure from the lofty theological talk about gospel and justification in the opening chapters, these chapters flow out of and are inextricably bound to the letter’s central argument. In fact, it would perhaps be more appropriate to say that in the shaping of his argument Paul has had in view from the very beginning the practical consequences of his proclamation for the life of the Christian in community. That should have been immediately suggested by Paul’s salutary announcement that Jesus’ death has rescued us “from the present evil age” (1:4).

The persuasive effect of this letter depends on the success of this argument about gospel. The compelling power of this gospel resides, in turn, in its effective power to shape the readers’ imagination. What if it were true that God has, indeed, raised Jesus from the dead, that God has thereby called us by grace, as Paul says, “into the gospel”? It is toward that shaping of the practical imagination most explicitly addressed in Gal 5-6 that the whole argument of the letter consistently moves.

Several important aspects of Paul’s argument in Galatians underscore this crucial unity of theology and practical ethics. The first has to do with the strategic development, more accurately, the postponement, of the issue of circumcision. Most readers would probably agree that the issue of circumcision within the Galatian community constitutes in some way an occasion, if not *the* occasion, for Paul’s letter. Still, although Paul’s rhetoric is immediately heated, in the beginning stages

¹Tenses are important in Galatians. Here, as in 1:15, Paul’s use of the aorist tense underscores that this calling is experienced in the event of what has already happened in Christ and in the corresponding event of the Christian’s call to faith in the gospel. In Gal 5:8, in contrast, the use of the present tense emphasizes the dynamic, energizing reality of God’s continuing call through the Spirit.

of the argument there is only indirect reference to the issue, as if by anticipation. The word circumcision, although occurring four times in chapter two (2:7, 8, 9, 12), is always used there indirectly, as a way of referring to or distinguishing a particular religious group: “those belonging to the circumcision.” It is at the beginning of chapter five, however, that for the first time the issue is placed squarely on the table. Paul gets to the heart of the matter—what “counts for anything”—with respect to circumcision and what it means to be “in Christ” (5:6). This location of the first clear and direct reference to circumcision as an issue in the Christian community, and specifically at Galatia, seems all the more significant when seen along with other parallels in language and tone between 5:2-12 and 1:6-10. If Paul’s opening words delineate the issue as nothing less than defining the gospel, then with chapter five Paul brings us to the “heart of the argument.”² The nature of the gospel and practical issues of life in community are linked at this center.

This impression is supported by a second factor, having to do with the overall flow of the argument in the letter. Thirteen times in the first two chapters, using either noun or verb constructions,³ Paul refers to the central issue as that of the “gospel.” These occurrences culminate in the reference to Peter’s behavior and his hypocritical failure to walk in accordance with the “truth” of the gospel. Thus, for this portion of the letter, the issue of “gospel” remains front and center, all the while, however, linked to matters of practical behavior in community. Following these references to the gospel, Paul turns instead in 2:16 to define for the first time the content and character of the gospel in terms of justification and righteousness before God. From this point on, in chapters two and three, what it means to be righteous before God occupies the argument. Righteousness before God now provides the content for talk about gospel.⁴

This focus on righteousness is then further focused by Paul’s talk about what it means to be incorporated within the community of God’s people—to be “children of Abraham.” First introduced in 3:7, this issue of identity and belonging comprises the major focus of the argument in chapters three and four.⁵ If the central question is how one is included within the family, Paul answers that the decisive factor for inclusion among the children of Abraham is the matter of “justification.” Crucial for Paul’s argument is the question whether this justification occurs “by works of the law” or “by the hearing of faith” (see 3:2-5). His clear answer is that “works of the law” is not an option. Because of having been joined with Christ’s death and resurrection (“I have been crucified with Christ”—2:19)

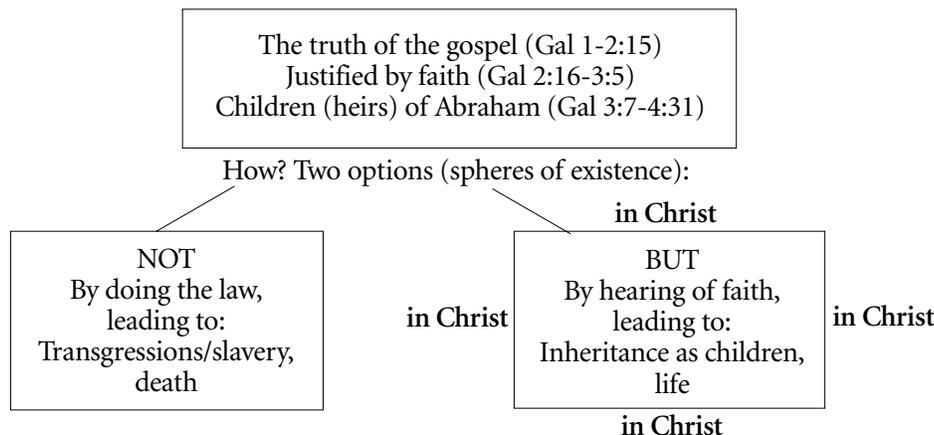
²Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 360. Witherington (citing Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* [Dallas: Word, 1990] 221-222) notes, for example, parallels in the severe tone, the references to desertion and the grace of Christ, and the threat of divine judgment.

