

GALATIANS

**The Letter of Paul
to the Churches in
Galatia**

Introduction

I have chosen to treat Galatians as the earliest of Paul's extant letters, composed in Antioch late in 48AD. This decision is the result of the coming together of a number of choices, all of which are disputed in scholarly circles. The first decision is how much confidence one puts in Luke as a historian. In the previous chapter I explained that I am more persuaded by those who acknowledge Luke's merits as a historian than by those who see him as inventive in creating a story line to convey his convictions. The decision to accept Luke's version of things as history affects our understanding of Galatians in a number of ways.

The first is the relationship between Paul's Letter to the Galatians and the Jerusalem Assembly recorded in Acts 15. The main reason for following the opinion according to which Paul wrote Galatians before the Jerusalem Assembly is that in his letter Paul does not quote the conclusions of the Jerusalem Assembly (49AD) even though they favour his argument against the 'circumcision faction' (Galatians 2:12) who were disturbing the young churches. The Assembly rejected the position of those who declared that 'it is necessary for Gentile Christians to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses' (Acts 15:5; see 15:10,19,24,28). If the opinion which we are following is correct, the meeting to which Paul refers in Galatians 2:1-10 was not the Jerusalem Assembly but an earlier meeting.

The Jerusalem Assembly also issued instructions (Acts 15:20-21,29) which made it possible for Jews and Gentiles to share the one table without weakening the sense of identity of Jews during a period of growing tension with Rome. The central place of the Eucharist in Christian life makes sharing a meal a matter of special importance. Nothing could be allowed to stand in the way of the whole community coming together in love. However, as the number of Gentiles grew it became more and more important that they respect Jewish sensibilities. It is likely that when the Christian community in Antioch met for the Eucharist in a Jewish home, the Gentile Christians, some of whom had previously been attached to the synagogue, would have accepted to eat kosher meat. When, on the other hand, the host was a Gentile Christian, there must have been an understanding that kosher food would be provided for the Jewish guests. Paul's letter to the Galatians indicates that the Gentiles ate according to their own customs (see 2:12-14). On this matter, the Assembly took a strong line. Jews can share a meal only with Gentiles who follow Jewish food laws (Acts 15:20,29). This was not a decision requiring observance of the law for salvation. This was rejected by both the Assembly and Paul. It was a pastoral decision which attempted to find a solution to a problem which involved deep Jewish sensitivities. According to Luke, Paul accepted this point, for he promulgated the decisions of the assembly when he revisited the communities in Galatia (Acts 16:4). Of course a different pastoral solution would need to be made in situations where the church was mostly Gentile. Paul will deal with the matter in later letters. The reason for stating all this here is to make the point that when Paul refers to a dispute which he had with Peter in Antioch precisely over the fact that Peter and the others were eating separate from the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14), he makes no reference to the agreement reached at Jerusalem which aimed precisely to avoid this. This is a further indication that the letter predates the Assembly.

There is a difference of opinion also as regards the timing of the Jerusalem Assembly in relation to the missionary journey which took Paul into Macedonia and Achaia (Acts 15:36 - 18:32). Some suggest that when Paul 'went up to Jerusalem' (Acts 18:22) after his sojourn in Greece, it was to attend the Assembly. I find no convincing reasons to alter the order found in Acts in which the Assembly (Acts 15:1-29) predates the journey.

There is also a debate about the identity of the Galatians. There are those who interpret the available evidence as favouring the identification of churches of Galatia with the churches of eastern Phrygia and Lycaonia in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia. These are the communities that were established during the journey which Barnabas and Paul undertook from Antioch in 47-48AD (see Acts 13-14). Others favour the region of Galatia from which the province takes its name, a region which lies to the north of Phrygia, and which Paul first visited with Silvanus in the summer of 52AD. The decision one makes here obviously affects the dating of the letter. More importantly, if the southern Galatian theory is correct, Paul was writing to communities with Jewish and Gentile members. If the northern Galatian theory is correct, his readers were all Gentiles. In my earlier commentary I opted for the north Galatian theory. More reading and research has caused me to change my mind. The question remains hotly debated.

There is no scholarly consensus on any of the above points, which indicates that we simply do not have the evidence to come to a certain conclusion. Different scholars apportion different weight to different pieces of evidence. The reader needs to know that when writers such as the author of this commentary take a point of view on the above matters, they are working on possibilities or probabilities at best. Fortunately, much of what Paul writes in this letter is not radically affected by the debates. Where the meaning is affected, we need to acknowledge that there is room for differences of opinion. In my opinion the weight of argument favours presenting Galatians as the earliest of Paul's extant letters, composed in Antioch before the Jerusalem Assembly, and sent to the churches of southern Galatia shortly after he and Barnabas returned from their mission in the area in 47-48AD.

This letter is quoted in documents which we have from the last quarter of the second century (Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria), and almost the whole text has been preserved in a papyrus codex of Paul's letters which dates from c.200AD (P⁴⁶). The fact that this could be Paul's earliest letter, and therefore the earliest writing of the New Testament, adds its own special interest.

First journey to Galatia

Paul's contacts with the churches of southern Galatia 47-49AD

Having opted for the opinion of those who identify the churches of Galatia with the communities of eastern Phrygia and Lycaonia in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, I shall present here what we know about Paul's contacts with these communities both before and after the composing of this letter. In c.47AD, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul on a missionary outreach (Acts 13:2-3). They went first to Cyprus, Barnabas's place of origin (Acts 4:36). From there they sailed north to the mainland. Their journey took them inland to another Antioch, in eastern Phrygia near the border of Pisidia (Acts 13:14). They went on to Iconium, also in Phrygia (Acts 13:51), and to Lystra and Derbe, both in Lycaonia (Acts 14:6; see 2Timothy 3:11). Throughout this missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogues where they proclaimed the gospel to Jews and also to 'those who fear God' (Acts 13:16), a Jewish term for Gentiles who, without becoming proselytes through circumcision, were attracted to Judaism and attended the synagogue. However, though some Jews listened and were convinced by their proclamation, others were opposed. Luke describes the response of the apostles:

Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'

– Acts 13:46-47

Luke comments:

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region.

– Acts 13:48-49

The action of Paul and Barnabas is not to be taken as a rejection of Judaism. When they left Antioch and went to Iconium, it was to the synagogue that they went to speak of Jesus (Acts 14:1). This will remain Paul's practice to the end (Acts 28:17). Some suggest that this is Luke's way of presenting things because it suits his purpose of highlighting the link between Christianity and Judaism. It seems to me to be most important that we acknowledge that Luke presents things this way because he knows that this is the way things were. I believe that there is sufficient evidence from Paul's writing to confirm this. Far from rejecting Judaism, Paul is reminding his Jewish brothers and sisters of the mission given to them by God. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of *many* nations. Israel was given the mission by God to share its faith with the nations as an instrument of the divine purpose. Paul came to recognise Jesus as the Messiah in whom God fulfilled his promises, and he saw it as his duty, as one who wished to be faithful to the mission given by God to Judaism, to take the good news of God's Messiah to the nations in order to bring them to enjoy the salvation being offered to them through Jesus. Paul sees fidelity to this mission as obedience to the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, and therefore as his way of being faithful to Judaism.

Map 1. Galatia



Paul returns to Galatia

If we call what happened to Paul on the way to Damascus a ‘conversion’, it is important to see it as a conversion from one way of seeing Judaism to another. It is as a Jew that he goes to the Gentiles, and he goes on behalf of his Jewish brothers and sisters. However, when Paul goes to the Gentiles he goes to them *as* Gentiles. He does not expect them to become Jews. They could believe in Jesus and become part of the community without circumcision or the need to keep the Jewish law.

Luke gives us an account of this journey in *Acts* chapters thirteen and fourteen. It is his conclusion that interests us here as it sets the scene, I believe, for the letter which we are about to read. Luke writes;

They sailed back to Antioch, where they ... called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

– Acts 14:26-28

In the meantime, news of what had taken place during the mission filtered back to the Jewish Christians in Judea. Some were scandalised. Luke writes:

Certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’

– Acts 15:1

They came to Antioch. They also hurried off with the same message to the communities in Galatia. Here they filled the recent converts with insecurity by telling them that the gospel which Paul had preached was essentially faulty. I suggest that it was when news of the success of this party in Galatia reached Antioch that Paul dispatched this letter. He also entered into what Luke describes as ‘no small dissension and debate’ with them in Antioch. The outcome was that ‘Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders’ (Acts 15:2). There follows Luke’s account of the Jerusalem Assembly.

After dispatching this letter and attending the Jerusalem Assembly, Paul lost no time in following up his letter with a return visit to the Galatian churches. Barnabas returned to Cyprus. Paul and Silvanus took the overland route to Galatia through Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), and revisited Derbe and Lystra in Lycaonia. ‘As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (Acts 16:4). At Lystra they were joined by Timothy. From Lystra ‘they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia’ (Acts 16:6). It seems to me more likely that Luke is referring here to one and not two regions, namely the region of eastern Phrygia which was part of the Roman province of Galatia (the larger section of Phrygia, western Phrygia, was in the province of Asia). This took in the cities of Iconium and Antioch. However, to skirt Asia (Acts 16:6) and to approach Bithynia (Acts 16:7), Paul would have had to pass also through a part of the region of Galatia, which lies to the north and from which the Roman province takes its name. Those who take a position contrary to the one I am espousing, see this as Paul’s first encounter with the Galatians to whom this letter is addressed. If one follows that line, the letter was probably written from Ephesus about 53AD.

The Structure of Galatians

Address	1:1-5
Part One	
1. Paul is astounded that they would desert the gospel	1:6-10
2. Paul's gospel is from Christ himself	1:11 - 2:14
3. It is Christ who gives life, not the Jewish law	2:15-21
Part Two	
1. Paul appeals to their Christian experience	3:1-5
2. The promise made to Abraham comes through faith	3:6-14
3. It is not dependent on keeping the law	3:15-18
4. The function of the law	3:19-25
5. What matters is being in communion with Christ	3:26 - 4:11
6. Paul makes an urgent personal appeal	4:12-20
7. The Law itself points towards the gospel of freedom	4:21 - 5:1
Part Three	
1. Christ has made them free also from the law	5:2-12
2. They are to 'walk by the Spirit'	5:13-24
3. Advice in living a good life	5:25 - 6:10
Conclusion	6:11-18

The lectionary

The liturgical readings

1:1-2,6-10	9th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
1:3-5	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
1:6-12	27th Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:11-19	10th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
1:13-24	27th Tuesday of ordinary Time Year II
2:1-2,7-14	27th Wednesday of ordinary Time Year II
2:3-6,15,17-18	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
2:16,19-21	11th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
3:1-5	27th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:6,15-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:7-14	27th Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:22-29	27th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:26-29	12th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
4:1-3	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:4-7	January 1st, the Mother of God
4:8-21,25,28-30	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:22-24,26-27,31	28th Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
5:1,13-18	13th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
5:1-6	28th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
5:7-12,26	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
5:16-25	Pentecost Sunday Year B
5:18-25	28th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
6:1-13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
6:14-18	14th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C

Paul introduces himself, as always, by his Roman family name (see page 11). Focusing on a special aspect of his person which is central to his purpose in writing, he declares himself to be ‘an apostle sent by Jesus and God the Father’.

The Galatians would have known that when Paul first came to them he did not come on his own initiative. The situation is described by Luke:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers ... While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went ...

– Acts 13:1-4

In one sense, the apostles Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 14:4,6) could be said to have been sent by the church in Antioch. However, as Luke also insists, it was not the community which initiated the move. It was the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of loving communion enjoyed by the exalted Jesus and God his Father, the Spirit that the glorified Jesus was pouring out over the world. Paul is not denying the role of human discernment, mediation and decision as noted in the text from Acts. He is stressing the fact that the origin of his mission is not to be sought at this level. He is an apostle because he is sent by Jesus, the Christ (Messiah), who is anointed by God the Father with the fullness of God’s Spirit.

The Jewish Christians in the various churches in Galatia had heard Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as the promised Messiah (‘Christ’). This is the main thrust of the speech given by Paul in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch (see Acts 13:16-41). The Gentiles who attended the synagogue, called ‘righteous Gentiles’ or ‘God-fearers’ (Acts 13:16), also heard this proclamation. As other Gentiles joined the community, they, too, would have been exposed to the concept of a Messiah, and they ‘were glad’ (Acts 13:8) to be told that the one whom God has anointed with his Spirit, the one through whom God has fulfilled the promises made to Israel, is also the one through whom God is offering the fullness of divine communion to them as Gentiles.

**¹Paul an apostle
– sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through [by] Jesus Christ and God the Father**

**^{1b}and God the Father
who raised him from the
dead –**

Paul is sent by ‘God the Father’. When Jesus addressed God as Father (‘Abba’), people must have been startled by his use of such a familiar and affectionate term. He was, after all, addressing the Almighty and Transcendent Deity, and yet he was speaking to God as a child speaks to a father. Jesus said that we have to become like little children if we are to share in his familiarity with God (Matthew 18:3). He asked people to trust this God who cares for us (Matthew 6:25-34), and to address God in prayer with that simplest and most trusting of words (Matthew 6:9). Jesus was attempting to bring home the amazing truth of God’s close and constant love.

Paul speaks of God as ‘Father’ three times in the opening four verses of this letter. He wants the Galatians to remember that God is the source of life – for his Son whom he ‘raised from the dead’, and for all who share with Jesus the life of the Spirit. Luke tells us of the joy experienced by the Gentiles in Galatia when they found that they, too, were welcomed into the community of those who shared Jesus’ life (Acts 13:48). Paul wants them to recall that joy and to remember what happened to them when they listened to Barnabas and himself and believed in the love of the God who sent the missionaries to them.

This divine life is the central topic of this letter. From the opening sentence, therefore, Paul is reminding the Galatians that it was God who sent him to them, and that it was from God that they received the new life in Christ which they are enjoying. For reasons that will soon emerge, Paul is also claiming divine authority. An apostle carries the authority of those who have authorised his mission. Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Galatians with the authority given him by ‘Jesus Christ and God the Father’ who sent him to them. He is writing to them with the same authority.

Paul is not alone. He writes as a member of a community: from ‘all the members of God’s family who are with me’. If Paul is writing from Antioch soon after the completion of his journey to Galatia we might expect him to have mentioned Barnabas. The fact that he does not could point to a later date and place for the composition of the letter. It could also mean that Paul knows that Barnabas is not entirely in agreement with what Paul is writing (see 2:13).

It was customary etiquette, after naming the person sending the letter, to name the person or persons to whom the letter is addressed. In this case it is ‘the churches of Galatia’. The key thing to note here is that the letter is not addressed to individuals but to the ‘church’, in fact, to a number of churches. In a Christian setting, the Greek *ekklēsia* denotes those who have been called into community and who are assembled for worship. If, for the reasons given in the introduction to this letter, we are correct in judging that Paul is writing to the churches of southern Galatia, we are in a position to name a number of them: in the region of eastern Phrygia, Antioch (bordering on Pisidia) and Iconium; and in the region of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derby. Those who favour the opinion that Paul is writing to the churches in the region of Galatia to the north, speak of Ancyra, Pessinus, and perhaps Tavium.

**²and all the members
of God’s family who
are with me,**

**To the churches of
Galatia:**

³**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.**

The customary Greek greeting was *chairein* (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, *charis* ('grace') – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God's action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul's prayer for the Galatian churches is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them. Luke tells us that in Antioch in Galatia 'Paul urged them to continue in the *grace* of God' (Acts 13:3). It was God's 'work' that was done in Galatia; it was God who 'opened a door of faith for the Gentiles' (Acts 14:27). Throughout the letter Paul will continue to draw the attention of the Galatians back to what God has done and is doing among them.

The customary Jewish greeting was *shalom* ('peace'). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion. It will soon emerge that Paul is amazed and horrified that a number of the Galatians, so recently converted to Jesus, have been persuaded by those who would set up divisions among them, and who would play on their insecurity by insisting on the need for boundaries that clearly demarcate the area of the sacred in ways that ignore the very essence of what God is doing in Jesus. The Jewish priests were instructed to pray the following blessing over the people:

The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

It is God the Father and Jesus, the source of Paul's apostolic commission, who are the source, too, of the grace and peace which Paul prays will be experienced by the Galatian churches. Through Jesus this peace is being offered to the world. It is one of the first casualties of the kind of sectarian teaching which is dividing the new Christians.

Paul has already called Jesus 'Christ' (1:1). Here he adds 'Lord', a title which has a range of meanings. It is a title of respect. Jesus is addressed in this way a number of times in the Gospel (see Luke 5:12; 6:46; 9:54; 10:17; 22:33). It is a title used in the Jewish scriptures of the king, when the focus is on the power of God which the king wields, as distinct from his communion with God through being anointed as the 'Christ'. When Paul calls Jesus 'Lord', he is referring to him as the Messiah raised to glory, who has demonstrated among the Galatians the power of his Spirit, primarily by forming the community itself, but also by the 'miracles' that were done there through Paul and Barnabas (Galatians 3:5; Acts 14:3,10).

