



Galatians and the Development of Paul's Teaching on Justification

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ON REFORMATION SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1999, IN AUGSBURG, GERMANY, THE Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. In signing that historic document, Lutherans and Catholics publicly affirmed to each other, and to the world, that they had reached a consensus regarding the doctrine of justification, the very doctrine that divided the church in the sixteenth century and resulted in more than four centuries of bitter controversy. Ironically, this teaching was born of controversy: the controversy at Galatia between Paul and Christian missionaries who opposed his circumcision-free gospel. In this essay, I propose to examine how Paul devel-

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oped his teaching on justification in Galatians. I will conclude with three practical implications of Paul's teaching for the life of the church today.

It was in the Galatian controversy, to the best of our knowledge, that Paul first developed his teaching on justification by faith. This is not to say that he had not considered the issue prior to the crisis at Galatia. After all, being a Jew, he was already familiar with the language of righteousness and justification. Moreover, even when Paul does not explicitly employ this language, the concept of God's grace underlies all that he says. The language of justification, however, does not play the role in Paul's earlier correspondence that it does in Galatians, Romans, and Philip-
pians.

The reason for this is not difficult to explain: Paul's letters were written in response to questions from, and problems in, the churches he established or was familiar with. Consequently, his teaching on justification is best interpreted in light of the circumstances that occasioned it.

I. THE BACKGROUND TO A CRISIS

Although scholars dispute exactly when Paul wrote Galatians and where the Galatian congregations were located, they agree that these congregations were composed of gentiles. It is also clear that when Paul preached the gospel to them, he did not require the Galatians to accept circumcision, the sign of the eternal covenant God made with Abraham (Gen 17). Rather, they believed in Paul's proclamation of the crucified Christ and enjoyed a powerful experience of the Spirit (3:1-6).

At some later date, other Christian missionaries came to Galatia. Who they were and what they said, we do not know. Perhaps they were Jewish believers from Jerusalem with some relationship to James, the kind of believers who compelled Peter and Barnabas to withdraw from table fellowship with gentile believers at Antioch (2:11-14). In any case, without identifying them, Paul viewed them as agitators who were destroying the gospel he had preached in Galatia (1:7). For, whereas he did not require the Galatians to be circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life, they did.

In requiring the Galatians to adopt circumcision and a Jewish way of life, the agitators may have argued in this fashion.

Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and you have done well to believe in him. Now you must perfect the faith you have embraced by having yourselves circumcised and adopting a Jewish way of life. After all, God made an eternal covenant with Abraham, the sign of which is circumcision. Moreover, the law pronounces a curse upon those who do not practice all of its prescriptions. The Messiah came so that even gentiles might live in accordance with God's law and become children of Abraham. Have yourselves circumcised then. Follow the dietary prescrip-

tions of the law and observe the Sabbath. If you do, you will live, because the law promises life to those who observe it.

We do not know how Paul learned of the agitators. But when he did, he understood that “the truth of the gospel” (2:5,14) was at stake; for if justification could have come through legal observance, there would have been no need for Christ to die on the cross (2:21; 3:21).

The problem at Galatia, then, was both theological and social. On the one hand, it was theological, because, if righteousness depended on something in addition to what God had done in Christ, what God did was not sufficient for salvation. On the other hand, the problem had social implications, for, if the agitators were correct, gentiles could not share table fellowship with Jews unless they adopted a Jewish way of life. To put it anachronistically, gentiles would have to become Jews to become Christians!

Galatians, then, is Paul's response to a problem with both social and theological implications: On what basis do gentile believers share in the inheritance of Israel now that the Messiah has come? Must they have themselves circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life to enjoy table fellowship with Jewish Christians? Paul's response is clear: they need not adopt a Jewish way of life to be justified, because God has already justified them on the basis of what has been done in Christ. To see how Paul develops this argument, we must turn to the text of Galatians.