³As noun: 1:6, 7, 11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; as verb: 1:8, 8, 9, 11, 16, 23.

⁴As adjective: 3:11; as noun: 2:21; 3:6, 21; 5:5; as verb: 2:16, 16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4.

⁵The words are: “son”: 3:7, 26; 4:4, 6, 7, 22, 30; “child”: 4:19, 25, 27, 28, 31. These words also underlie the numerous substantive constructions such as “the ones of faith” in 3:9.

the Christian now lives “in Christ.” This new sphere of existence⁶ in Christ, by which one receives the inheritance by promise through faith, stands in direct opposition to the old order of life under law. The order and scheme of the argument to this point might be represented as follows:



II. SHAPED BY A NEW VISION

This shaping of the argument towards Galatians five and six ultimately moves the hearer to the “center of Galatians”⁷—Paul’s announcement in 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” That this assertion stands absolute, as it does, with no verbal links to what precedes or follows effectively makes it link to both. It is clearly a transition, effectively summarizing and providing the goal of the argument to this point. At the same time, it sets the theme for what follows. Specifically, it makes clear that the gospel of which Paul speaks is not theoretical speculation; rather, it always has to do with particular places where “freedom” happens and freedom is exercised—where habits are shaped and reshaped as tradition, experience, and social context interact with one another. This is also the arena where new experiences have the power to reshape tradition and to restructure social relationships. Of this, Peter’s actions in Antioch are testimony, and thus of critical import. His hypocrisy has consequences for the life of the community and for discernment of those actions that accord with the “truth of the gospel” (2:11-14).

It is thus misleading to say that chapter five begins the ethical section of the letter. We see, rather, that it is exactly at this point that the theological and practical components of Paul’s argument come together most clearly. Just here, in the context of talk about the exercise of freedom and for the last time in the letter, we hear

⁶Compare Sam K. Williams, *Galatians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 149. Williams calls this Paul’s “binary system” in which “both the Law and the flesh belong in the column set over against the Spirit.” Richard B. Hays (“Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 [1987] 276) speaks of a “regulative principle or structure of existence.”

⁷Williams, *Galatians*, 132. It is significant that in the original Greek the word Christ, and thus by inference Christ himself, stands literally at the center of the repeated (and thus emphatic) goal or end of freedom.

reference made to justification/righteousness. Justification⁸ is now defined as the object of hope, waited for by faith through the working of the Spirit (5:4-5). At the same time, as we have noted before, it is here also that for the first time in the letter explicit reference is made to “circumcision” as a practical issue of contention within the Galatian community (5:2, 6). However, as crucial as the issue of circumcision may be, Paul declares that another issue is more crucial still. When it comes to understanding this new sphere of existence, to imagining what it means to be “in Christ,” circumcision is not the real or decisive issue: “For *in Christ* neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything...” (5:6). Then what does “count for something” according to Paul?

III. THE CROSS OF CHRIST: A NEW CREATION

Beginnings and endings are telling, and, significantly, a most important clue awaits the reader at the very end of the letter. There in an almost verbatim recollection of this reference to circumcision in 5:6, Paul again asserts that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but what counts is a “new creation” (6:15). Thus, though for the moment it may appear in chapter five that Paul argues persuasively about circumcision as the critical or decisive issue within the Galatian community, his last words in the letter move the hearer to a community and world that imagine a different order. In this new sphere of existence one is defined by belonging to Christ; one is child and heir not by the keeping of external marks or requirements but through the promise that rests upon the cross of Jesus Christ. Through this cross one has experienced a death to those things which would be important by the standards of the “world” (6:14).

At the end of the letter it is as though Paul imagines the gospel breaking through even the provisional constraints of his own argument. Whereas in 5:2-4, the matter of circumcision would seem to determine one’s relationship to Christ, in the end Paul can now say that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts. What counts is rather a “new creation.” In the cross of Christ the power of the gospel is no longer constrained. Even Paul cannot by his own careful arguments control or prevent the power of the gospel to do a new thing. Here eschatology and hope break into this world with the promise of the gospel. For the Christian, God and God’s promises are ultimately in control and ultimately define what shape this new life “in Christ” will take.⁹

IV. IDENTITY: THROUGH FAITH, CHILDREN OF GOD

Hope consists in a new identity “in Christ,” which empowers those who are

⁸As both verb (5:4) and noun (5:5).