However, of even greater significance is the fact that the title ‘Lord’ is used of God as Saviour. When the Hebrew scriptures speak of ‘THE LORD’ they are speaking of God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and who sent Moses to liberate the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:13-15). It is this mysterious and divine aspect that is highlighted here by Paul. He is identifying this ‘Lord’ as Jesus, the risen and exalted Christ. To have God’s name is to exercise God’s power (see Exodus 23:20-21). Paul is claiming that in exercising kingly power, Jesus is the one through whom God has chosen to save. As he says elsewhere: ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2Corinthians 5:19).

The Galatians want to be free from the various ways in which they fail to do God’s will, because they know that sin leads only to the experience of being lost and separated from the communion with God for which they yearn. They are anxious to be free from the corruption that is all around them and that constantly threatens to draw them back into the kinds of behaviour in which they indulged before they came to experience the gift of Jesus’ Spirit (compare Hebrews 2:1-15). As the letter progresses, it will emerge that there are those who are insisting that if the Galatian converts want to be sure of salvation they must obey the Jewish law and become Jews through being circumcised. Only by observing the Sabbath and obeying the dietary and other laws that were part of the Jewish tradition would they be obeying God’s will.

From the outset Paul reminds them that Jesus is the one who ‘gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age’. Paul would have spoken of this often, especially at the Eucharist when they recalled Jesus’ own understanding of his death given at the last supper (see 1Corinthians 11:23-26). Paul repeats here what he said when he first came to Antioch, the main city in southern Galatia:

By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

– Acts 13:39

If they really want to be free they must put their trust in what God is doing in their lives through giving them a share in Jesus’ Spirit. Jesus’ self-offering is a revelation of God’s love that is powerful enough to attract us away from the many ways in which we fail to do God’s will, the many ways we become lost and distracted. Furthermore, it is life-giving, making the journey of repentance possible, leading us to forgiveness and salvation. Jesus is enjoying the fullness of divine communion. Jesus is the source of the Spirit which they have experienced. This is because he was obedient to the ‘will of God our Father’ which was to make of himself a gift of love. As Paul writes elsewhere: ‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). Paul witnessed to what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. It must be the same for the Galatians. There is no other way. There is no substitute for the giving of self in love. This is not something which we can do just by our own decision, or which we can learn by joining a group or fulfilling certain prescribed actions. We must open ourselves to Jesus’ gift of himself to us, to the grace and peace that come from Jesus and from his Father. Living Jesus’ life is the fruit of his gift. There is no other way. Paul bursts into a hymn of praise and invites the assembly to join him as they had done so often when he was among them, and cry ‘Amen’.

He gave himself for our sins

This letter is very much about freedom, and it is significant that here in the opening address Paul speaks of Jesus self-giving as the way in which God willed to liberate us from the many ways in which we find ourselves being enslaved. Paul is thinking precisely of the way in which the missionaries from Judea are enslaving the Gentile Galatians by insisting that they must change their culture and become Jews if they wish to benefit from God's offer of salvation. Such an idea is anathema to Paul, for he knows from his own experience that God loves us as we are. Redemption – that is, freedom from slavery – comes when we open our hearts to welcome God's unconditional love. It does not come about by thinking, in our insecurity, that we have to become someone other than we are and be pressured into conforming to a narrow view of God that is being imposed on us from outside.

When Paul speaks of Jesus' self-giving, he is thinking, of course, primarily of Jesus' self-giving on the cross. Since we are here at the heart of Paul's gospel it is important to reflect on the relationship between the cross and salvation in Paul's writings. This opening address is a good place to start for Paul's focus is perfectly clear: we are redeemed by Jesus' gift of himself; we are redeemed by love.

Let us begin our reflection with words spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus. Referring to his coming crucifixion, Jesus says: 'the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14-15). That Jesus saw his being 'lifted up' on the cross as part of God's providential design for our salvation is indicated when he says that 'the Son of Man *must* be lifted up'. We are reminded of a similar statement recorded by Mark: 'Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again' (Mark 8:31). In choosing to accept his death, Jesus saw himself as carrying out his Father's will:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

This text and others like it must be read with care. If Jesus' death (his being 'lifted up') could be described without qualification as God's will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were carrying out God's will. This would make what they did an act of obedience, and therefore virtuous. Such a conclusion is obviously false. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the unjust death of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus' life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy. It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the 'obedient' soldiers. To see God's part in Jesus' death, we will have to contemplate Jesus' dying more carefully. Before we do that, let us look beyond Jesus' death to his resurrection. It is clear that here we are watching the action of God. Sinful human beings 'lifted up' Jesus on the cross. God 'lifted up' Jesus into his eternal embrace in the resurrection.

This was Paul's message in the synagogue of Antioch in Galatia: 'Though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. But God raised him from the dead' (Acts 13:28,30). We find the same message given by Peter:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

– Acts 2:23-24 (see also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10)

Paul has already mentioned the resurrection in the opening verse in this letter and a proper understanding of his death on the cross cannot be had if we neglect the fidelity of God to Jesus revealed in his taking him from the cross into his eternal embrace. However, it is important not to move too quickly to the resurrection, but to stay contemplating Jesus on the cross. The statement in the above passage from the *Acts* that Jesus was 'handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God', is not to be understood in a temporal sense, for God does not exist in time. Luke is telling us to look beyond sinful human activity to the design of God, for God can use even sin to bring about his will. Our question here is: what is the will of God that is achieved through the crucifixion? What does it mean to say on the one hand that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the sinful responsibility of those who refused to obey God's will, and yet, on the other hand, that it comes within God's providential design and grace?

Whatever we mean by God's providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons; we are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God's loving design, it is also true that much that is good results from our saying Yes. Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects and loves what he has made. God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in loving ways. To the extent that we respond to God's inspiration we behave responsibly and God's will is done. To the extent that we reject God's inspiration, we behave irresponsibly and God's will is not done. Any particular decision we make is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that 'displease God' (1Thessalonians 2:14-15). The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God's will. Jesus himself says as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37). Stephen links the crucifixion of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were precisely 'opposing the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

He gave himself for our sins

You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:31-32,37 (compare Acts 7:52)

God's attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

– Mark 12:6-8

God sent his Son to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners, the prostitutes and the outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen. When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they determined to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do? His mission looked like a failure. The religious authorities were not listening. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

Yet, as sometimes happens, the sinful decisions of other people left Jesus no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue preaching the good news of God's saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful, forgiving and patient, and to continue taking the side of the poor who were crying to God for help. On the night before he died he shared with his disciples what his approaching death meant to him: he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love. When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died (Mark 15:39). His death was brought about by others. The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13).

It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design. What we see when we contemplate Jesus' self-giving on Calvary is the power of God. It is important that we distinguish between power and control.

The good news is precisely that real power, the power of God, is not a matter of control. It is a matter of love. Were it a matter of control, we would not be 'set free'. What we would claim as religious obedience would be a servile submission to a controlling God, not a free, creative response in love to love. We would bury the wonderful gift of freedom, lest we offend. We would spend our life being careful, failing to live lest we make mistakes. We would be victims of superstition, caught up in trying to control God, to manipulate God into being on our side. We would conform, as the Gentile Christians of Galatia are being tempted to conform, to whatever religious system offered security (in their case, the Jewish system).

If, on the other hand, when we contemplate Jesus on the cross, we come to see that the power of God is not in the sphere of control but of love; if we see that God respects human freedom even when it behaves as atrociously as people behaved in crucifying Jesus; if we see that Jesus' faith in God was not destroyed by the pain, degradation and humiliation of the cross, we might dare to be free. Recognising God as love, we might allow God's graceful Spirit to create in us, as God did in Jesus, someone who dares all for love. Later in this letter Paul will say: 'For freedom Christ has made us free!' (Galatians 5:1).

If we believe the gospel proclaimed by Paul, we will not fear God. Rather we will fear our own capacity to fail in love. We will dare the journey of freedom, knowing that we are constantly graced by love. We will not avoid life and its risks for fear of God's punishment. Rather, we will take seriously the gift of freedom given to us by God. Knowing our capacity to abuse freedom, we will humbly cry out to God in our need and in our poverty, knowing that God will grace us with his Spirit. Purified by love and sensitive to the presence and action of God's loving Spirit in our lives, we will dare to express love in the kind of creative self-giving that we see in Jesus on the cross.

When we focus on Jesus' relationship to us, another consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you' (John 15:12). However, his example would have had little power to persuade us had he not suffered. Suffering is part of the human condition, and Jesus' example is all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him.

He gave himself for our sins

When Jesus says that he ‘*must* be lifted up’, he is saying that *we* needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life by reacting to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not prevent God loving us and does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, despite being faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to ‘look on the one whom we have pierced’(John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin. His example and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross make it possible for us to give meaning to our sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his. If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). God is almighty power – the ‘might’, however, is the might of love. When Jesus wept over the city, we see God’s reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration. God is all-powerful, all-powerful *love*, and from the broken heart of God enough love pours out over this world to transform it into a paradise, if only we would receive it.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal. Through Jesus it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the Beloved Disciple saw blood and water flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34) for the healing even of those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity’s rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God’s love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God’s providential plan, so that ‘by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone’(Hebrews 2:9).

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

When Jesus said in his agony 'Not my will but yours be done'(Mark 14:36), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represented, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to him would succeed.

When Jesus' early disciples searched the Old Testament, the ancient testament of Israel, in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God's love persisting through rejection. In this sense, Jesus' dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God's people. Jesus' way of dying, and God's taking him into his embrace in the resurrection, are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God's love-response to human disobedience. Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are. Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope (a hope we renew each time we pray the 'Our Father') of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

6I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel –

7not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

To this point Paul has followed the customary form for beginning a letter. One would expect to find here some words of thanksgiving. Instead we find this abrupt expression of profound concern. It is a measure of Paul's confidence in the affection that has been established between himself and those whom he is addressing, but also of his amazement over what has happened, that he feels free to give vent so strongly to his feelings.

Information has reached Paul that something is happening in the churches of Galatia that cuts at the very heart of the gospel. Some, perhaps many, in the churches have been persuaded to embrace ideas and a way of life that are opposed to the gospel which Paul proclaimed while among them. Paul wants them to be in no doubt that in doing so they are abandoning God himself who has called them into communion with Christ and in whose grace they have been living.

As the letter unfolds a clearer picture will emerge of the Judean missionaries who are 'confusing' them. The Greek *tarassō* is stronger than 'confuse': they are introducing fear into their relationship with God. An introductory sketch here may help. They are Jews (6:13) who have become Christians. They have, therefore, accepted Jesus as the Messiah in whom God has fulfilled the promises given to Israel. They see, too, that the grace that God is giving to Israel through his Messiah is to be shared with the Gentiles. One can imagine the kind of encouragement which they received from texts such as the following:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'

– Zechariah 8:23

For them, this meant sharing their Jewish faith with Gentiles. They drew on words of Jesus himself, such as the following:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 5:17-19

The Judaeen missionaries judged that Paul's failure to insist on the Gentile converts keeping the law (throughout this letter, 'law' means the Jewish Torah) was a failure to be faithful to Jesus. However – and this is the key – they continue to fit Jesus into their reading of the scriptures, and they fail to read their scriptures in the light of Jesus. It is therefore unthinkable for them that any of their sacred traditions, any of the ways in which faithful Jews have expressed their obedience to God and their covenant obligations, could possibly have been transcended. They insist, therefore, that Gentiles who wish to share in the blessings of Abraham and in the fullness of life as lived by Jesus the Jew, must be circumcised (6:12), must observe Jewish feasts (4:10) and other regulations of the law.

They have come to Galatia as missionaries, confident in the support of a powerful group in the Jerusalem church. How much they represent the Jerusalem church is another matter. Luke tells us of 'certain individuals' who came down to Antioch 'from Judea and were teaching the brothers: Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' (Acts 15:1). He speaks also of 'some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees' who proclaimed during a meeting of the community in Jerusalem that 'it is necessary for them [the Gentile converts] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses' (Acts 15:8). However, at the conclusion of the meeting, this opinion was not supported and a letter was sent to Antioch stating that those who 'have gone out from us' and who 'have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds' went 'with no instructions from us' (Acts 15:24). In spite of their protestations, much the same could perhaps have been said about the Judaeen missionaries in Galatia. It is significant that in the text just quoted Luke uses *tarassō*, the word used by Paul in the present text. In both cases it is translated by 'disturb'. However, it is better translated 'frighten'. They are causing disturbance because they are introducing fear into the people's relationship with God by stating that unless they follow the law they will be excluded from salvation.

One can imagine the horror of the Judaeen missionaries when they came to Galatia to find that the Gentile Christians felt under no obligation to follow the law (the Jewish Torah). They are obviously meeting with a good deal of success in convincing the new converts that the gospel given them by Paul is insufficient, and that, if they want to be saved, they must obey the law (4:17). According to the missionaries, it is a matter of obedience to God and fidelity to their part in the covenant with God into which they have been welcomed.

This letter is Paul's response. He has already touched on the central point by speaking of Jesus as he 'who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4). Again and again Paul will come back to the cross and to Jesus' gift of himself in love. This and this alone is their security. A so-called 'gospel' that requires of Gentile converts that they observe the Jewish Law is not gospel ('good news') at all, but counterfeit. We need not assume that these missionaries were setting out intentionally to 'pervert the gospel of Christ', but this is what they are in fact doing. Later in the letter Paul will accuse them of wanting a following (4:17), of avoiding the cross (6:12), and of wanting to boast about their missionary successes (6:13). Here he wants to alert the Galatians to the fact that, if they continue to listen to these intruders, they are abandoning the grace of God offered them in Jesus.

⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!

⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

¹⁰Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a slave [NRSV 'servant'] of Christ.

Paul wants those who are perverting the gospel of Christ to be 'accursed' (Greek: *anathema*). He wants them, and anyone else who dares to pervert the true gospel of Christ, be it himself or an angel of God, to be 'lifted up as an offering', and left to God, to suffer the consequences of their actions. When something is made *anathema*, others cannot touch it, and Paul wants the Galatians not to get involved with the Judaeian missionaries or the pseudo-gospel which they are presenting. As Paul will go on to demonstrate, it is true that Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures – but not in the way in which the missionaries are claiming. It is also true that it matters how the Galileans behave – but they must be sensitive to the guidance of Jesus' Spirit, not caught up in fulfilling obligations that have nothing to do either with them as Gentiles or with following Jesus.

It would seem that the missionaries from Judea have persuaded the Galatians that Paul failed to insist on their submitting to the law, and so proclaimed a defective gospel, because he wanted to ingratiate himself with them by making things easy for them. The blunt language which Paul is using in this letter can hardly be defined as an attempt to ingratiate himself. He is sent by God and by the risen Christ. The only approval that interests him is theirs. As he writes elsewhere: 'Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts' (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

When he writes: 'If I were *still* pleasing people', he seems to be admitting that that is how he used to behave when he persecuted Christians to get the approval of the authorities in Jerusalem. That was before he came to know Christ. Now he is a 'slave of Christ'. This is a particularly powerful self-description, especially in a letter which is about the freedom that Christ brings, and in which Paul is pleading with the Galatians not to desert Christ and the true gospel to go back into slavery. Jesus lived a life of self-transcendence through self-giving, and he did so in obedience, 'according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4). It must be the same for Paul. The freedom brought by the gospel is not a freedom for self-promotion or self-satisfaction such as is encouraged by 'the present evil age' (1:4). It is the freedom to obey the gracious will of God and to enjoy the communion in love that comes only from being a 'slave of Christ' – captured by his love and living heart and soul for him. If any persuasion is needed, Paul is confident that the gospel has its own power. He leaves persuasion to God.

In speaking of himself as a 'slave/servant of Christ', Paul is drawing on one of the richest themes of the Hebrew Scriptures. The so-called 'servant songs' which speak of the 'servant of the Lord' (the Hebrew is '*bd*, 'slave') appear among anonymous writings composed during the Babylonian exile and incorporated into the scroll of Isaiah. Reflecting on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Lord's temple, the author reappraises the relationship between Israel and their God. The effort to be powerful in opposition to the power of Egypt or Babylon had proved disastrous. The pride of the kings of Judah had proved their downfall. What was needed was a humble people, and the new Moses who was to lead them back to the promised Land was to be humble, like Moses – a 'servant of the Lord'.

Ezekiel, also a prophet of the Exile, had called on the people to repent of their sins. He saw the glory of God come to Babylon and rest upon them in their exile (Ezekiel 1:28; 10:18-22). He promised them a new covenant (Ezekiel 36), and a renewed experience of God's Spirit (Ezekiel 37). He kept alive the belief that the Lord would not abandon them. They would return and rebuilt the temple. This time the land would indeed be holy.