II. JUSTIFICATION IN GALATIANS

Galatians can be divided into three parts. In the first (1:1-2:21), Paul employs autobiographical material to defend what he calls “the truth of the gospel.” In the second (3:1-5:12), he employs a variety of arguments to show the Galatians that they are already Abraham's descendants, because they enjoy the promised inheritance of the Spirit. In the third (5:13-6:18), he explains that even though the Galatians are not under the law, they fulfill it through the love commandment; for the Spirit produces its fruit within their lives, provided that they are led by the Spirit. Therefore, there is no need for them to have themselves circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life.

1. The truth of the gospel (1:1-2:21)

In the opening chapters of Galatians, Paul reviews the course of his life to establish the divine origin of the circumcision-free gospel he preaches among gentiles like the Galatians. He argues that he was not taught this gospel, nor was it entrusted to him by human beings. Rather, it came directly from God who revealed his Son to Paul (1:11-12).

After recalling the events surrounding his call (1:13-24), Paul recounts how he defended the truth of this gospel at Jerusalem, where false brethren tried to force Titus to be circumcised (2:1-10), and at Antioch, where certain people associated with James forced Peter, Barnabas, and other Jewish believers to withdraw from ta-

ble fellowship with gentile believers (2:11-14). It is at this point, after mention of the controversy over food laws at Antioch, that Paul explains the truth of the gospel.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. (Gal 2:15-21)

There are several points to note here. First, Paul begins by establishing common ground between himself and other Jewish Christians: even they acknowledge that a person is justified by God on the basis of faith in Christ rather than by the works of the law. Second, this realization resulted in a new relationship between gentiles and Jews that allowed them to share table fellowship with each other—until certain people from James came to Antioch. Third, Paul says that he died to the law through the law. That is, his zeal for the law which led him to persecute the church paradoxically resulted in his call or conversion. Since that moment Paul has been so conformed to Christ that Christ lives in him, and he lives by faith in the Son of God. Finally, Paul now realizes that, if justification came through the law, there would have been no need for the Son of God to die. That God sent his Son into the world indicates that it was never the purpose of the law to effect righteousness.

If we are to appreciate what Paul says in Galatians, we must remember that he makes the above statement immediately after describing the incident at Antioch, when certain people from James persuaded Jewish Christians like Barnabas and Peter to withdraw from table fellowship with gentile believers. The issue at Antioch then had profound social implications, as is clear from Paul's criticism of Peter: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:15). In effect, the agitators were making a Jewish way of life a requirement for justification.

At this point Paul opposes two ways of life: one based on works of the law, the other on faith in Christ. The works of the law are the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. But in Galatians, Paul is primarily concerned with those works of the law that outwardly identify one as a Jew: circumcision and dietary prescriptions. In effect, Paul equates these particular works of the law with Jewish identity and says that it is not Jewish identity that justifies one before God but rather the faithful act of Christ

who gave his life to rescue us from the present evil age (1:4), wherefore we believe in Christ in order to be justified before God.

Put another way, Paul was not accusing the Galatians of trying to justify themselves by good deeds that would amass merit before God, what is traditionally called works righteousness. Rather, he was opposing their apparent willingness to adopt a Jewish way of life as something necessary, above and beyond what God had already accomplished for their justification in Christ.

2. Already descendants of Abraham (3:1-5:12)

Having explained the truth of the gospel as justification by faith rather than by doing the works of the law, in the second part of Galatians Paul develops a number of arguments to support his thesis.

This part of Galatians is difficult to understand, because we do not know the full background to the controversy at Galatia. For example, I suspect but cannot prove that the agitators told the Galatians they must be circumcised if they wish to be numbered among Abraham's descendants. And I suspect but cannot prove that they told the Galatians that those who did not practice the prescriptions of the law were liable to the curse pronounced in Deut 27:26, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law" (Gal 3:10). If so, Paul had to counter arguments such as these in order to persuade his converts of the truth of the gospel he had preached to them.