⁹Cf. Paul’s similar language elsewhere: “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). Besides this passage and the one here in Galatians, the only other place where Paul uses this language of creation is in the intensely eschatological speech of Rom 8:19-22. It seems telling that the same verb of “eager longing,” of which Paul speaks in Romans, is used in Gal 5:5 to describe the hope that initiates and shapes this last section of the Galatian letter.

in Christ to action. Those who are persons of faith are children of God, Paul says, and being such children means freedom, a freedom that is empowered and informed by faith. So what really counts in this Christian freedom? What counts, Paul says, is ultimately not arguments over circumcision or uncircumcision, as important as such issues might be, but (finishing the sentence from 5:6 that was previously interrupted) what counts is “faith that is continuously energized through love” (5:6).¹⁰ Clearly the love of which Paul speaks is not self-authorized or authenticated, but is grounded in the model and example of Christ’s love: “The life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20).¹¹

V. ACTION: THROUGH LOVE, SLAVES OF ONE ANOTHER

Yet even if Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count, this is not to say that the love that Paul imagines is some disembodied or theoretical construct. If the call to freedom is grounded in the model of Christ’s love, then it implies action of a particular sort. We are driven to continue asking, “If what counts is ‘faith continuously energized through love,’ then what shape will that love take?” Paul’s key transitional statement in 5:1 has already argued that such love is shaped by the freedom occasioned by Christ; in 5:13 comes the added assertion that such freedom is marked by the call of God. The reference to the call of God links back to the opening address to the Galatians, where their desertion from the one who has called them by the grace of Christ was a pivotal point in Paul’s initial argument (1:6). Furthermore, now Paul notes that this call to freedom always stands at risk of being surrendered for a return to life in the flesh.

That risk is due in no small part to the ironical and mysterious shape of this freedom that Paul now describes. What shape will this freedom take? The shape of servanthood or slavery: “through love become slaves to one another” (5:13). At the heart of Paul’s argument in Galatians stands the ironic assertion that this strange freedom belonging to the new creation in Christ should be exercised in community, through the transforming power of Christ, precisely in its opposite—through becoming slaves to one another. If this were not strange enough, now we hear that this new sphere of existence has power even to transform and revalue the function of law—one can now legitimately speak of fulfilling the “whole law” or the “law of Christ” (5:14; 6:2). As Hays puts it,

[Paul’s] exhortation to “become slaves to one another” is not an isolated or random piece of advice; rather, it is an integral part of his theological vision, grounded in christology and set forth in opposition to the prospect of using freedom “as an opportunity for the flesh,” which means, in Galatians, as a cause of division in the community.¹²

¹⁰Author’s translation.

¹¹For an extended argument for seeing Christ as the model for life lived in this new “structure of existence” that Paul imagines in Gal 5 and 6, see Hays, “Christology and Ethics,” 268-290.

¹²Hays, “Christology and Ethics,” 286. Hays describes this as one of the distinctive marks of the paradigm of Christ’s example for Christian ethics.

VI. THE HARMONY OF IDENTITY AND ACTION

How shall this “becoming slaves to one another” be realized, particularly since, as Paul acknowledges, the danger of slipping back into life in the flesh is so real and so close at hand? First, Paul says, it is a matter of persuasion, of faith, if you will, that is constituted and resides in the “one who continues to call you” in the Lord (5:8). Furthermore, it is a matter of true *phronēsis* (5:10). Here the several links to Philippians are instructive. There, in the familiar Christ hymn, we also find commended the example of Christ, who takes the “form of a slave” (2:7). As Paul commends the example of Christ to the Philippians, he employs the particularly apt word *phronein*. Usually translated as having to do with the “mind,” what this word actually imagines is a kind of life in which mind and action are in harmony—a life in which willing and doing are not out of sync or at cross-purposes but are shaped in conformity to one another. Witness the confirmation of that vision in Paul’s interpretive conclusion to the Christ hymn in Philippians: “Work out your own salvation...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling¹³ you both *to will and to work* for his good pleasure” (emphasis added). *Phronesis* is that gift “in the Lord” that enables “willing and doing” to be brought into harmony.

Secondly, we “become slaves” through the power of the Spirit. Paul has just described the call of God to these “brothers and sisters” to live in a community marked by servant love rather than by constant biting, devouring, and mutual destruction. As if to emphasize the point, Paul continues, “Now this is what I am saying” (5:16)—or, “Now this is the point I am getting at.”¹⁴ There is a war going on, he says, between two spheres of existence, that of life lived in the flesh and empowered by doing works of the law, and that of life lived in the Spirit and empowered by faith. The chart below lays out schematically these two spheres of existence and the language of Paul in Gal 5 and 6 belonging to each.