The composer of the 'servant songs' speaks of the kind of leader they would need as they journeyed back to a restored Judah. He would have to be someone after the fashion of Moses, the intimate, humble and faithful servant of the Lord:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord ... who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

– Isaiah 42:1-7

Luke saw Jesus in this light. There are echoes in the concluding words of the song of Zechariah who sees the approaching of the dawn 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79). There are echoes, too, in Jesus' reply to the disciples of John the Baptist: 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk ... the poor have good news brought to them' (Luke 7:22). God's servant is to bring forth justice 'to the nations', to be a 'light to the nations'. We are not surprised to hear Paul speaking of himself in the same terms.

The prophet develops his ideas of the servant in a second poem:

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'

The servant of the Lord

But I said, 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.' And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him ... he says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'

– Isaiah 49:1-6

Once again it is the universal scope of his mission that is highlighted. This second poem takes into consideration the difficulties: 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing'. It is the aspect of suffering that is developed in the third poem of the servant:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens — wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?

– Isaiah 50:4-10

We think of Jesus as he 'set his face to go the Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51; see Luke 13:31-33). We think of how he was mocked by Herod and his soldiers (see Luke 23:11). He warned his disciples to expect similar treatment, and to remain undaunted (see Luke 6:27-35). We will find echoes of the same ideas in Paul's description of himself and of his mission.

The fourth and final poem is the one best known to us, as it is quoted or alluded to over forty times in the New Testament. The writers could find no more powerful or more beautiful expression in their sacred writings to express the suffering which Jesus went through or the faithfulness of God who glorified his servant Jesus. It is on this theme of humiliation and suffering leading to glorification and life that the poems begins:

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him — so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals — so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate. Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

– Isaiah 52:13 - 53:1

It was to these words more than any others that the writers of the New Testament, including Paul, looked to help them understand the scandal of the death of Jesus. It was through reflection on passages such as the poems of the servant that the disciples of Emmaus were enabled to come to some understanding of the scandal of the cross:

Jesus said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

– Luke 24:25-27

The central section of the poem, too long to quote here, speaks in moving terms of the suffering experienced by God’s chosen servant. The final section of the poem returns to God’s promise to reward with glory the fidelity of his servant:

It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

– Isaiah 53:10-12

Luke has Jesus quote from this passage just before his passion: ‘I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, “And he was counted among the lawless”; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled’(Luke 22:37). Luke also has Jesus on the cross, like the servant, praying for sinners: ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’(Luke 23:32). Jesus returns to the theme of his suffering and glorification throughout the gospel:

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

– Luke 9:22

The Son of Man must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.

– Luke 17:25

This portrayal of Jesus as God’s suffering servant who is ‘taken up in glory’(1Timothy 3:16) is central to all of Paul’s writings. Here in his earliest letter, he identifies with the one who suffers in carrying out the mission entrusted to him by the Lord.

¹¹For I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;

¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Of course the gospel is something which Paul has ‘received’ and is ‘handing on’. Elsewhere he writes:

I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you ... For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received.

– 1Corinthians 15:1-3

Paul is not denying the fact or the value of tradition. However – and this is at the heart of the difference that separates Paul from the Judaeen missionaries – tradition must always be judged by what God is doing. We must not limit God to what our tradition allows. Paul has already said that he was sent to the Galatians by God. He is not denying the role played by the community in Antioch in sending him to the Galatians. He is making the point that they, too, were acting under the direction of God’s Spirit. To find the origin of his apostolic mission and gospel, the Galatians must look beyond the level of human decision; they must look to God and to the action of the risen Jesus.

There is a parallel in the Gospels in regard to Peter. When Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, Jesus replied: ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven’ (Matthew 16:16-17). Peter learned through observation and conversation, but the insights he received were the result of a special enlightenment from God. So it is with Paul. Whoever may be God’s instrument in speaking to Paul *about* Jesus, his coming to know Jesus is a gift from God.

When Paul says that he received the gospel ‘through a revelation of Jesus Christ’, he is referring to the way in which Jesus revealed himself to Paul (1Corinthians 15:8; Acts 9:3-8), but he is saying much more than that. He is claiming that Jesus is the one in whom God has revealed himself and his will to save. This is the good news. God is not locked into the past. On the contrary, the gospel of which Paul is an apostle is a new revelation which God has made in Jesus Christ. It is consistent with all that God has done in the past. It brings to fulfilment all that God has promised. It is the perfecting of the law.

But it is more. It is a new creative act of God. Nothing can be the same any more. God has revealed love in a surprising and new way. The self-giving of Jesus reveals that communion with God is possible for everyone and is offered to everyone through union with Jesus. This offer must be welcomed, and it will radically change people's lives, but there is no place for attempting to become what we are not. There is no place for a Gentile to behave as though he or she were a Jew. God's grace in Jesus redeems us where and as we are.

The gospel proclaimed to the Galatians by Paul has its origin in God, and God has revealed the good news by revealing Jesus Christ. To know the true gospel we do not fit Jesus into our tradition as though he were a further step along a familiar path. We open ourselves in faith, hope and love to the action of his Spirit in our lives, freeing us from all that would limit God as well as from all that would distract us from God, including our human traditions, however sacred. Nothing Paul says indicates that he thinks that a Jewish Christian should cease to be a Jew. Christianity is the flowering of Judaism and its fulfilment. But for a group of Jews to come from Judea insisting that Gentiles follow the law is a preposterous enslavement that, in the name of the gospel, Paul cannot countenance.

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.

¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born, and called me through his grace,

¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to [‘in’] me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,

Paul’s aim here is to reinforce what he has just said about the gospel having its source in God’s revelation in Jesus. The Judean missionaries have been telling the Galatians that Paul is an untrustworthy missionary who has been unfaithful both to the law and to the apostles in whose authority he is supposed to have carried out his mission. By contrast, they claim to be acting out of fidelity to God and to the law. Paul demonstrates that he knows what it is like to be ‘zealous for the traditions of my ancestors’. He reminds the Galatians of his earlier history as a persecutor of the Christian church. Note how he refers to it as ‘the church of God’. Paul is not simply giving snippets of his life story. His focus is still on what God is doing.

He once opposed God by what he was doing to the church. The Judean missionaries had better take note! Like them, he acted out of zeal for the law. However, something happened that changed all that, and it was something that God did: ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son to me’. Paul expresses God’s choice of him in terms borrowed from the prophetic writings of Israel:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

– Jeremiah 1:4-5

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me ... And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant ... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

– Isaiah 9:1,5,6

Paul experienced a conversion on the road to Damascus. From being determined to keep Judaism pure from Gentile defilement, he came to see that fidelity to Judaism means recognising Jesus as the promised Messiah and welcoming the Gentiles to share in this truth and to form one family with Jews.

It is noteworthy that when Paul speaks of the experience that radically changed the direction of his life he speaks of Jesus as God’s ‘Son’. Luke picks this point up nicely when he says that, immediately after his conversion ‘Paul began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God”’ (Acts 9:20).

The Jewish Christians in the Galatian churches and the Gentiles familiar with Judaism would have understood the term 'Son' as a Messianic title. God promised David: 'I will raise up your offspring after you ... I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me' (2 Samuel 7:12,14). When the Davidic prince ascended the throne, the following words were chanted: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). In another psalm we hear: 'I will make him the firstborn [son], the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm' (Psalm 89:27-28). The title 'Son of God', as with all other Messianic titles, takes on special depths of meaning when it is used of Jesus by Christians. It places the focus on the intimate communion in life between Jesus and God his 'Father'. What made the difference to Paul was when he came to see that the God whom he thought he was defending with such zeal had chosen to reveal himself in Jesus.

The other key aspect of Paul's conversion experience was that God was calling him to proclaim this truth about Jesus to the Gentiles. Luke was very aware of this as we see from the three separate accounts which he gives of Paul's initial conversion. In Luke's first account, Jesus appears to Paul, tells him that it is he, Jesus, whom Paul is persecuting, and instructs him to go into Damascus where he will be told what to do (Acts 9:4-6). Jesus then appears to Ananias and informs Ananias that he has chosen Paul 'to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:15-16). In the second account it is Ananias who explains to Paul: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard' (Acts 22:14-15). This is followed by a vision which Paul has in the temple in Jerusalem in which Jesus tells him 'I will send you far away to the Gentiles' (Acts 22:21). In the third account, Ananias is not mentioned. It is Jesus himself who tells Paul: 'I am sending you to the Gentiles' (Acts 26:17). Like Paul, Luke is not ruling out human mediation. The key point is that the choice of Paul as a missionary (apostle) to the Gentiles is a divine one.

In verse twelve, Paul says that he received the gospel 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ'. He makes the same point in verse sixteen. The gospel is based on something that God has done in choosing to reveal himself and his saving will in Jesus. The basis of Paul's apostolic mission is that God has revealed Jesus to Paul and commissioned him to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. The choice is God's. The call is God's. The timing is God's. Verse sixteen can also be translated 'God was pleased to reveal his Son *in me*'. Chrysostom reads it this way and speaks of Paul being 'richly endowed with the Spirit. The revelation enlightened his whole soul and he had Christ speaking within him'. Paul came to know Jesus and God's will for him through his experience of the life-giving Spirit of the risen Christ who filled his heart and commissioned him to share this experience among the Gentiles. One reason for Paul focusing on his experience here is to invite the Galatians to step back from the persuasive arguments that have been presented to them by the Judaeans Christians, to remember their own experience, and to reflect on what God has done in their lives.

^{16b}I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia; and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days;

¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia,

²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ;

²³they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.'

²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

Paul has already stated that he was commissioned as an apostle by God himself and by Jesus, and not by the apostles in Jerusalem. He reinforces his point here. How could he have received the gospel from the apostles in Jerusalem, and how could he derive his authority as an apostle from them when he has had so little contact with them? When he says that he 'did not confer with any human being', he is not denying conversations or faith-sharing with Ananias and other Christians in Damascus (see Acts 9:17-19). He is stating that whatever conversations he had were not the origin of his gospel. As regards the apostles in Jerusalem, it was three years before he visited Jerusalem, and even then he stayed for only a fortnight and had contact with Cephas. Rather than give the Greek equivalent, *Petros*, Paul transliterates the Aramaic into Greek as *Kēphas*. Apart from Peter, the leader of the twelve, the only other person Paul conferred with was 'James, the Lord's brother'.

Though it is not important for an understanding of the present text, a comment may be in order on Paul's speaking of James as 'the Lord's brother'. In the extended family of Jesus' culture the word 'brother' covered cousins as well as those who shared the same mother and father. Luke mentions the presence of a woman called Mary among those who informed the apostles that the tomb of Jesus was empty. In order to distinguish her from the other women of the same name, Mary Magdalene, Mary the sister of Martha, and Mary the mother of Jesus, Luke identifies her as 'Mary, the mother of James' (Luke 24:10). Matthew (27:56) and Mark (15:40) include her among the women at the foot of the cross. If the evangelists were referring to Jesus' mother, they would surely have identified her as such and not as 'the mother of James'.

In John's gospel the husband of this Mary is called Clopas (John 19:25). Hegessipus, writing in the middle of the second century, states that Clopas was the brother of Jesus' father, Joseph. This would make James Jesus' first cousin. The ancient tradition that Jesus was Mary's only child fits with the scanty evidence we have from the New Testament. James, who was known as 'the Lord's brother' (see also Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3), became the leader of the elders in the Christian community in Jerusalem (2:9,12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18).

Paul says very little about how he spent the three years immediately following his conversion. The point he is making is that he did not spend them in Jerusalem with the apostles. He tells us only that he ‘went at once to Arabia and afterwards I returned to Damascus’. ‘Arabia’ refers to the Nabataean kingdom to the west and south of Damascus. This was quite a prosperous area with a number of large cities. If this was Paul’s first attempt at a Gentile mission it seems to have been short and quite unsuccessful. Luke also passes quickly over this period, mentioning briefly Paul’s preaching in Damascus and a plot by some Jews to kill him which forced him to escape through an opening in the wall. The disciples, under cover of darkness, lowered him down in a basket (Acts 9:19-25). Paul also mentions this incident: ‘In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands’ (2Corinthians 11:32-33).

It is unlikely that Damascus would have been under the client king Aretus IV prior to the death of the emperor Tiberius in March 37AD. Aretus himself died in 39/40AD. The different accounts by Paul and Luke are not contradictory. There is nothing to stop some Jews being in on the plot. All we can conclude from this piece of information is that some time in the late 30’s Paul escaped from Damascus, and, for the first time since his conversion, he came to Jerusalem. Luke also mentions this visit, and the role played by Barnabas in introducing Paul ‘to the apostles’ and in telling them that Paul had ‘seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of the Lord’ (Acts 9:27). In his brief account of this visit, Luke writes: ‘Paul spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus’ (Acts 9:29-30).

Luke also mentions the fact that some time after this Barnabas was sent down to Antioch from Jerusalem when they heard that Gentiles were joining the church there in great numbers (Acts 11:20-22). It was from Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria-Cilicia, that Barnabas ‘went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch’ (Acts 11:25-26).

Paul stresses the brevity of his contact with Jerusalem, and with the ‘churches of God in Judea’. He is not saying that they did not know him as a persecutor. His only point is that they had no contact with him as an apostle and therefore that he received neither the gospel nor his authority as an apostle from them. Furthermore, when they heard that he was ‘proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy ... they glorified God because of me’. They were delighted with what Paul was doing, unlike the Judaeon missionaries in Galatia. For the first time Paul speaks of ‘faith’. We will speak of it shortly.

¹Then during [NRSV 'after'] fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.

²I went up in response to a revelation.

As noted in the introduction to this letter, there is a difference of opinion among scholars that affects our understanding of this text. Most identify this meeting with that of Acts chapter fifteen. Others disagree. If we begin from the premiss that Luke knew Paul, and that he took pains to establish the facts accurately, we will find ourselves, I believe, siding with the minority view. We discussed this question in introducing the letter (see pages 20-21). The following considerations are also pertinent.

Up to this point Paul has been demonstrating how little connection he has had with the Jerusalem church. He has mentioned his first visit which was three years after (Greek *meta*) his conversion (1:18). Now he says that the only other time he went to Jerusalem 'during (Greek *dia*) fourteen years' was this meeting. The fourteen could be referring to the distance in time between his conversion and the meeting. It is more likely to refer to the time between his conversion and this present letter. He is saying: it is fourteen years since Damascus and this was only my second (and last) visit to Jerusalem. When we remember that he even put himself under oath in verse twenty, it is quite unthinkable that he would omit a visit there, or that he would allow the Judaeon missionaries to dismiss his whole argument by demonstrating that his connections were more frequent than he is admitting. Luke mentions a visit which Paul and Barnabas made to Jerusalem *after* the visit already noted (1:18; Acts 9:26) and *before* the assembly described in Acts chapter fifteen. The question is whether this intermediate visit could be the one to which Paul is referring here, and the answer is Yes, it could. Luke writes:

Prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

– Acts 11:27-30

There is evidence of recurring famines during the reign of Claudius. Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem 'in response to a revelation'. Could he be referring to the words spoken by the prophet Agabus? Furthermore, the request that the Antioch church 'continue to remember the poor' (1:10 – a possible rendering of the present subjunctive of the Greek verb *mnēmoneuō*) would fit well with the visit described by Luke.

Thus far we have attempted to show only that the visit mentioned here by Paul *could* be the same as that noted by Luke in Acts 11:27-30, and that it could have occurred *before* the Jerusalem Assembly. Our second consideration is stronger. Luke informs us that at the Jerusalem Assembly Peter spoke of his experiences in relation to Cornelius and the Gentiles who were with him. He reminded the gathering that the Holy Spirit had come down upon these Gentiles just as he had come down upon the apostles. He went on:

In cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

– Acts 15:9-11

If this is the meeting to which Paul is referring in his letter to the Galatians, he would surely have gone on to say something like: ‘And during this meeting Peter said ...’. Either that, or he would have gone on to say something like: ‘On my third visit to Jerusalem, after my time with you, Peter said ... and it was agreed that ...’. Since he makes no mention of it, we should assume that he wrote this letter *before* the assembly took place.

In his account of the Jerusalem Assembly Luke goes on to tell us that James, the leader of the presbyters in the Jerusalem community, accepted Peter’s inspired words, and declared: ‘I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God’(Acts 15:19). Then ‘the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church’ wrote a letter to the church in Antioch in which they distanced themselves from those who were, with no authorisation, disturbing the Christians there (in much the same way as the Judaeon missionaries were disturbing the Galatians). They included some directions concerning food (we noted this in the introduction and will return to this shortly), but apart from this: ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden’(Acts 15:28). All of this is too good for Paul not to use in his letter. One response is to question the accuracy of Luke’s account. But on what grounds? It does not contradict Paul’s. If Paul is, indeed, speaking of a meeting that took place on the occasion of the relief sent from Antioch to Jerusalem, then the meeting was, as Paul goes on to say, a ‘private meeting’(2:2b), which took place before Paul and Barnabas visited Galatia and before the Jerusalem Assembly.