Paul's initial argument in chapter three (3:1-6) is his most compelling, because it is based on the experience of the Galatians. How did they receive the life-giving Spirit of God? Was it by practicing works of the law such as circumcision and dietary prescriptions? Or was it by believing in the message of Christ crucified that Paul proclaimed to them? The answer was immediately obvious to the Galatians, since they had not yet adopted a Jewish way of life. They received God's life-giving Spirit when they believed in the proclamation of Christ crucified. Thus they find themselves in a situation similar to that of faithful Abraham (3:6). He believed in God, and God reckoned this to him as righteousness. The Galatians believed in the proclamation of a crucified Messiah, and they received God's life-giving Spirit.

In this comparison between the Galatians and Abraham, righteousness and the experience of God's life-giving Spirit are interchangeable. Consequently, the experience of the Spirit, which the Galatians already enjoy, is the empirical proof that they have been justified. They stand in the proper covenant relationship to God because they believed in the proclamation of Christ crucified, not on the basis doing the works of the law.

Having shown the Galatians that they are justified because they already enjoy the gift of the Spirit, Paul must next deal with the question of the law. In doing so, he contrasts two kinds of people: those whose lives are based on faith (3:7-9) and those whose lives are based on law (3:10). The first are like faithful Abraham to whom God promised, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you" (3:8). Such people are blessed with Abraham (3:9), and they received the promised Spirit (3:14). The

gentile Galatians belong to this group of people because they have entrusted themselves to Christ.

The second group relies on works of the law. Here, Paul undoubtedly has the agitators in view who insisted on those works of the law that outwardly identify one as a Jew: circumcision and dietary prescriptions. Paul says that whereas those whose lives are based on faith will inherit a blessing, those whose lives are based on works of the law put themselves under the threat of the curse found in Deuteronomy.

It is at this point that Paul introduces a second text from Deuteronomy to interpret the first: "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:14). Making use of this text, Paul concludes that Christ took this curse upon himself when he hung on the tree of the cross in order to free us from the law's threatening curse. In effect, Christ has annulled the curse so that those who entrust themselves to his saving death and resurrection are no longer under the law and its threatening curse.

Paul lays a choice before the Galatians: blessing or curse. If they align themselves with faithful Abraham, they will inherit the promised blessing of the Spirit and be justified. But if they align themselves with the agitators who would place them under the law, they will put themselves under the threatening curse of the law.

But if the Galatians are not under the law, how can they be numbered among Abraham's children? After all, did not God establish an *eternal* covenant with Abraham whose sign was circumcision (Gen 17)? If Paul is to persuade the Galatians not to adopt circumcision, he must explain their relationship to Abraham.

Once more, Paul turns to Scripture, noting that the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring (Gal 3:16). Seizing on the grammatical point that Genesis speaks of a singular offspring, Paul explains that Christ is Abraham's *singular* descendant. Thus the promises made to Abraham find their fulfillment in Christ, Abraham's singular offspring. The upshot is that those who are *in* Christ are Abraham's offspring, even if they are uncircumcised. So Paul concludes, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:29).

In effect, Paul points to the priority of promise over law in time and in importance. This promise is the justifying Spirit of God. Whereas the law was humanity's disciplinarian, holding it in check until the promised offspring came, the promise finds its fulfillment in Christ.

To summarize, though the Galatians are not under the law, they have what they desire: the Spirit, which is their righteousness, and descent from Abraham through Christ.

3. *Life in the Spirit (5:13-6:18)*

A problem remains, and Paul is keenly aware of it. If gentiles do not submit to circumcision and do the works of the law, how can they live a moral life? Does not

Paul's teaching on justification result in an immoral way of life? In the words of James, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" (James 2:14).

The final section of Galatians is Paul's response to this objection. This part of the letter, however, is often neglected as if it had nothing to do with Paul's teaching on justification. Indeed, it is sometimes seen as an embarrassment and contradiction in Paul's thought. Why does the apostle turn to moral instruction after teaching that justification comes through faith and not by legal observance?