TWO SPHERES OF EXISTENCE: GALATIANS 5 AND 6

LIFE IN FLESH	5:1-6:16	LIFE IN SPIRIT
Held captive in bondage	5:1	Set free for freedom
Severed from Christ	5:2-4	Christ as benefit
Righteousness through law	5:4-5	Righteousness and hope through Spirit by faith
Circumcision	What counts 5:6	Faith “working” through love

¹³The Greek word translated “enabling” is the same as that in Gal 5:6 where Paul speaks of a faith that is “energized” through love.

¹⁴The NRSV’s weak “I say” misses the rhetorical effect of the argument at this point.

Without truth	5:10	True <i>phronēsis</i>
Primed for the flesh	5:13	Called for freedom
Biting/devouring one another—destruction	5:13-15	Through love, slaves to one another—law is fulfilled
By flesh: desires	5:16-17	By Spirit: living
Subject to law	5:18	Not subject to law
Works of flesh: plurality of passions	5:19-23	Fruit of Spirit: unity of will & action
Belong to flesh: passions/desires	5:24	Belong to Christ: flesh/passions crucified
Conceit/competition/ envy	5:25f.	Living by Spirit: walking in line with spirit
(οἱ σαρκικοί)	6:1f.	οἱ πνευματικοί: restore one another; uphold one another; test one's own work; share the word
Sow into/for flesh, reap from flesh: death (corruption)	6:7-10	Sow into/for Spirit, reap from Spirit: eternal life
Boasting in flesh	6:12-14	Boasting in cross of Christ
Circumcision / uncircumcision	6:15	A new creation

This chart shows that each of the spheres of existence imagined by Paul has its own language and forms a system or world in which all the other language and images cohere. In 5:16-26 the shape of this new existence, this new creation in Christ, is sketched out. The key marks of these worlds are that the flesh has desires that are in opposition to the Spirit, and the Spirit is¹⁵ against the flesh. Significantly in the argument at this point, the key effect of this opposition is that it prevents those who belong in the flesh from “doing what you want.” Willing and doing are not able to be in harmony. As long as this is the case the desires of the flesh will persist in producing an endless plurality of “works.” Paul lists fifteen products, concluding with “and things

¹⁵Again the NRSV is wrong. In v. 17, in the original, the verb “desire” is not used with the Spirit. Paul will not and does not use the negative word “desires” in conjunction with talk of the Spirit and what the Spirit does.

like these.”¹⁶ To these “works” of the flesh Paul contrasts the “fruit” of the Spirit (5:22). This singular fruit of the Spirit is actually characterized not by an endless list of desires but by a harmonious whole. Paul’s list of nine components—three groups of three—certainly has symbolic significance. It is as if to say that when it comes to being led by the Spirit one must begin to be led also by the gift of imagination, seeing a new reality taking shape; the prosaic language of business as usual begins to fail. Paul’s language and argument turns to the imagery of poetry. So it is with life that is led by the Spirit. The Spirit’s fruit is poetry of a different sort; it is a new creation born in the transforming power of the cross of Jesus Christ. This new creation takes shape in the unfolding flower of dynamic love exercised in community. It holds out the promise of new image of harmony, a kind of *phronesis* in which willing and doing create their own new symphonies of mutual love in community.

This section of Paul’s argument in 5:16-26 begins and ends with the call to “live by the Spirit.” To live by the Spirit in this way is to imagine and know a world in which we are no longer bound by the law and the structures of death. Rather those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires and now live guided by this new creation in which the Spirit is life. Indeed, such living by the Spirit demands in us no less than the transforming power of the cross of Jesus Christ and, with that, the new creation of which Paul speaks. We know the opposite story—in ourselves and others—too well to imagine that such transformation could come from our own resources. Martin Luther describes the battle well in his lectures on Galatians:

Human nature and reason does not hold Christ firmly in its embrace but is quickly drawn down into thoughts about the law and sin. Thus it always tries to be free according to the flesh but a slave and a captive according to the conscience.¹⁷

But it was certainly also the promise of this poetry of the Spirit, of a new creation empowered by the cross of Christ, that was the inspiration of a far different hope captured so well in Luther’s well-known juxtaposition regarding freedom and the bondage of the Spirit:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹⁸ ⊕

¹⁶Images are important. It seems significant then that Paul avoids using the word *poiein*, with its suggestions of poetry or creation, when he here talks of the “works of the flesh.” Instead he uses the more common or street variety word *prassein*, from which we get our words practical or pragmatic.

¹⁷Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1955-76) 26:120.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:345.