Barnabas is well known to the churches in Galatia. He and Paul were partners in proclaiming the gospel to them (Acts 13:14 - 14:25). Titus, as a Gentile convert and an uncircumcised member of the Christian community is taken along so that the discussion will not be an abstract one. Paul wants the church in Jerusalem to meet an uncircumcised Christian from the area of Paul’s mission activity.

The leaders in Jerusalem do not require Gentiles to be circumcised

^{2b}Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.

³But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us –

⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with [for] you.

As Paul recounts what happened at this his second visit to Jerusalem, he wants the Galatians to continue to focus on what God is doing. He has already stated that he went up to Jerusalem ‘in response to a revelation’. Now he focuses on ‘the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles’ – a gospel which, as he has already explained, is ‘the gospel of Christ’(1:7), a ‘gospel received through a revelation of Jesus Christ’(1:12), a gospel which consists in ‘proclaiming God’s Son among the Gentiles’(1:16).

Initially, Paul was concerned. If those who were acknowledged as leaders in the Jerusalem church listened to the ‘false believers’ and demanded that Gentile converts follow the Jewish law, and that Titus be circumcised, Paul knew that he ‘could not submit to them even for a moment’. Such a decision could lead only to a parting of the ways, a division between Jewish and Gentile Christians, a breakdown of the communion in love for which Jesus died. That would have broken Paul’s heart. It would have gone against the kind of community that he, Barnabas and others had been helping to build in Antioch (Acts 11:20-26).

When Paul speaks of the ‘false believers’, he is thinking also of the Judaeian missionaries who are carrying on the same way in Galatia. Once again (see 1:7), they may not consciously be setting out to ‘enslave’ the Galatians, but that is in fact what they are doing. ‘The freedom we have in Christ’ has nothing to do with irresponsibility or disregard for living a life that is in accordance with God’s will. Paul will make this clear later in the letter. It has everything to do with faith as a commitment to Jesus, flowing from a grateful acceptance of the grace offered by God. In fact, it is the acceptance of this grace that enables us to do God’s will.

Paul fought for this freedom in Jerusalem, because it was a matter of the truth: the truth of the gospel, the revelation of God’s faithful love in Jesus. He could not allow false believers to pervert the gospel. He was obliged, in fidelity to the mission given him by God, to preserve it intact for the Galatians; indeed, for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

When Paul presented his gospel to the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem church, not only was no attempt made to have Titus circumcised, but Paul's gospel was accepted without addition or qualification. Those whose authorisation the Judaean missionaries in Galatia are claiming recognised the validity of Paul's commission, and did not demand that Gentiles follow Jewish ways.

Paul is consistent in keeping the focus, not on himself or on the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church, but on God. The fact that James, the leader of the presbyters who governed the Jerusalem church, Cephas, the leader of the twelve, and John, another of the twelve, agreed with Paul was significant, and Paul wants the Galatians to know about it. However, he is not appealing to their authority, nor is he impressed with the way others (presumably including the Judaean missionaries) speak of them. 'God shows no partiality'. God does not arbitrarily favour some and not others. Those whom the Jerusalem community look up to as their leaders are to be judged, like Paul himself, by their fidelity to the mission given them by God. What matters is 'the truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:5).

It is God who is working (Greek: *energeō*) through Peter, and it is God who is working through Paul. The agreement was reached because they looked at what was happening and saw God at work. God chose Peter to be an apostle to the Jews, and it is God who sent Paul to the Gentiles. It would be against the whole tenor of this passage to see these two categories as mutually exclusive, as though there were to be two separate churches. Such a conclusion would ignore what we know from Luke about Peter and the acceptance of Cornelius. It would also ignore what Luke tells us about Paul's missionary strategy, which was to go first to the Jews. The result of this meeting was that the leaders of the Jerusalem church accepted the practice of the church in Antioch of welcoming Gentiles without their having to be circumcised. It is important to note that, unlike the Jerusalem Assembly, nothing was said at this 'private meeting' about laws governing eating.

Paul's letters demonstrate how faithful Paul was in his commitment to helping the poor in Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:25-27).

⁶And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – those leaders contributed nothing to me.

⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸(for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles),

⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognised the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

¹⁰They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned;

¹²for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate, for fear of the circumcision faction.

¹³And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

¹⁴But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

The confrontation to which Paul refers here takes place in Antioch. Since the church in Antioch plays such an important role in the development of the early church, and since what happened in Antioch is central to the issues at stake in this letter, it is important, before analysing Paul's account, to attempt to get a picture of the church in Antioch at the time. Luke writes:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists [Greek-speaking Gentiles] also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'

– Acts 11:19-26

From this we learn that the church in Antioch was originally made up of Jews. Then a large number of Gentiles joined the community. We know from the account of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1 – 11:18) that the Jerusalem Christians (though, as we already know, not all of them) had already come to see that it was God's will that Gentiles be admitted into the community without having to become Jews through circumcision. This was a huge step for them to take and it says a lot about the extraordinary openness of Jesus himself and the powerful example he gave by the way in which he welcomed people, whoever they might be, and shared their table with such simplicity and love. This was a major factor in his being rejected. It was also very impressive for those who opted to join him. The welcoming of people like Cornelius into the community says a lot also about the powerful and convincing presence of Jesus' Spirit in the community and about the openness and willingness of the community to see what the Holy Spirit was doing among them and to let go their long held and cherished assumptions by accepting Gentiles as equals.

For all that, inevitably there would have been only a small number of Gentiles in the churches within Palestine, and their presence would not have constituted a threat to the Jewish character of the Christian communities. We can assume that they were happy to adapt to Jewish dietary regulations. The large numbers of Gentiles joining the community in Antioch, plus the fact that Antioch was a Gentile and not a Jewish city, created a different kind of dynamic. When news of what was happening there reached Jerusalem, they sent down Barnabas, one of their most trusted members, ‘a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith’ (Acts 11:24), to investigate. ‘When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced’. No doubt he sent a favourable report back to Jerusalem. Barnabas stayed on in Antioch. He knew Paul. In fact it was he who introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). He knew that Paul was just the sort of person that the Antioch church needed, so he went to Tarsus, brought Paul back with him, and they worked together in the Antioch church, helping to nurture a community in which Jews and Gentiles were learning to live together in a communion of love engendered and nurtured by the Spirit of Jesus.

Then comes the scene which we have just read in Paul (2:1-10). Though Paul did not mention Antioch in his account, we know that it was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were sent as delegates with assistance for the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-29). While they were there the matter of Jewish-Gentile relationships in the church came up again. It is clear that there was a determined group in Jerusalem that was against what was happening in Antioch. However, as we have heard, the leaders in the church agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised: they were not bound by the law. Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (Acts 12:25), and that it was from Antioch that they set out on the mission which took them to Cyprus and then to the southern regions of Galatia. We quote again Luke’s description of their return (Acts 14:26-28):

They sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

The scene which Paul now recounts seems to fit best into the period after the mission to Galatia and before the Jerusalem Assembly. Since it involves Peter (Cephas), we need to recall the key aspects of a conversion which Peter experienced. Because of what he came to see in prayer while he was staying with Simon, a tanner, in Joppa (Acts 10:9-16), and because of the Pentecost experience of Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Caesarea, Peter realised that not only was God calling Gentiles into the church, but that the dietary rules of the law did not have absolute value. God declared all food clean. Another implication was that Peter could eat with Gentiles (Acts 10:15). This had profound implications for when the Christian community came together to share a common meal, especially the Eucharist. So it is that when Peter (Cephas) comes to Antioch he quite happily shares table fellowship with Gentiles who are not following the Jewish dietary laws. He may even have been disregarding these laws himself – at least that is the impression we get from Paul’s account where he speaks of Peter ‘living like a Gentile and not like a Jew’. This should come as no surprise in the light of the vision which Peter had at Joppa in which he was told by God to eat food that was forbidden by the law (see Acts 10:13).

A clash of views in Antioch

However, when Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem ('from James'), Peter, Barnabas and others, withdrew from the common table and began to eat apart. Their behaviour incensed Paul because, whatever their motive, they were breaking communion, and making the Gentiles feel like second-class Christians. He condemned them for what he called their hypocrisy. They were 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel' (2:14). Before Paul and Barnabas had gone to Cyprus and Galatia, they had gone together to Jerusalem with relief from those affected by a famine (see Acts 11:27-29). If, as is likely, this is the meeting described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10, James, Cephas and John agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. However, we are not told that anything was said at that meeting about how Gentiles were to eat when sharing a meal with Jews, nor about exempting Jewish Christians from their obligations as Jews (see Leviticus 11). Let us pause briefly to look at what was behind these food laws. Their purpose was to keep reminding the people of Israel that they have been set aside by the Holy One, and that they must not do anything that would compromise or contaminate what is sacred. Since life is sacred, they could not drink blood, or eat meat from which the blood had not been drained:

You are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. You shall not eat any abhorrent thing.

– Deuteronomy 14:2-3

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to be cut off from social contact. It was especially important that they not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (Amos 7:17). The same held for their inhabitants, the Gentiles (Isaiah 35:8; 52:1). Since table fellowship is essential to a Christian community, and since there was a long history of problems between Jews and Gentiles when it came to sharing meals, it is understandable that, at this early stage of experimenting in how best to build community, different churches may have gone in different directions. Whereas in Judea Gentile Christians probably followed Jewish food laws, in Antioch it may well have been the Jews who adapted.

Peter had no trouble with this, for the reasons already noted, but when the group from Jerusalem arrived, he changed his behaviour. Perhaps Peter, while happy to eat with Gentiles in Antioch according to the customs that were followed there, was concerned as to how Jews back in Jerusalem would react when his behaviour was reported by the visitors who did not share his openness. Perhaps he behaved as he did so as not to jeopardise his mission among Jewish Christians. Whatever his reasons – and we should note that Barnabas agreed with him – Paul objected strongly. It is important for us to remain with Paul's focus (the gospel) and not to distract ourselves by focusing on the personal relations between Paul and Peter or Barnabas or James. If Peter and Barnabas had changed their behaviour because of Paul's words he would surely have mentioned that fact here. We can safely assume that on this occasion Paul's view did not prevail. We can also assume that Paul had heard that the Judaeon missionaries were using this disagreement to demonstrate how wrong Paul was and how they had the backing of James, Peter and Barnabas. Otherwise it is difficult to see why Paul mentions the scene.

It is likely that it was this confrontation in Antioch that was the occasion for the calling of the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15:1.5), which, as it turned out, confirmed the earlier private agreement that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. On the matter of food laws, it said nothing about Jews being free from obedience to the dietary laws. Furthermore, it was agreed that Gentile Christians should comply with these prescriptions when they are sharing a meal with Jews (Acts 15:20-21, 29).

It seems that, as a result of the Assembly, Paul came to see the appropriateness of the decisions that were reached, at least as regards communities that were largely Jewish. However, prior to the Assembly and in view of the practice that had been prevailing in Antioch, one can understand Paul's vehement reaction. There is nothing, however, to stop Paul, once the matter had been properly discerned and decided, coming to agree with Peter and Barnabas that Jewish sensibilities should be respected in shared meals. The decision at the Assembly was not about the basis of salvation. It was not insisting on Gentiles becoming Jews. It was a pastoral decision about what was the more loving behaviour in a complex situation. Why could not Paul have come to see that it was right to ask the Gentiles to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters? According to Luke this is precisely what Paul did. Luke tells us that after the assembly Paul returned to the churches of Galatia, and 'as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem' (Acts 16:4). What Paul is objecting to here in this letter is the Jews separating themselves from the Gentiles and so breaking communion. This is something he could never countenance.

The key decision of the Assembly, and one which supports Paul's missionary practice, his understanding of the gospel and the central thrust of this letter, was that Gentiles could become Christians as Gentiles. They were not bound by the Jewish Torah. The practical directions concerning food were about ensuring harmony and sensitivity in a community an essential element of which was sharing in the Eucharistic celebration. Where the majority of the community was composed of Jews who saw it as a matter of fidelity to continue obeying the dietary laws of the Torah, charity pointed towards the Gentiles adapting to these laws. Where the majority was Gentile, however, the situation was different. As we shall find in later letters, Paul felt free to advise a different way of acting in the largely Gentile churches which he founded. What is not negotiable is that Jew and Gentile Christians must share the Eucharist together.

All this, however, was in the future. As Paul is writing his letter to the Galatians, he sees the behaviour of Peter and Barnabas as a response in fear to the group that 'came from James' – the same kind of fear that the Judaeon missionaries are stirring up in Galatia. Imperceptibly, Paul's words to Peter merge into a passionate cry to the Galatians and a challenge to the Judaeon missionaries to focus again on the central truths of the gospel concerning which there can be no compromise. It is to this statement that we now turn.

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;

¹⁶yet who know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Jesus Christ.

And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Christ

and not by doing the works of the law,

because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

Libraries have been written on these two verses, and understandably, since here we have Paul's earliest statement of what he calls 'the gospel we proclaimed to you'(1:8), 'the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles'(2:2), 'the truth of the gospel'(2:5,14). Against the background of the disturbing news that has come to him from Galatia, Paul expresses here the essence of what he 'received through a revelation of Jesus Christ'(1:12), the central insight that God gave to Paul when 'he was pleased to reveal his Son to me'(1:16).

One would expect Paul to be lucidly clear at this point, yet there has been a long history of differing interpretations of these verses. Our human capacity to read things through the filter of our own experiences and expectations plays a big part in this. Another problem is that the history of the interpretation of Paul's words has left us a legacy of certain 'English' expressions which have taken on a life of their own even though the meaning which they convey is not immediately clear.

Let us begin by looking at the word 'justified'. We know what this means when it comes to formatting a text. The text in this column has been 'justified'(each line reaches the right hand margin); the text in the adjacent column has not. To 'justify' the text is to do something to it, namely, to 'ad-just' it, to set it straight, to set it right. When God 'justifies' a person, God does something to the person (God adjusts the person) to set him/her in a right relationship with God.

The verb 'justify'(Greek: *dikaioō*, 2:16,17), and the noun 'justification' (Greek: *dikaiosis*, 2:21) are based on the word *dikē* which refers to divine order – the will of God as revealed in nature, in history, and in divinely revealed law. The Judaeon missionaries are insisting that the way to get into a right relationship with God, the way to enjoy the communion with God which is offered to us by Jesus, necessarily involves observing every detail of the law in which God has expressed his will. Paul's gospel is that God has given us this communion through something that God has done through the self-giving, life-giving, love-giving of Jesus his Son. Yes, there is something which we have to do – and Paul talks about that. But we must first be clear about the fact that what we do cannot bring 'justification'. We cannot 'adjust' ourselves. For that we must look to Jesus. What matters now is that we open our hearts to Jesus' love, not observe the law.

A complication arises in regard to the verb ‘to justify’ from its use in court where it can mean ‘to declare just’. A human judge can be mistaken. A human judge can declare a person to be just when in fact the person is not. From the point of view of the law, such a declaration puts a person beyond punishment, but the person remains unchanged. He/She has been declared just without having been made so. Paul, however, is referring to God, where such an error of judgment is not possible. If a sinner is declared by God to be in a right relationship with him, this must mean that God has done something to set the person right. Paul could not be clearer on this point, nor on the fact that what God has done has everything to do with Jesus.

We move now to the expression ‘works of the law’ (Greek: *erga nomou*). It is important to observe that the word ‘works’ does not always refer to the same thing in Paul. It can refer simply to any kind of human activity; it can refer to activity that flows from faith; or, as here, it can refer specifically to activity that is performed in accordance with the law. The Judaeen missionaries are insisting that it is necessary to do what the law prescribes, and in this way to carry out our part in the covenant with God. Put simply they are insisting on observing the law. Paul uses the word ‘law’ in a restricted and in a wider sense. In a restricted sense it refers to the Jewish Torah (also called the Pentateuch from the Greek word for its five scrolls). In a broader sense it refers to all of the sacred books of Israel, including the Prophets and the Writings in so far as they were understood to reveal God’s will. In the present context Paul is speaking of God’s will as revealed in the Torah as interpreted in the light of the prophetic writings.