Despite this apparent contradiction, the final chapters of Galatians are an integral part of Paul's teaching on justification. For, if there is no place for the moral life in Paul's teaching, that teaching will collapse of its own weight. Therefore, just as Paul showed the Galatians that they already are Abraham's offspring, he must convince them that they fulfill the law even though they are not under it.

To understand how Paul's teaching on the moral life coheres with his teaching on justification, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, the problem Paul faced at Galatia was not works righteousness in the sense that the Galatians were trying to save themselves by doing good works in order to accumulate merit before God. Were this so, it would be difficult to explain why Paul writes: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at the harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal 6:9-10). Rather, the problem at Galatia was this: What must gentiles do if they wish to share in the blessings of Israel's Messiah? Whereas Paul argues that they must believe in Christ, the agitators argue that they must entrust themselves to what God has done in Christ *and* adopt a Jewish way of life. In other words, the problem Paul faced at Galatia was not exactly the problem Luther faced on the eve of the reformation, though one can understand why Luther drew the exegetical conclusions from Galatians that he did. Second, Paul's teaching about the moral life cannot be understood apart from his teaching about the Spirit, the point to which I now turn.

Paul begins his moral exhortation with a reminder and a warning: He reminds the Galatians that they were called to freedom, and he warns them that they should not allow their freedom to become an opportunity for the flesh. Rather they should enslave themselves to each other through love, because the whole law is fulfilled in the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (5:13-14). It is clear, then, that Paul does not envision his teaching on justification as a license for an antinomian way of life; the Galatians who once were enslaved to the desires of the flesh must now enslave themselves to each other in love. For Paul, the purpose of the law is fulfilled in the love commandment.

Paul is aware, however, that human beings cannot fulfill the law through their own power. Therefore, he exhorts the Galatians to live by the Spirit (5:16), be led by the Spirit (5:18), and be guided by the Spirit (5:25). This Spirit, which identifies believers as children of God and allows them to call God "Father" (4:6), produces

its fruit in them. Paul identifies this fruit as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22-23). In contrast to this *singular fruit* of the Spirit, Paul lists the *multiple works* of the flesh which destroy the fabric of community life (5:19-21).

In Paul’s view, the Galatians are faced with a choice: either live by the Spirit or live under the law. If the Galatians submit to circumcision, they will choose the latter, and Christ will not benefit them (5:2). Such a life will not bring them righteousness. But if the Galatians live by the Spirit, they will live a righteous life, because the Spirit will produce its fruit in them.

Lest anyone think that the moral life of the justified is without cost, Paul reminds the Galatians that those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (5:24). Thus the moral life of the justified, which originates from and is empowered by the Spirit, requires a daily dying to self.

To summarize, Paul’s teaching on justification not only has room for the moral life, it positively demands this life made possible by the Spirit. When believers follow the urging of the Spirit, they fulfill the law through the love commandment. Or, to put it another way, they fulfill the law of Christ (6:2).

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

The crisis at Galatia was the occasion for Paul to develop his teaching on justification. A complete treatment of this teaching would have to deal with all of Paul’s letters, especially Romans, a writing in which he developed his teaching in a more systematic and less polemical manner. Nevertheless, Paul’s teaching in Galatians has a number of implications for the Lutheran and Catholic understanding of justification. I highlight three.

1. The social and ecumenical implications of justification

Paul’s teaching in Galatians was a response to a social as well as a theological question: On what basis may Jewish and gentile believers share table fellowship? This question came to a head when a group of Jewish Christians came to Antioch and challenged the behavior of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and those who were enjoying table fellowship with gentile believers. Such people would have segregated gentile and Jewish believers from each other.