Paul states that a person ‘is justified not by the works of the law but through faith’. He is establishing common ground for the argument which he intends to develop. It has been persuasively demonstrated that Jewish opinion at the time would have agreed with Paul on this point. It is absolutely vital to grasp this if we are to have a correct understanding of Paul. We should assume that the Judaeen missionaries in Galatia would also have agreed. Jews, and so Jewish Christians, knew that what mattered was faith in God. They obeyed the law precisely because of this faith, since they recognised in the law a precious gift to them from God:

‘I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

– Psalm 119:15-16

Before looking at the intimate connection which Paul establishes between ‘faith’ and ‘Jesus’, we must pause to explore the biblical meaning of the word ‘faith’, for this word, too, through constant use, is in danger of losing some of its rich content. Faith (Greek: *pistis*) and ‘believing’ (Greek: *pisteuō*) speak of listening to God, heeding God’s inspiration, and acting accordingly. The verb especially focuses on the dynamic movement of our actual relating with God. Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action. As Jesus himself says:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

Faith

To speak of 'faith' is to speak of the truth about God's self-revelation through his activity in the world, reaching its climax in God's self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek verb *pisteuō* or by the related noun *pistis*, or adjective *pistos*. These latter only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn. The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithfulness'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, certain, and so trustworthy (note, *trustworthy* - which is not the same as *trusting*).

God has this quality in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the *real* God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

– Psalm 33:4

I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:20

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are *trustworthy* because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of the Lord, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18). Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

When we come to the Hebrew verb 'mn we find, as we would expect, that it means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness. The verb 'believe' then has two essential components. It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is. But who is God? Among the many necessarily imperfect answers to this question found in the sacred Scriptures, there is one that stands out: God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. When God first appears to Moses, God declares:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

Exodus 3:7-8

Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.'

– Exodus 6:6-7

This loving kindness of God is stressed throughout the Old Testament. It finds its most sublime expression in the New Testament in the First Letter of John where we read: 'God is love' (1John 4:8,16). Since God *is* love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God, therefore, is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'

– Psalm 82:1-4

Jeremiah challenges king Zedekiah:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? ...
He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 22:15-16

King Josiah, Zedekiah's father, acted justly and so can truly be said to have put his faith in the faithfulness of God. The idea recurs again and again in the writings of the prophets:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

– Amos 5:24

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.

– Hosea 4:1

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

– Hosea 6:6

Faith

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

– Isaiah 11:9

The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor. They are to remember that they were once oppressed and that it was the Lord who redeemed them. The following text is typical and similar injunctions can be found throughout the books of the Law:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.

– Exodus 22:21-23

In the New Testament - and it is to this point that we must return – Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to 'be' - 'lieve', to 'be' in 'love'. It is to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts. To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion. To believe is:

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus (1:12).
- to heed what God says 'when God was pleased to reveal his Son to me' (1:16), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus (2:20), sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love (5:14).

We come now to the crucial point of what Paul is saying to the Galatians. He makes a clear distinction between two realities: between ‘observance of the law’ (Greek: *erga nomou*) and ‘the faith of Jesus Christ’ (Greek: *pistis Iēsou Christou*). It is not observance of the law which sets us in a right relationship with God, it is our sharing in the faith of Jesus. Our understanding of Paul’s gospel hangs on the way in which we understand what Paul means by ‘*pistis Iēsou Christou*’. The translation given in the NRSV, though common, points us in the wrong direction. It is surely clear already from what Paul has written, that being in a right relationship with God, that is to say, sharing in the intimacy of Jesus’ own communion, does not depend primarily on what *we* do. Paul is not saying that instead of doing one thing (observing the law), we should do something else (believe in Jesus). There is a place for believing in Jesus – and Paul will explicitly mention it in this passage. But, the central insight in his gospel lies elsewhere, and it is expressed perfectly in the words ‘*pistis Iēsou Christou*’.

This is a simple genitive in Greek. Of itself it simply places one reality in relationship with another; in this case, ‘faith’ and ‘Jesus Christ’. Paul is quite capable of using prepositions to define the relationship more precisely. Since he does not do so here, we should assume that he wants us to reflect on the different ways in which these two realities are related. If we think in terms of something which *we* are supposed to do, we will think of the faith which we should have in relation to Jesus. Paul will go on to make it abundantly clear that he wants us to think in this way. However, this is not his central focus. He wants us to think first of what God revealed in revealing Jesus, his Son. He wants our minds and hearts to go straight to Jesus’ faith: his trust in God, his obedience, his fidelity, shown especially when ‘he gave himself’ (1:4) in obedience to his Father and out of love for us. The faith which we are to have in God is a gift which Jesus gives us in giving us a share in his life. It is a faith which we receive from God, before it is a faith which we offer God as a response.

Paul is reminding the Galatian Christians that they were brought by God into a love-communion with God, not on the basis of being circumcised and becoming observant Jews, but on the basis of their union with Jesus. This is true of the Gentiles in the community – so they should not start looking to the law for their security. It is also true for the Jews. Their continued fidelity to the observance of the law as Jews is one thing. To base their security of salvation on this observance or to join with those who are attempting to frighten the Gentile members of the community into looking for their security in this way, is to pervert the gospel. Let us return now to Paul’s text.

[repeated from page 54]

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;

¹⁶yet who know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Jesus Christ.

And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Christ

and not by doing the works of the law,

because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

Paul has not formally concluded his conversation with Peter. The 'we' here is, in the first place, Peter and Paul and the other Jews in the Antioch community, including Barnabas. However, as noted earlier, Paul imperceptibly changes focus. The 'we' expands to take in the Judaeian missionaries and also the Jews in the Galatian churches. As Jews, and therefore not 'Gentile sinners' (as Jews were accustomed to calling them), they know the importance of observance of the law, but they also know that it is not this observance that puts them in the right relationship with God. Communion with God is a gift from God. As Christian Jews they know that it is the gift of Jesus that has brought them to enjoy communion with God who has embraced them and whom they have embraced. Paul's use of the words 'a person' prepares us for him to say that this extends beyond Jews and includes Gentiles as well.

Having established this foundation, Paul goes on to define what it is that *we* must do, for we must do something. God is love. God's offer of life is precisely that: it is an offer. It is offered in love; it is not imposed. We are free to accept the gift or to reject it. We accept in by 'believing in', that is to say, directing our faith towards, Christ Jesus'. We are to place our trust in him; we are to open our hearts to his Spirit; we are to listen to his words; we are to obey his inspiration; we are to do his will. Like Paul we are to be 'a slave of Christ' (1:10). All of this matters, but it is not the basis of our being put right with God. Rather, it is our response to Jesus' self-giving to us. Moreover, it is made possible only through his self-giving. It is only through the gift of Jesus' Spirit that we can direct our faith towards him. But we must do this, and not allow ourselves to be distracted or side-tracked into thinking that it is our observance of the law that is the reason for our enjoying God's love.

Peter uses almost the same words in his speech at the Jerusalem Assembly when he says that God 'cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith and made no distinction between them and us' (Acts 15:9). He goes on to say: 'we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (Acts 15:11). How much did Peter's words and Paul's words here flow out of the conversations which they had consequent upon the confrontation that took place between them in Antioch? Perhaps they both learned from it.

The Galatians are disturbed that they have fallen back into sin after their conversion. Paul insists that this is not because of the faith they placed in Jesus. Furthermore, Paul has been accused of being a sinner in Galatia for not insisting on the Gentile converts observing the law. Paul's defence is that since he did what he did in obedience to Jesus' command of love, and since Jesus cannot be 'a servant of sin', what he did could not be sinful. Since the subject is table fellowship, we are surely meant to reflect on Jesus' eating with sinners, and especially on the last supper where Jesus spoke of himself as 'one who serves' (Luke 22:27).

It really would have been sinful for Paul to acquiesce in the behaviour of Peter and Barnabas. Because of the commission given him by God, he had been tearing down the wall that had separated Jew from Gentile. It was not that he had been advocating disobedience to the law. It was, rather, that a higher obedience coming from God through God's new initiative in Jesus demanded that whatever in the law supported separation between Jew and Gentile had to be torn down in order to allow the emergence of a community of love in which Jew and Gentile, with their differences, could share communion in the common faith. To build that wall of separation again, out of fear for what some people in Jerusalem might think – that would indeed be a transgression!

The kind of insistence on observance of the law that he knew so well from his own life as a Pharisee, and that had driven him to persecute the church is the kind of observance that the Judaeon missionaries are insisting upon. It was precisely this kind of zeal that brought about the crucifying of Jesus. And that act has shown up such meticulous law-observance for what it really is. Paul had been living for the law, with the best of motives. In approving the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1) and in the zeal with which he tried to stamp out the church, he had been continuing the work of those who crucified Jesus. Now that he has come to know Jesus, something has died in him; and that something is his fixation on the law as the final guide to obedience. The law-observance of those who crucified Jesus is what caused Paul to die to the law. Jesus was the obedient one on Calvary; not those who in God's name insisted on him being crucified. It is through the communion in love which flows from the heart of the risen Jesus into the heart of Paul that Paul now knows what it is like to 'live to God'. Furthermore, the law commands that we listen to the Messiah (see Deuteronomy 18:14). Through the law, then, Paul has seen that he must die to whatever in the law stands in the way of this listening.

¹⁷But 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!

¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.

¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

²⁰I 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 the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me [NRSV 'who loved me and gave himself for me'].¹

²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

¹A word of explanation for altering 'loved' to 'loving' and 'gave' to 'giving'. In both cases the Greek is an aorist participle. As the very name 'aorist' indicates, it is free of nuance. The meaning of an aorist participle, and the same goes for an aorist imperative and infinitive, is often best expressed in English by the present. Paul is contemplating the Son of God 'loving' and 'giving'.

Letting go his former life was a kind of crucifixion for Paul. The accusations being levelled at him from Galatia are part of the suffering which he continues to experience. But he is not alone. The old self that was finding energy and glory in taking a leading role in the persecution of Jesus' disciples is dead. Paul now lives a new life in communion with the one who was crucified, and who made of his death a gift of love, to Paul and to whoever opens his/her heart to welcome the gift. It is the new life of the risen Jesus that Paul now lives. He will not go back. He writes elsewhere: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10). And to the presbyters at Miletus he says: 'I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace' (Acts 20:24).

This is the life that he has proclaimed in Galatia, and he cannot stand by while others destroy it in God's name. The Galatians want to be free; they want to avoid being condemned by God for their failure to live a life of grace. They are being told that the way to be sure of not being condemned is to sign up to the law and become Jews. Paul is pleading with them not to allow the gospel to be perverted in this way. As he will write in a later letter: 'There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). It is Christ who is the 'life-giving Spirit' (1 Corinthians 15:45). They must look to him and cling to him in love, and allow his Spirit to purify them, in love. Truly, 'the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, has abounded for the many' (Romans 5:15).

It is not Paul who has been 'nullifying the grace of God'. It is his accusers who are perverting the gospel by cramming Jesus into the confines of the law, instead of marvelling at the freedom to love which he is offering them. Furthermore, it is only by exercising this freedom that the purpose of the law can be achieved.

It is Jesus' faithful love that has brought us into communion with God and freed us from our sins. In four brief statements Paul summarises what our response to this grace should be. He will expand on these statements in the rest of the letter.

First, if we want to live in communion with God, we must die to the law as the ultimate guide to obedience. We either continue our futile striving for perfection achieved through our own successful efforts to obey the law, or we allow Jesus to embrace us in love and share with us his faith. Thanks to Jesus, Paul came to a deeper understanding of the law. He saw that the law points beyond itself and finds its fulfilment in Jesus' self-offering in love.

Secondly, we must allow ourselves to be crucified with Christ, in the sense of allowing everything that is not love to be nailed to the cross. As we embrace the crucified Christ, we will experience a sharing in his communion with God.

Thirdly, we must live, not from ourselves, but from the life of Christ who lives in us.

Fourthly, we must live in this present world ('in the flesh') a life of faith which unites us to Christ. Paul denies that in preaching the gospel as he does he is disregarding God's grace; and he reasserts the fact that Jesus died to draw us out of sin and into God's love – something the law could not do. In fact it is only in this way that the purpose of the law can be achieved.

Paul takes us to the very heart of his faith when he states: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'. It is this experience of union with the risen Jesus that underlies everything he says in this letter. It is central to Paul's conversion experience (1:16), and is at the centre of the gospel which he has preached to the Galatians.

It is possible to look at Jesus from the outside; to admire him, and to try to imitate him. The Christian experience, however, is something else. We are called not to be like Christ but to let Christ live in us. We are called not to love like Christ, but to let Christ love in and through us. We are called not to pray like Christ, but to make space for the Spirit of Christ to pray in us. We are invited into a right relationship with God by the risen Jesus who shares his Spirit with us and so draws us into the intimate communion with God which is his life. It is for us to believe, that is to say, to make room for him by letting go our own ego and welcoming his love.

We sometimes strive to imitate Jesus in such a way that the gospel itself becomes a yoke burdening our shoulders like another law; or we see Jesus' example as a star beckoning to us from the horizon. We find that we cannot carry the yoke, nor can we reach the star. Paul tells the Galatians that Christ lives in him; that is why he can 'live to God'. God's action is always a gift. We cannot earn it, nor can we do anything that will stop God offering it. We can, however, refuse to receive the gift; we can reject it; we can allow ourselves to be so distracted that we forget it. Then, when we strive by our own efforts to do God's will, to keep God's law, even to imitate his Son, we find that we cannot, of ourselves, do any of these things. We are setting up inevitable failure for ourselves.

We are being offered the Spirit of Christ. It is Paul's gospel that we are to open our hearts to receive it. This is what it means to believe.

¹You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!

²The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law, or by what you heard of faith? [NRSV ‘believing what you heard’]

³Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

⁴Did you experience so much for nothing? – if it really was for nothing.

⁵Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by what you heard of faith? [NRSV ‘believing what you heard’]

Paul appeals to the Galatians’ own experience, shaping his argument in the form of questions because he wants them to remember and reflect. Incidentally, it is sometimes stated that Paul would not have called inhabitants of Phrygia and Lycaonia ‘Galatians’, and that these words demonstrate that he is writing to people who live in the region of the ethnic Galatians. It has been demonstrated that there is no substance in this argument. Paul begins by reminding them of how he spoke to them of Jesus crucified. In the opening address of this letter he spoke of ‘the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father’ (1:4), and he has just spoken with deep feeling of ‘the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (2:20). How can they take their eyes off Jesus and his love and seek security in observance of the law?

He then asks them to remember how they experienced the Spirit in their lives, and the ‘miracles’ of forgiveness, healing and love. Speaking of the disciples in Galatian Antioch, Luke tells us that ‘they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:52). This did not happen because they observed the law. It happened ‘from what was heard of faith’ (Greek: *ex akoēs pisteōs*). As in the previous passage, this is best understood as a reference to Jesus’ faith. What impressed them was what they heard (*akoä*), namely, the gospel proclaimed to them by Paul – which told them of the trust, the obedience, the fidelity and the self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. They started there. Are they now going to put their faith in a piece of flesh cut from their penis in circumcision?

There is a lot of human experience and many beautiful memories contained in Paul’s three references here to their experience of the Spirit. We might recall Luke’s reference to the ‘signs and wonders’ that occurred in Iconium (Acts 14:3), and to the healing of the lame man in Lystra (Acts 14:10). There were, no doubt, many other memories of physical, psychological and spiritual healing, of a powerful release of liberating and creative energy, of dramatic changes in people’s lives, as well as memories of selfless love and communion. None of them were related to observance of the law. Paul is in no way denigrating the law. The problem was that it did not have in itself the power to alter people’s hearts so that they might observe it. Only the gift of Jesus’ Spirit could achieve that. The Galatians must keep focusing on the real Jesus and not allow themselves to be distracted by those who would want them to focus on the law.

Paul's approach to interpreting Scripture

The Judaeon missionaries in Galatia are using Scripture to demonstrate to the Jewish Christians in the churches of Galatia that the gospel proclaimed to them by Paul is essentially defective and that they must observe the law in order to be saved. This in turn is exerting pressure of the Gentile Christians. If they want to remain in communion with their Jewish brothers and sisters they must have themselves circumcised and observe the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. Paul, therefore, meets them now on their own ground, and offers a methodical interpretation of Scripture which supports his gospel and not theirs.

Before examining Paul's argument, we should note that he is not attempting to read the gospel in the light of the scriptures. Absolutely the contrary. He is interpreting the scriptures in the light of the gospel. He must do so, for, as he has already stated, God has done something new in Jesus. It is consistent with the story of what God has done in the history of Israel. Moreover, it brings that history, that revelation, and the promises and hopes contained within it to their fulfilment. But God has done more than that. In revealing his Son, God has gone beyond the scriptures, and Jesus cannot be confined within the limits of Israel's faith, sacred and inspired though it is. This principle is central to Paul's way of interpreting the sacred texts.

I am not suggesting that Paul uses the Scriptures to support ideas which he has come to quite independently. I am certainly not saying that he misuses the Scripture by bending the texts to say what they do not say. He is faithful to the traditions he learned as a Pharisee and to the methods of interpretation current in his day. I am saying that his experience of Jesus enlightened him to ask new questions of the texts and to discover new meanings there. Since the methods employed by Paul's contemporaries in the study of the sacred texts are often quite foreign to us, some introductory words seem required if we are not to lose ourselves in the maze of argument.

Since in the final analysis it is God himself who is communicating with his people through the inspired texts, the scribes approached scripture expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered. Jeremiah writes: 'Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?' (Jeremiah 23:29). Scholars believed that the sparks of light which issued from the written word revealed the divine enlightenment hidden within them. The more meanings they could discover, the better. Problems arose only when a text gave contradictory meanings, or when one text contradicted another. When this happened, they searched the scripture for texts in which the same words occur, believing that verbal connections might contain a clue as to meaning. We will observe Paul doing precisely this in the following passage.

We are accustomed to searching out the literal meaning of a text by using all the tools of criticism available to us, both literary and historical, and then we try to draw out the implications for us of the meaning so discovered. Of course this is a notoriously difficult task. It is especially difficult to avoid imposing on a text our own unconscious presuppositions. The horizon within which we have been trained to think frequently has a more determining role than we would hope upon the questions we ask.

However, the method remains a valid one, and to the measure that we are self-critical, humble and honest, the scholarship of one person will help to throw light on what another person has failed to see. Paul's method, though obviously very different, is not without its merits. Scholars in his day delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye. His key insights did not come from the scriptures, any more than ours do. It was partly his study of the scriptures that led him zealously to persecute the Christians in God's name. His key insights came from his experience of the risen Christ. It was this experience that sent him back to the scriptures with new questions, and he saw them in a new light. He was able to find, hidden in these mysterious and sacred texts, meanings that had hitherto escaped him. His aim here is to so arrange the texts that his readers will be able to see what he had come to see revealed in them. Such is Paul's method.

Let us now examine the substance of his argument. He wants to demonstrate from scripture that it is God's will to bring everyone into a communion of love with him. Since we are sinners, this means setting right what is wrong ('justifying'). This is not something which we can do, either by observance of the law, or by believing in Jesus. Believing in Jesus is essential, but it is our response to something that God has done and is doing. God is putting things right by what we see when we look at Jesus. We are put right by Jesus' faith, by his trust in God, by his obedience, his fidelity and his self-giving love. Since the Judean missionaries are winning over to their view many of the Christians in Galatia, Paul takes up the challenge and argues that the scriptures, when understood correctly, point to Jesus as the one who sets us right with God, and not observance of the law.

One final point. When Paul, in this letter and elsewhere, reflects upon the sacred scriptures, he is not only attempting to counter what he sees as erroneous interpretation of the text. He does so because for him they remain a vital source of revelation, inspiration and communion with God. Paul never lost his love for Judaism. What died when he came to know the risen Jesus was not Judaism. It was not the law or the sacred texts. It was his over zealous fixation that was so locked into finding security in the law that it prevented him from recognising the surprise of God in Jesus or in the community of Jesus' followers.

Paul went beyond Judaism in obedience to God, he did not abandon it. When he went out to the Gentiles, he went out because he was commissioned to do so by God and by the risen Jesus. And he went out as a Christian Jew. When he was rejected by the synagogue, and went out to the Gentiles, which happened in Galatia (see Acts 13:46), he did not reject the synagogue. He saw that it was members of the synagogue who were rejecting the vocation which was theirs from the beginning. As Jews, in a covenant with God, they were graced and called to share their faith with the Gentile world. Jesus showed them how, but they refused to accept him or the challenge which he offered them. Paul took up the challenge, as a Jew. Through the grace of God, he was committed to doing what every Jew was called to do. When they refused, he took up the challenge for them and on their behalf. There was much in the law that would benefit people other than the Jews. Paul never rejected the law. He rejected only the law as used as an instrument for containing or contradicting Jesus and the will of God as revealed on Calvary.

When, therefore, Paul comes to quote from the scriptures, he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads it with new eyes – with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as ‘loving me and giving himself for me’. He has come to see that the love of the heart of Jesus embraced every person, for it is the love of God. It is God’s will to build a human community that is not divided by walls of religious prejudice or habit, where people could come together and ‘break bread’ without embarrassment or humiliation.

Paul has come to see that it is God’s will revealed in Jesus for people to come as they are, and not to think that they must be like someone else to be loved. The love of God, revealed when God revealed his own Son, embraced everyone. Jesus, as a Jew, called his brother and sister Jews to be faithful to the covenant which they had with God, a covenant of love, open to the world. It was this Spirit that Paul caught, hence his passionate reaction to the ‘prudence’ of Peter and Barnabas, and hence his passionate letter to the communities he loved who were being bewitched into perverting the gospel in the name of Judaism.

Paul wants to show them that the scriptures can be read in another way, and so, in the Spirit of Jesus, he turns now to the sacred texts of his people in an attempt to persuade the Jews in the churches of Galatia to embrace a true fidelity to the Torah by seeing that it is in Jesus that the law finds its fulfilment, and that they must not use the law to divide the community of love that is the fruit of the Spirit, or refuse to accept Gentiles, as Gentiles, as their brothers and sisters, though they do not follow the law.

Let us now turn to Paul’s text, firstly to note the methodical way in which he has selected his texts, and then to examine his argument step by step.

[1] ⁶Just as Abraham 'believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6)

⁷so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.

[2] ⁸And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the gentiles shall be blessed in you' (Genesis 12:3; 18:18). ⁹For this reason, those who believed are blessed with Abraham who believed.

[3] ¹⁰For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law' (Deuteronomy 27:26).

[4] ¹¹Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4).

[5] ¹²But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary 'Whoever does the works of the law will live by them' (Leviticus 18:5).

[6] ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' (Deuteronomy 21:23)

¹⁴– in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul links together six separate scripture passages. His first quotation (3:6) is from Genesis. His fourth quotation (3:11) is from Habakkuk. This choice of texts is not accidental or arbitrary, for these are the only two texts in the whole of the Old Testament in which the words 'believe/faith' and 'righteousness/ righteous' occur together.

His first quotation is about Abraham; so is his second (3:8). In this way he demonstrates that God intends there to be a link between faith, justification ('setting things right'), blessing and the Gentiles.

The second quotation (3:8) speaks of the 'blessing'. The opposite to blessing is 'curse', for to be cursed is to be unable to receive the blessing. So Paul chooses as his third text (3:10) a text from Deuteronomy that mentions 'curse'. It is also the only text in the Old Testament which combines 'curse' with 'law'.

His fifth text (3:12) links 'law' and 'life', declaring that the laws are means of regulating life within the covenant. They are not the basis of the covenant itself.

The final quotation (3:13) links 'curse' with 'hanging on a tree'. Since the same word is used for crucifying (compare Acts 13:29), this enables Paul to unveil a hidden reference to Christ.

[1] Paul begins with a text concerning Abraham, the acknowledged father of the Jews. It speaks of Abraham's faith in relation to God. As we saw when examining the nature of biblical faith (2:16), it includes obedience and fidelity, but it is primarily an attitude of willing acceptance of something which God has done. In Abraham's case, God has promised him a son, and Abraham has placed his trust in God's promise and acted accordingly. Abraham's faith was his response to God's love and God's recognition of his faith is proof that Abraham really was in communion with God. If we want to be true descendants of Abraham, let us share his faith.

[2] Paul's second point – and again he turns to the sacred scriptures – is that, from the beginning, the grace which God offered to Abraham, and the promises which God made to him and in which Abraham placed his trust, were always intended to embrace and include the Gentiles. They, like the Jews, are called to be descendants of Abraham, and they, like the Jews, will be 'descendants of Abraham' if they share his faith.

[3] Having established the relationship between communion with God and faith, Paul moves on to consider the law. The Judean missionaries have been frightening the Galatians (1:7), both Jews and Gentiles, by quoting Deuteronomy to insist that if they do not observe the law they will be cursed. Paul argues that to restrict covenant grace to Jews and to fail to open it to Gentiles is to fail to observe 'all that is written in the book of the law'.

[4] Paul goes straight on to address both Jews and Gentiles by quoting from the prophet Habakkuk. The setting is the triumph of Babylon. It seems to the people of Judah that all is lost. The prophet encourages them to remember God's faithfulness to them and to be faithful in return to God (see Romans 1:17). Paul includes both these ideas and uses the text to state his gospel again. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, life – and he is speaking of communion with God – comes by faith; that is to say, it is a gift from the faithful God, given to us through the faithful love of Jesus, asking of us that we respond in faith.

[5] Someone might claim that the law and faith are independent. On the contrary, says Paul, the law itself declares the dependence of observance of the law on faith by speaking of life. The problem is that the law itself doesn't provide the power to effect its observance and so cannot give life. For that we need to be in communion with Jesus and to receive the gift of Jesus' faith.

[6] Finally, Paul tells the Galatians not to be frightened by the curse expressed in the law. He wants to reassure both the Jews who, through circumcision, are already committed to the observance of the law, and the Gentiles who are being frightened into complying with it because of the fear that they must do so in order to be saved. Christ himself fell under its curse when he was crucified, and he is the source of the life of communion with God which they are enjoying, the life of the Spirit. If the curse of the law could not deprive Jesus of communion with God, they need not fear it. The life given by the Spirit is the life that was promised to Abraham and that is offered by God to all Abraham's children – to all who, like Abraham, put their trust in the faithful love of God, and not in their own fidelity in observing the law.

The grace given in Jesus

In Christ Jesus, the promise made to Abraham – the promise of living in communion with God, the promise of the fullness of the Spirit – is realised at last for the Jews.

In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham at last reaches out to the Gentiles, as promised.

In Christ Jesus Jew and Gentile are bound together as children of Abraham. Their communion flows from their shared faith, not from their observance of the same law.

We are now in a position to see more clearly why Paul disagreed with Peter and the others at Antioch. It is not enough to say that Gentiles do not have to observe the Jewish law. This is true, but what God has revealed in Jesus says more than that. It says that Jews too are released by God from the need to observe the law when it conflicts with the new revelation of love that God demonstrated when Christ 'gave himself for our sins'. To withdraw from sharing the Eucharistic table with Gentiles because of fear of what others will think about not observing the dietary regulations of the law is to break faith with Jesus.

Paul will go on to suggest the purpose God had for the law in history, and the part it plays in the life of a Christian. He has, as we will see, a profound respect for the law. But God has revealed something infinitely superior in Jesus, and Paul will not stand by while people play on the insecurity of his converts and distract them from the new life in Christ which they have experienced and which is the source of all their hopes and of the new moral life which is made possible for them through the gift of the Spirit of Jesus.

Where observance of the law comes into conflict with living by the Spirit of Christ, as it did in Antioch, and as it is doing in Galatia, it is the law that must give way.

Paul's first argument was to ask the Galatians to reflect upon their experience of the Spirit (3:1-5). His second argument was from the scriptures (3:6-14). He now moves to his third argument: 'an example from daily life'. Once a person's will has been ratified, others cannot come along later and alter it.

Having stated this, Paul turns to the commitment (Greek: diathākā) which God made to Abraham. It consisted in a promise concerning Abraham's 'seed'. Now it is obvious from the text in Genesis 17:8, that this refers to Abraham's descendants. However – and this goes back to what we said earlier about Paul seeing new meanings in the scripture in the light of Christ (pages 65-67) – Paul offers a new interpretation. He sees this promise as fulfilled in Jesus.

He then makes the point that follows from his analogy. Whatever the purpose of the law, it came four hundred thirty years later (see Exodus 12:40; also Acts 7:6). It cannot alter the promise which God made to Abraham – a promise that was not dependent on observing a law which did not yet exist.

¹⁵Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.

¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ.

¹⁷My point is this: the law which came four hundred thirty years later does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.

¹⁸For if the inheritance comes from the law, it is no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

¹⁹Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made;

and it was ordained through angels by a mediator.

²⁰Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

²¹Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law.

²²But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through the faith of [NRSV 'faith in'] Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Paul has argued from experience, from scripture, and from the time-lag between Abraham and Moses, to show that the law was never meant by God to be the basis for our being in communion with God. If the Gentiles experience the promised Spirit without the law, and if Christ has liberated the Jews from the threat of punishment attached to it, what was its purpose?

Paul's answer is that 'it was added because of transgressions'. Note that he says 'transgressions' (*parabasis*), not 'sin' (*hamartia*). Sin has always been part of the human condition. But sin can remain hidden. Law had the effect of bringing sin into the open, because it reveals sin as a direct contravening of God's will expressed in the law. It is this contravening of law which constitutes a transgression. Our inability to keep God's law alerts us to the need for forgiveness and for redemption if we are to be able to live in communion with God. The law also provided a way, however inadequate, of dealing with these transgressions. One thinks of the Day of Atonement and the various ritual sacrifices that were part of Jewish liturgy.

Paul goes on to point out the provisional nature of the law. When Christ came and the promise was fulfilled, the law was superseded. He adds a subsidiary argument to highlight the fact that the promise is of more importance than the law. The promise was made directly by God himself to Abraham, whereas the law, according to a common opinion among the Jewish scholars, was promulgated indirectly, through angels, and by a mediator, Moses.

The law and the promise are not in opposition. The law, however, has an inherent and basic limitation: it cannot give life and so it cannot 'justify' – it cannot put us in a right relationship with God. It is true that the scripture often states that people will live if they keep the law (see Galatians 3:12; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 32:47). The weakness of the law is that it does not give us the ability to keep it. It shows us what is wrong. It passes judgment on us when we fail to observe it. This is good in that it makes sin appear to be what it really is, and so 'through the law' we can come to realise our need and cry out for redemption. Paul is inviting his readers to recognise in Christ the answer to that cry, and not to let the law stop them from inheriting the promise 'given to those who believe' (compare Romans 11:32).

The disciplinarian (Greek: *paidogōgos*) to whom Paul refers was the person responsible for disciplining a child prior to his or her reaching maturity. This included seeing to the child's education. Paul makes an apt comparison between the custodian and the law. The law 'imprisoned and guarded' people until the time came when they attained maturity, Then it brought them to Christ their true teacher, who taught us to believe and who gave us a share in his faith that we might share the communion he has with the Father.

Nothing Paul says about the law in any way denies that it was a precious gift from God, and a gift that Paul respects. Luke has Paul say:

I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.

– Acts 24:14

The law is precious, but is of limited value. It pointed to Christ, who lived it perfectly, but who also went beyond it. The life of God's Spirit, as promised, has been poured out upon the Galatians by God. The law must not be used to take Jewish Christians away from the one who fulfills in his person the promises that are the very reason for Israel's existence as a people. Nor must it be used to seduce Gentiles into finding their security in its observance rather than in their communion with Jesus.

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.

²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith.

²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

²⁶You are all sons of God through the faith that is in Christ Jesus

[NRSV ‘for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith’]

²⁷As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek,

there is no longer slave or free,

there is no longer male and female;

for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

In this, his fourth argument, Paul focuses on their experience of conversion. Earlier, when speaking of his own conversion, Paul wrote that ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son to me’ (1:16). A son receives life from his father; he also receives instruction from him. A son hands on to his children the life and enlightenment that he has received from his father. Christian conversion involves a recognition of the truth that in these ways Jesus is related to God. This includes the fact that God, the Father of Jesus, wishes to pour out his Spirit into those who open their hearts and minds to communion with his Son (3:2).

The desire to use inclusive language encourages the translation ‘children’ in verse twenty-six. It is important, however, to stay with Paul in using ‘sons’, because Paul is focusing not primarily on our relationship as children to God, but on our being one with the Son through sharing his life.

To understand the significance of baptism for Paul we should begin with the account of Jesus’ baptism:

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

– Mark 1:9-11

At the time of their conversion, the Galatians received the same Spirit, poured out on them by the risen Christ. It was this Spirit who created a bond of consecration between the Christian and Christ, and so between the Christian and all those already in communion with Christ. To each Christian the Father says: ‘You are my beloved son/daughter; with you I am well pleased’. The acceptance of God’s grace, the conversion to a new way of life, and the acceptance of the convert into the community, all found expression in the ritual of baptism. Having been ‘clothed in Christ’, the convert lived ‘in Christ’, surrounded by his love in the community of his disciples.

Baptism is a sacramental initiation into the family which can say to God, with Jesus, ‘Abba! Father!’ Those who belong to this family are already, without any reference to the law, sons and daughters of God and heirs of the promise. Let Jews remain Jews. Let Gentiles remain Gentiles. What matters is that we are in communion with Jesus.

Paul adds: 'there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female'. Since neither of these phrases belongs directly to the argument, some surmise that Paul is quoting, perhaps from the baptismal liturgy.

It goes without saying that those who were baptised did not lose their sexual identity, nor did baptism lead automatically to a change in their social and economic position in society. If you were a Jewish freedwoman or a Celtic male slave on the morning of your initiation into the Christian community, you were still all those things in the evening. What matters now is that a person, initiated into the Christian community through baptism, is living a new life, sharing in the life of the risen Christ and so experiencing being a child of God in a new way. While baptism does not change one's sexual, social or economic position in society, being a member of the Christian community does bring all these and other relationships under the scrutiny of the gospel. No institution or set of relationships can remain the same once we open ourselves to Jesus' Spirit.