In contrast to their approach, Paul’s proposed another solution: gentile and Jewish believers may share table fellowship with each other on the basis of what God has done in Christ. In light of his call and conversion, Paul understood that God had justified the gentiles apart from legal observance because of Christ’s faithful act of obedience. A person is justified by faith in Christ rather than by adopting a Jewish way of life characterized by doing the prescriptions of the law.

Paul’s teaching, then, had social implications for two groups of people whom the law had separated from each other. The author of Ephesians was keenly aware of this when he reminded his gentile readers that once they were aliens “from the

commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12), but now they have been brought near by the blood of Christ who “has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (Eph 2:15).

Both Lutherans and Catholics need to recover the social dimension of justification, remembering that God’s purpose is to reconcile communities of people to each other and to himself. The social dimension of justification also has practical implications for the reunion of the churches. After all, Lutherans and Catholics find themselves in a situation somewhat akin to that of those early Christians, some of whom wanted others to adopt their way of life before they would share table fellowship with them. Paul’s teaching on justification reminds us that if we are justified by God’s grace through faith in Christ then we should not expect others to adopt the cultural practices and piety that we have developed over the past four centuries. When doctrinal issues have been settled, each community should allow the other to maintain the customs and practices that identify it as Catholic or Lutheran.

2. The Spirit as the experience of the justified

One of the more neglected aspects of Galatians is its emphasis on the Spirit as the experience of the justified. Paul argued that the Galatians’ experience of the Spirit proved that they had been justified apart from the works of the law (Gal 3:1-6). Then, in discussing the promises God made to Abraham, he interpreted these promises in terms of the Spirit (Gal 3:7-9, 14). In doing so, Paul sees his gentile congregations as the fulfillment of God’s promise that Abraham would be the father of innumerable children. For Paul, his Spirit-filled gentile converts were Abraham’s offspring in Christ, even though they were not circumcised. They belonged to “the Israel of God” (6:16).

Like the social dimension of justification, the experience of the Spirit in the life of the justified needs to be recovered. Lutherans and Catholics must affirm that where the Spirit of God is present, God is at work justifying and reconciling people to himself. It would be a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching to judge other believers without taking into consideration the presence of God’s Spirit in their lives. The Spirit of God moves where it wills, and those who enjoy an authentic experience of God’s Spirit are among the justified.

3. The moral life of the justified

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* states, “We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope, and love—follow justification and are its fruits” (4.7.37). This is a remarkable statement in light of the historical disagreement between Lutherans and Catholics about the implications of justification for the moral life. On the one hand, Catholics often wonder if Lutheran teaching pays sufficient attention to the demands of the moral life, while, on

the other, Lutherans wonder if Catholic teaching pays sufficient attention to the priority of God's grace.

Paul's teaching in Galatians leaves no doubt that the justified must live a moral life that is in step with the urging of the Spirit. The justified no longer live under the regime of the law, nor does their justification depend on doing the works of the law. The threatening curse of the law has been absorbed by the crucified Christ.

Having said this, Paul affirms that the whole law is fulfilled in the love commandment (5:14) and that bearing one another's burdens fulfills "the law of Christ" (6:2). The justified are not lawless. Rather, to use an expression from Paul's Corinthian correspondence, they are "under Christ's law" (1 Cor 9:21).

Paul makes these statement because he knows that the justified live in the sphere of God's Spirit. He is confident that if the justified live by the Spirit and allow the Spirit to guide them, the Spirit will produce its singular fruit in their lives. That is to say, the justified will live a moral life in accordance with God's will.

Galatians teaches Catholics that justification by faith does not short-circuit the moral life, because the justified fulfill the law of Christ. It reminds Lutherans that good works are compatible with justification by faith, because they are the singular fruit of God's Spirit.

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* that Lutherans and Catholics have agreed upon has arrived at a common understanding of justification. It notes that "the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their differences open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths" (5.40). I suspect that Paul would be pleased with this formulation that respects legitimate diversity for the sake of unity in Christ. ⊕