Nowhere in Paul's letters do we find a direct critique of the injustices that existed in the slave-system or between the sexes. What we do find, however, is a powerful concentration on Jesus, on the way he lived and the way he died, and especially on the love which he revealed on the cross. Paul does not set out to create a new social system. God is the creator, not Paul, and he knows that God is a God of justice. If our focus is on Jesus and we are sensitive to the inspiration of God's Spirit, the changes that God inspires will come about, at the time and in the way known best to God. Such a perspective, and such a commitment to what Paul calls elsewhere 'the obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5), could not but profoundly affect all areas of human behaviour, including those just mentioned. We who have seen many centuries of Christian history cannot use Paul as an excuse for our failure to face the implications of his teaching.

It must have been very exciting to experience the liberation of belonging to a Christian community. We will have occasion, particularly in the Corinthian correspondence, to look at some of the abuses to which this excitement led. In this letter we are watching ways in which certain Christians pulled back from the implications of this freedom, and we will have occasion in later letters to see more of this too. Paul does not claim to have everything in exactly the right perspective either. But he does passionately insist that we keep our focus upon Jesus, for he knows that without this focus nothing will go right. Only if we live in Christ can we experience true justice (can we be 'justified').

¹My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.

³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits ['principles'] of the world.

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons [NRSV 'children'].

⁶And because you are sons [NRSV 'children'], God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'

⁷So you are no longer a slave but a son [NRSV 'child'], and if a son [NRSV 'child'] then also an heir, through God.

In the previous passage, Paul spoke of all those baptised into Christ, whatever their ethnic, social or sexual identity, as having received a new life, the life of the Son, and as being, therefore, 'sons' of the one Father (3:26). Paul now makes the point that, as 'sons' we are also heirs. We came into our inheritance when we opened our hearts to receive the self-giving love of God in Jesus, and the inheritance was the experience of Jesus' Spirit in our hearts. We received 'the promise of the Spirit through faith' (3:14; see Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:31-33). We know this because we found ourselves caught up in Jesus' own prayer, crying out to God as our 'Abba!'

It was not always like this. Before the time appointed by God, before the time of Jesus' redeeming love, and before people, including Paul and the Judaeon missionaries and the members of the churches in Galatia, whether Jew or Gentile, learned to believe in God's love as revealed in Jesus, everyone was living as a slave. Paul will have a lot more to say about the various forms of slavery that keep people bound. Here, addressing himself especially to the Gentiles, he speaks of 'the elemental spirits (Greek: *stoicheia*) of the world'. He may be referring simply to their relying on principles that do not go beyond this present world. Or he may be referring to the various pagan gods and goddesses which were projections of the various elements of nature:

For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.

– Wisdom 13:1-2

Prior to the coming of Jesus, Jews living under the law were immature, and so 'no better than slaves'. To remain in this immaturity is indeed to live in slavery, slavery to the law. Jews needed to be redeemed, no less than did the Gentiles, for compared to the life which they experienced in Jesus, nothing which they had known previously had enabled them to enjoy the communion in life with God whom they could call 'Abba!'

The experience which people had of Jesus led them to a new way of thinking about God. Jews, faithful to their heritage, held to the truth that God is one. They recognised, therefore, that everything that exists belongs to everything else, for there is but one source of being. At the same time, Jesus' disciples could not think of God any more without thinking of Jesus and of the love of the heart of Jesus for the one he called Father. It was this communion of love, this divine Spirit of love, that they experienced in their own hearts when they were in communion with Jesus. Jesus' disciples came to perceive that God is one, not in transcendent individual isolation, but because God is communion in love. It is this divine love which they experienced in Jesus and in which they shared. It could be said of Jewish Christians – and Paul would be the first to admit it of himself – that before they came to know Jesus they 'did not know God'. Observance of the law prior to what God has revealed in Christ is one thing. To cling to this observance when it means turning away from the life which they have in Christ is another.

Here, however, Paul's primary concern is for the Gentiles in the community, for they are the ones most at risk from the pressure being brought to bear upon them by the Judaean missionaries. They, too, though in a different way, did not know God 'formerly' (witness the scene in Lystra, Acts 14:11-17). Through coming to know Jesus, they have come to know God, and Paul cannot bear to think of them turning away from this communion, and turning to the law. It would be as though they were going back to their pagan ways.

When Paul speaks of 'days and months and seasons and years' he is not criticising festal celebrations. There is evidence that he himself observed the Sabbath (Acts 13:14,44; 18:4), celebrated the first day of the week (Acts 20:7 – the day of the Resurrection), and that he celebrated Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) and Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Rather, he is castigating a superstitious mentality that finds its security in such celebrations. It is possible that he also has astrological charts in mind.

He begins by making a contrast between not knowing God and knowing God. Note how he corrects himself in mid-sentence (4:9). Yes, it is good to know God, but, like our faith in God, this is only ever a response to something that *God* has done and is doing in knowing us, in love.

⁸Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are no gods.

⁹Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits ['principles']? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?

¹⁰You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.

¹¹I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

¹²Friends, I beg you, become as I am for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong.

¹³You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; ¹⁴though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

¹⁵What has become of the good will you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

¹⁶Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

¹⁷They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. ¹⁸It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

¹⁹My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,

²⁰I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Paul appeals to the affection which he and the Galatians once knew and to the time when they shared each other's lives so happily. Interpreters search verse thirteen for clues that might indicate who the Galatians are and when Paul wrote to them. Is Paul saying that he may not have announced the gospel to them were it not for a physical infirmity? If so this seems to favour the north Galatian theory. His first visit to the cities in southern Galatia seems to have been quite intentional. As for his second visit, he set out precisely to revisit the communities (Acts 15:36). Luke tells us that after this visit he was heading for Asia but, under the direction of Jesus' Spirit 'he went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia' (Acts 16:6). Could Paul have interpreted his unexpected sickness as an indication of God's will, and could that have been when he spent this time among the northern Galatians? As for the timing of the letter, Paul speaks of when he *first* announced the gospel. Could this imply a second visit? (Acts 18:23). If so then the letter was probably written from Ephesus c.53AD. Others recognise that 'first' does not require a second visit, but could simply be referring to the beginning of his visit: 'when I first visited you'. In which case the letter could have been written before Acts 18:23, from Macedonia or Corinth c.51AD.

However, those who favour the south Galatia theory rightly suggest that the indications are too vague to decide the matter. Paul could easily have picked up something in the unhealthy coastal plain of Pamphylia (Acts 13:13), which caused him to head for the higher altitude of Antioch, or to stay on much longer than expected. This condition may have stayed with him when he went on to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. The matter remains unresolved.

Paul is not jealous, but he cannot understand how these intruders who are working among them for their own purposes could persuade them to turn against him. It was 'the truth of the gospel' (2:5,14) that he proclaimed to them. With deep affection he admits how much their love means to him, even at a distance, and likens the pain they are causing him to the pains of labour (see Isaiah 45:9-11). Does he have to go through it all again to bring them back to the life they received from Christ?

This is Paul's final argument. He uses typology – seeing the present realities of Christianity and Judaism as reflected in the events of scripture. He also follows an allegorical method – claiming to give insight into the deeper truths hidden in the events to which he refers. The story of Hagar and her son Ishmael can be found in Genesis 16. The story of Sarah and her son Isaac can be found in Genesis 21.

The Judaeon missionaries are insisting on the necessity of observing the law if the members of the Galatian churches want to be saved. They are also claiming the support of the church in Jerusalem for their view. There is no need for us to assume that Paul concedes this second point. At the Jerusalem Assembly (which in my view came after this letter) the Jerusalem church did not support the views which they were promoting (Acts 15:24).

When Paul speaks of Jerusalem, he is speaking of the Jerusalem that crucified Jesus, the Jerusalem in whose name he himself persecuted Christians, and the Jerusalem represented by the Judaeon missionaries who have failed to grasp the freedom given them by Jesus, when he gave them the promised Spirit.

Jesus is the true representative of Jerusalem, and from 'above' it is he who has given them the life promised by God: the life of his Spirit. The Galatians have known this freedom. The Jews among them must not submit again to the yoke from which Jesus has liberated them. The Gentiles among them must resist those who are trying to convince them to take it up.

21Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?

22For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. 23One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.

24Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. 25Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

26But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. 27For it is written, 'Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birthpangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married' (Isaiah 54:1).

28Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. 29But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

30But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman' (Genesis 21:10). 31So then, friends, we are children not of the slave but of the free woman.

5:1For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

²Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

³Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law.

⁴You who want to be justified within [NRSV 'by'] the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

⁵For, through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Paul's warning could not be more striking. If the Galatians continue to take notice of the Judaean missionaries and seek their security in observance of the Jewish law, they are taking on themselves an intolerable yoke, for they would be undertaking to adopt the Jewish way of life through and through (see 3:10). They are also cutting themselves off from Christ and falling away from grace. Paul has stated throughout this letter that salvation is a grace that comes to them from God's unconditional love. It does not depend on being circumcised or on not being circumcised. Through the love of his Son, God is offering to everyone communion in the life of intimate love that God and his Son enjoy in the Spirit. This does have implications for their behaviour – Paul is about to speak about this. But the basis for their hope must not be their observance of a law; it can only be Jesus' love shown them in 'loving them and giving himself for them' (2:20). If they welcome this gift with faith, the Spirit of Jesus will cause the fruits of love to blossom in their lives.

Being in communion with God (being in a right relationship with God, translated here as 'righteousness') is something which we can lose by turning away from grace. If the Galatians are seduced by the Judaean missionaries into attempting to secure 'righteousness' within (Greek *en*) the law, by committing themselves to observing it, they will lose it, for righteousness is something which they must receive, not something they can achieve. It is the gift and the fruit of Jesus' Spirit, and it is to be welcomed in faith. Paul concludes by linking three central characteristics of the Christian life. He speaks of 'hope' and of 'faith' working through 'love'. We have already reflected on the meaning of 'faith' (Greek: *pistis*, see 2:15). Let us look at the biblical meaning of 'hope', and then 'love'.

In non-Biblical Greek *elpis* means 'estimation' or 'expectation'. We should have a sound basis for our judgment of what the future might hold for us. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and prophetic writings *elpis* translates words expressing 'trust' and 'taking refuge'. The focus is on God as the one in whom we place our trust. This sentiment continues in the Wisdom literature, but there the influence of non-Biblical Greek can also be seen with the focus shifting from present trust to future expectation. In the New Testament *elpis* retains the idea of trust, but with the focus on the future. We could define it as a trusting confidence now in regard to the future – a trust based on one's faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen and we can leave the future peacefully to God.

When Paul speaks of ‘eagerly waiting’, and when he speaks of ‘hope’, these are not the same. There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on *present* assurance because of the God in whom one *now* places one’s confidence, on whom one *now* relies, to whom one *now* looks. A perfect expression of hope is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
 I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.
 But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
 my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
 O Israel, *hope* in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope. Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God’s will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our ‘faith’) is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus (1:12,16). Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can leave the present and the future in God’s hands. The Galatians know their own frailty. They know how easily they fall back into sin. They know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. They are being frightened into thinking that the only way they can be assured of attaining to an eternal sharing with Christ is to be circumcised and obey the law. Paul, on the other hand, is encouraging them to eagerly await the promised communion, but to trust that God knows their longing; it is, after all, God’s gift to them. God is faithful. Let them believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving themselves to his Spirit. If they do this, they will find that the love which they see burning in his heart will set fire to their own, and this is all that matters: ‘The only thing that counts is faith working through love’. Paul has spoken of ‘love’ only once to this point, where he used the verb *agapaō* in speaking of Jesus’ love for him in giving himself for him (see 2:20). Now, for the first time, he uses the noun *agapē*. Let us pause to reflect on what he means by love, since it is at the very heart of Paul’s gospel.

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression ‘God is love’ (1John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus’ self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God’s gift of self, to God’s love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5). One of the central texts of the Torah reads: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word ‘love’ is translated in the Greek version by *agapaō*, inevitably Paul uses this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God. However, it may come as a surprise to discover how seldom he does so – in fact only three times: in 1 Corinthians 2:9 and 8:3 and in Romans 8:28. Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Christ only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians. Furthermore, he never uses the noun *agapē* with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God he prefers to speak of ‘faith’.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God’s love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and thanks to this gift from us to each other. Jesus’ disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit. In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus’ own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals. As Paul writes: ‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: ‘Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’ (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’, he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’(Deuteronomy 6:5). Does not Jesus affirm the same truth:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

James writes:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.
Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

– James 1:22; 2:17

James is speaking about ‘works of faith’, not ‘works of the law’. He is insisting, like Paul, that real faith bears fruit in love. Of course it matters what we do. Of course we must obey the will of God. Paul’s comments throughout this letter concerning the law do not claim that the law does not in any way express God’s will. Nor is Paul suggesting that people should set out to disobey the law. He is not claiming that the law is totally irrelevant to the lives of Christians, or that circumcision is valueless for Jews. In a later letter he will ask: ‘What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?’. He will reply: ‘Much in every way’(Romans 3:1-2). In so far as obeying the law is an expression of faith and bears fruit in love, Paul thanks God for the law and rejoices in the gift he has as a Jew. But when observance of the law bypasses faith and is an obstacle to love, it cannot stand.

Furthermore, for Gentile converts to take on circumcision is to turn their back on the freedom offered them by Jesus. God has now revealed himself and his will in Christ. The law, or any other criterion of behaviour, must be checked against what God has revealed in Christ, not Christ reduced within the confines of the law. To abandon Christ for the law is to ‘cut yourselves off from Christ’. It is to ‘fall away from grace’. Earlier in our present letter Paul spoke of Christ delivering us ‘from the present evil age’(1:4), and redeeming us ‘from the curse of the law’(3:13; see 4:5). In the present passage he pleads with the Galatians not to enslave themselves to anything or anyone other than Christ (see 1:10).

Note that the hope, the faith and the love to which Paul calls them are all experienced ‘in Christ’(5:6).

⁷You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?

⁸Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

⁹A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.

¹⁰I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

¹¹But, my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed.

¹²I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

Paul remembers how the Galatians were while he was with them. They have stopped ‘obeying the truth’, by which he means the ‘truth of the gospel’ (2:5,14). In behaving in this way they have stopped obeying ‘the one who calls you’, Christ himself. Those who are responsible for frightening them into abandoning Christ for observance of the law will have to pay a price for what they are doing.

They seem to be telling the Galatians that Paul himself is ‘preaching circumcision’. Luke tells us that when Paul visited Lystra, one of the churches of Galatia, after the Jerusalem Assembly, he met a young man called Timothy whose mother was a Jewess:

He wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

– Acts 16:3

As a Jew, it was right that Timothy be faithful to his religious heritage. It was fidelity to Judaism as lived by Jesus that fired Paul in his mission to the Gentiles. Paul is not in principle opposed to circumcision.

However, to practice circumcision when appropriate is not the same as ‘preaching circumcision’, that is to say, instructing others as though circumcision was part of the gospel. This Paul would never do, as this letter amply demonstrates. To ‘preach circumcision’, as the Judaeon missionaries are doing, is to remove the scandal of the cross.

The cross is indeed an ‘offence’ (a ‘scandal’, a ‘stumbling block’), for many could not accept that God would reveal his love and declare his will in such a scandalous way. But Christ did not die ‘for nothing’ (2:21). It is the love which he demonstrated on the cross that is God’s power to save.

It is terrible that those insisting on circumcision are ‘perverting the gospel of Christ’ (1:7). They are playing on people’s fear to persuade them to conform. Paul hopes that no one will listen to them. He hopes that they will ‘castrate themselves’ with the circumcision knives which they are wielding. That is to say, he hopes that they will have no ‘children’, no disciples. Is there an echo here of Jesus’ words: ‘If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!’ (Mark 9:43)? Their focus on circumcision is taking them from Jesus. They would be better to cut off their penis.

The 'freedom' (see 5:1) of which Paul is speaking is the freedom given by Christ, whether it be freedom from slavery to the false values of the pagan world (see 4:3,8-9), or freedom from subjection to the law (see 2:4; 3:23; 4:1, 24-25). It is freedom from sin (see Paul's words to the Galatians on the occasion of his first visit, Acts 13:38-39). Already he has spoken paradoxically of his own freedom as expressed in being a 'slave of Christ' (1:10). He goes further here to speak of freedom to be slaves of each other. We are to be, as it were, prisoners of love, bound to each other body and soul, heart and mind, giving our lives for each other as Christ gave his for us.

In his letter Paul makes it perfectly clear that in rejecting the law as a necessary condition for enjoying communion with God he is not thereby rejecting morality; nor is he denying a place for the guidance provided by the law (he quotes it in verse fourteen), so long as it is recognised that life comes from the Spirit of Christ and not as a result of observance of the law. The freedom to which they are called is a freedom to live Christ's life. We recall Paul's statement earlier in the letter:

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.

– Galatians 2:19-20

We are not released from subjection to the law in order to be left to ourselves, a prey to our own unspiritual desires which can only draw us into sin. We are not left to ourselves. We have the Spirit of Christ as our source of life. It is probably here that we uncover the root cause of the problem in Galatia: insecurity concerning the problem of sin and how to cope with it. The Judaeian missionaries have been offering them the law with its clear directions and its institutional ways of finding forgiveness through the cult. Paul is anxious that they avoid the trap of this apparent security, and dare the journey they have already begun. He challenges them to 'live by the Spirit'.

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'
(Leviticus 19:8).

¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other.

This is why you do the very things you do not wish to do.

[NRSV ‘to prevent you from doing what you want’]

¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law.

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious:

**fornication
impurity,
licentiousness**

Paul is explaining to the Galatians why it is that they find themselves falling back into sin. It is not that the gospel which he preached is defective. Rather, it is because there is a battle going on between the life of Jesus in them, which is the gift of the Spirit, and the demands of their broken humanity which continue to make themselves felt. The Judean missionaries have been pressuring them into thinking that the only way they can avoid falling into sin is to submit to the Jewish law. Paul is stating categorically that that does not work, for the law does not enable them to avoid sin. If they submit to the law they will still find themselves doing the very things they do not wish to do. This is because they ‘cut themselves off from Christ’, and so ‘fall away from grace’ (5:4). No wonder they cannot resist the flesh. The only effective opposition to the flesh is the Spirit of Jesus, not the law.

Paul follows with a list of conventional vices, described here as ‘works of the flesh’. These are typical ways in which we behave when we are enslaved by desires that have not been purified by the Spirit of Jesus. He begins with *porneia*: a word covering a whole range of morally irresponsible behaviour in matters of sexuality. He puts it first because the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love. He then speaks of ‘impurity’: the pollution of our physical environment bears no comparison with the harm caused when we pollute the mind and heart. He goes on to name the vice of unrestrained gratifying of sensual desire.

Being a Christian means living in a certain way. It concerns the truth of who we are as persons. It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are meant to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust. There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other. Paul speaks of sexual behaviour which ignores all delicacy, by-passes love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one’s own power or gratify one’s own misdirected passion.

He moves on to name the vice of worshipping false gods. For Paul, this is any god other than the God revealed by Jesus. Linked with this is the vice of sorcery. Rather than accepting human limitations and the mystery of our own being and of the world of which we are part, rather than placing trust in a loving God, we seek false assurances from people who claim to know the future or to be able to control spirits.

‘Enmities’ and ‘strife’ are found where people are defined by race, or by any other quality other than their being made in the image of God. In the churches of Galatia, the differences between being a Jew and being a Gentile are being accented. ‘Jealousy’ (Greek: *zēlos*) is a form of ‘zeal’ motivated by self-interest. We hold on to what we have so tightly that we treat people as objects and are unwilling to share with others when love requires it.

Paul lists ‘anger’ among the vices. He is not speaking of appropriate anger when we defend ourselves or others against unjust aggression. Rather, he is speaking of the unreasonable and spiteful passion that can come over us when we fail to get our own way or have our own whims gratified. The many different ways in which ‘selfishness’ (Greek: *eritheia*) finds expression lead to ‘dissensions’, and create ‘factions’. Paul has in mind the ‘circumcision faction’ (2:12). We are ‘envious’ when we are unhappy with the prosperity of others, or the freedom they have in Christ. Being dissatisfied with who we are or with what we have, we want what others have. Paul concludes with ‘drunkenness’ and ‘carousing’. We lack moderation in our behaviour and in the way we seek to satisfy what we see as our needs.

The Judaeon missionaries are blaming the sinful behaviour of the Galatians on Paul’s failure to insist on their following the law. He reminds them that when he was with them he warned them against such behaviour: ‘those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God’. In this Paul agrees with the Judaeon missionaries. Such behaviour is not the behaviour of one who is a ‘son of God’ (3:26). The answer however is not the law; it is the life of the Son, offered to them in the Spirit (4:6-7). In the context of inheritance, Paul speaks of the ‘kingdom of God’. Luke tells us that Paul ‘argued persuasively about the kingdom of God’ (Acts 19:8; also 20:25; 28:31), demonstrating in word and deed the presence and activity of God’s amazing love and what happens when we welcome that love into our lives. This was the subject of Jesus’ whole life and ministry, prior to his death (Luke 8:1; 16:16). It was to proclaim this kingdom that Jesus sent out his apostles (Luke 9:2,60; Acts 1:3), and it is for the coming of this kingdom that we are to pray (Luke 11:1). To inherit it we must let Jesus’ Spirit live in us.

²⁰**idolatry,
sorcery,
enmities,
strife,
jealousy,
anger,
selfishness**

[NRSV ‘quarrels’],
**dissension,
factions,**

²¹**envy,
drunkenness,
carousing,
and thinks like
these.**

**I am warn-
ing you as I
warned you
before: those
who do such
things will
not inherit the
kingdom of
God.**

**²²By contrast,
the fruit of the Spirit is**

**love,
joy,
peace,
patience,
kindness,
generosity,
faithfulness,
²³gentleness
and self-control.**

There is no law against such things.

²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Paul follows the list of vices, not with a list of virtues, but with examples of what he calls ‘the fruit of the Spirit’. To cut oneself off from Christ is to cut oneself off from these fruits.

We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is ‘love’ (*agapē*). Paul is not referring to the spontaneous feeling that one associates with one’s spouse or family; nor is he referring to passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one’s life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. ‘Love’, as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to others whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. If we love we will achieve all that the law set out to achieve (5:13-14). However, love is not something which we can choose to do of ourselves. As we saw when examining love in relation to 5:6, love comes from God, and is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus through his Spirit.

The second fruit of which he speaks is ‘joy’ (Greek: *chara*): the joy of having Christ living in us (2:20); the joy of experiencing his Spirit in our hearts (4:6); the joy of knowing that we are heirs to the promise (3:29); the joy of experiencing the love of our brothers and sisters in the faith.

The third fruit is ‘peace’ (Greek: *eirēne*). Paul prayed that the Galatians would know this peace in his opening greeting (1:3). It is the peace we experience when we are in the right relationship with God and are living the life of his Son. It finds expression in the community when differences are no longer sources of injustice or insecurity (see especially the differences mentioned in 3:28), but variations which enrich the community as various instruments enrich an orchestra. The peace promised here will be complete only when all creation unites in a cosmic hymn of praise.

The fourth fruit of the Spirit is ‘patience’(Greek: *makrothumia*). Patience is more properly a translation of the Greek *hupomonē*, which speaks of our ability to bear difficulties which are happening to us. *makrothumia*, on the other hand, refers to our sharing in God’s magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by the opposition or suffering that ensues. It is the ability to remain constant in love and in a big (Greek: *makro*) way. It is a fruit of the Spirit because it can come only from God; it is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus ‘loving me and giving himself for me’(2:20).

The fifth fruit is ‘kindness’(*chrēstotēs*). It refers to whatever is pleasing, desirable, useful, lovely, valuable or morally good. Matthew associates it with the yoke of Christ as against the yoke of the law (11:30), and for Luke it is characteristic of God who is ‘kind to the ungrateful and the wicked’(Luke 6:35).

Closely associated with kindness is the next fruit, ‘generosity’(Greek: *agathōsunē*), perhaps better translated by the simple and profound word ‘goodness’.

Then comes ‘faithfulness’, or ‘faith’(Greek: *pistis*). This has been a central theme of this letter. When we examined the meaning of *pistis* in relation to 2:16, we saw that God is ‘faithful’: his love and his promises will never be withdrawn. Jesus lived this ‘faith’ to the full. Our faith is one of the fruits of his Spirit; our response to God’s love revealed in Jesus. One who lives by the Spirit of Christ shares also in his ‘gentleness’(Greek: *praiūtēs*), a characteristic that is typical of the heart of Jesus (see Matthew 11:28-29).

‘Self-control’ (Greek: *egkrateia*) was considered a most important virtue in the Greek world (see also 1Corinthians 7:9, 9:25; Titus 1:8). Paul is not speaking of control by the self. On the contrary, it is the control which we experience when we open ourselves to Jesus and to the gift of his Spirit. It is allowing ourselves to be controlled by him. It is being, like Paul, a ‘slave of Christ’(1:10).

Looking back over this list we become conscious of an important and fundamental dimension of Christian morality. Paul does not take away the Jewish law to replace it with a Christian equivalent. The command is not directly to follow certain precepts: it is to ‘live by the Spirit’(5:16), to be ‘led by the Spirit’(5:18). If we do this, then the Spirit will cause the above fruit to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us (see 2:20). Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. If the Galatians are concerned that they are sinning, the answer is not to subject themselves to the Jewish law. That will not give them the life they seek. The answer is to become more and more a ‘slave of Christ’(1:10), more and more allowing his Spirit to penetrate every aspect of our lives. To ‘belong to Christ’(3:29) demands, of course, that we die with him on the cross, dying to our selfishness (5:24) and giving our lives in love for others. It is to live ‘in Christ’(2:16-17; 3:26-28; 5:6). It is to be ‘clothed with Christ’(3:27). It is to have Christ as one’s Lord (1:3,10) and one’s Redeemer (1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 4:4-5; 5:1). It is to live by his Spirit (4:6).

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourself [NRSV 'yourselves'] are not tempted.

²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

The disturbance caused by those insisting on the law is resulting in the 'enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy' which Paul has already castigated as being 'works of the flesh' (5:19-21). If the community is to heal, there is need for correction. Paul insists on this being done 'in a spirit of gentleness'. He makes his message very personal by moving in 6:1, for the only time in this letter, to the second person singular. He is inviting each person in the community to take care.

Correcting others is necessarily a delicate task. It can be carried out effectively only where there is love. It is interesting to compare Paul's advice with that found in the Gospel of Matthew (18:15-20), especially since this Gospel probably emerged from the Christian community at Antioch, which was Paul's community for a number of years. Before speaking of correction, Matthew reminds us of the need for humility (18:1-5), of the importance of not scandalising or despising others (18:6-9), and of God's love for those who have gone astray (18:10-14). If a member of the Christian community goes astray, it is an act of mercy to attempt correction, but the correction will be graced and not destructive only to the extent that the virtues stressed in these passages are present. Matthew follows his teaching on correction by speaking of the importance of forgiveness (18:21-35).

The Galatians are obviously concerned about the continuance of sin among the baptised. What they need, insists Paul, is not the law but the guidance of Jesus' Spirit. Jesus will inspire them to correct each other, but always 'in a spirit of gentleness'. It is likely that Paul's opponents, in their insistence on the need for the Gentile converts to follow the law, were doing so by speaking of it as the 'law of Christ'. Paul picks up the phrase, but directs it to the injunction given by Jesus concerning love. As he said earlier, quoting the law: The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (5:14; see Luke 10:27-28). The Christian law *is* Christ.

Once again, Paul shows that it is not the law that is the problem. It is insisting on observance of the law as a secure means of being in communion with God, or when observance of the law issues in behaviour that is not according to the Spirit of Jesus. Jesus obeyed the will of God perfectly. If they open their hearts to Jesus' Spirit they will share in his obedient faith. In their mutual love they will experience communion with God in the Spirit of Jesus: something which obedience to the law could not even imagine.

Part of the problem of the Galatians is that they have been comparing themselves with the missionaries who have been boasting of the law. No one should be boasting of being better than anyone else, and there is no need for the Galatians to feel inferior to those who claim to find help in living a moral life by clinging to the law. If anyone is going to boast, let it be about the gift of his Spirit given to them by the risen Jesus.

Some think that in verse six Paul has in mind the giving of assistance to the poor in Jerusalem. James, Cephas and John asked him to help in this way when he was in Jerusalem, and this was something he was keen to do (see 2:9-10). No doubt he brought the matter up when he visited Galatia shortly afterwards (see 1Corinthians 16:1). Others suggest that the problem was that with the coming of the Judaeian missionaries the communities were neglecting the teachers that Paul had set up while he was with them.

It matters how we live. Our judgment depends upon it. We will live good moral lives to the extent that we are guided by Jesus' Spirit. The end result of following any way that is not inspired by the Spirit of Christ is 'corruption'. The goal to which life in the Spirit looks forward is 'eternal life'.

³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride.

⁵For all must carry their own loads.

⁶Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

⁷Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

⁸If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.

¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

¹¹See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

¹²It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

¹³Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

¹⁴May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

¹⁵For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!

Paul has been dictating to a secretary skilled in the craft of writing. Now he sums up in his own handwriting. Those who are trying to get the Gentile Galatians to be circumcised are seeking to avoid the kind of persecution which Paul has suffered (see 5:11). They do not want to ‘be crucified with Christ’ (2:19). They do not want to die to a way of life that they have known in order to embrace Christ on the cross, or rather, to be embraced by him.

They keep talking of the necessity of observance of the law. Surely, by now, the Galatians can see that in failing to live ‘the law of Christ’ (6:2), in failing to live according to the Spirit of him who brought the law to its perfection, in failing to transcend the law by attaching themselves whole-heartedly to Christ, they are failing to follow the way pointed out by the law itself. They are failing in their obedience to what God has revealed in his Son (compare Acts 7:53).

Paul does not want to have any other security to boast of than the security of knowing Jesus’ love revealed on the cross. He has died to anything that is not Christ, and this includes basing his confidence on observance of the law. Those who crucified Jesus did so in the name of obedience to the law. Paul has been crucified with him (2:19).

He repeats the central theme of this letter and of his whole preaching. In Christ God has made a new creation. Man and woman are created anew, for God has breathed into our flesh of clay the life-giving Spirit of Christ his Son. In this way he has made us his children and heirs with Christ to the promise. God has offered us a new way which transcends the old law in that it enables us to live in such a way that we will inherit the kingdom of God. The life-giving Spirit of Jesus enables us to live Jesus’ life and to experience his love-communion with God.

How often Paul would have heard and prayed: ‘Peace upon Israel’ (Psalm 125:5). God’s promise to Abraham, the sacred scriptures and the law have been central to this whole letter, as they came to their perfection in Jesus. The same prayer comes readily to his lips here. Having prayed that God’s peace and mercy may come upon the Galatians, his heart goes out as well to his own people, the Jews, and he prays that the fullness of God’s blessing may come upon them and that they may respond by believing in Jesus and answering God’s call into the Christian community. Paul’s heart is big enough to hold both prayers. His missionary life, ever faithful to Judaism and its mission, demonstrates that for him the two prayers are intimately interwoven.

Like a soldier showing the scars of battle as proof of the price he has paid for what he believes, Paul reminds them that he has suffered in the name of Christ. They have seen for themselves the scars of the suffering inflicted on him at Iconium, where ‘they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead’ (Acts 14:19). His boast is that he has accepted the death of everything that could separate him from Christ. He wants nothing less for them.

¹⁶As for those who will follow this rule, – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

¹⁸May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Living in his love

Paul writes:

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, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

Can we hear him continuing in prayer:

My need for communion with God took me to the law. I was committed to observing every last detail of it. Then, in his mercy, God revealed his Son to me. I realised that the answer to my need was communion with Christ. I was attracted to him, for I wanted to share his secret. I wanted to share his life. I wanted to be able to give my life in love the way I saw him giving his. The law did not make this possible. When he embraced me from the cross and poured his Spirit into my heart, my fascination with the law died. I fixed my eyes upon him. I saw that the purpose of the law has been achieved in the faith of Jesus. In giving me his Spirit, he gave me a share in his faith. Now I can live for God.

The love of the Father into which I have been invited, the embrace of the Son, the communion in the Spirit issuing from the pierced heart of my crucified Lord, has put to death in me the distracted desires that dominated my existence. The law of God has been written now in my heart, and with it the power to keep it. For I am a child of God, living already through his Spirit the life of his Son. May nothing separate me from this love.

And may nothing separate you, my dear Galatians. Amen.

* * * * *

According to the chronology which we are following, shortly after writing to the Galatians Paul went with Barnabas to the Assembly in Jerusalem. The Assembly supported Paul's main contention, insisting that those who were troubling the Christians in Antioch (and Galatia) were not acting under instructions from Jerusalem (Acts 15:24). Gentiles could be welcomed into the community as Gentiles, without being burdened by having to observe the law. They would be saved, as would Jews, not by observing the works of the law but 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ'(Acts 15:11).

However, the assembly ruled that when Gentiles and Jews came together to share communion around a common table, it was necessary for the Gentiles to observe the regulations of the law regarding what food could and could not be eaten (Acts 15:19-20, 28-29). As stated in the Torah, these regulations applied not only to Jews but to Gentiles living with Jews.

Silas was one of the men sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to promulgate the decisions of the council, and when he accompanied Paul on his next missionary journey, 'as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem'(Acts 16:4).