

GETTING THE GOSPEL RIGHT (GTGR) (GAL 4:21-31)

The historical backdrop of the book of Galatians is a setting much like our own today. Those considered to be the “pillars” of the Christian Faith were getting the gospel wrong (2:9-11). The outdated methods of justification (i.e. the OC clean laws of circumcision, animal sacrifices, Sabbaths and ritual separation) were being touted as back in force. Paul however would have no part in it. And that because he knew that the cutting off of old foreskins would also mean cutting off their relationship with Jesus and the justification offered through faith in Him (5:3-4). As such Paul goes on the offensive in this letter. He publicly attacks this “works of the law” addition to the gospel, as well as those promoting it (1:8-9, 2:11, 5:12). But it doesn’t stop there. Like all heresy, once ingested, its poison quickly spreads into other areas or facets of the Christian Faith (2Ti 2:17) – which in turn, also need to be remedied if the gospel is to be preserved. Paul’s mission in this letter is therefore much bigger than just righting the wrongs surrounding justification. It is about making sure that the Galatians were getting the gospel right at every level; that all aspects of their thinking that had been corrupted by this false gospel message were replaced by sound doctrine. In this respect, Paul provides the Galatians (and us) with a compendium of surgically precise, super effective biblical truths whose central focus and purpose is this very thing: getting the gospel right. In this respect, verses 21-31 of chapter 4 introduce us to #15.

15. GTGR means identifying who is Israel (or a member of Israel) under the New Covenant (21-31).

How we know these verses are indeed about identifying Israel (or her members) though the term “Israel” is nowhere in 4:21-31= B/C of Paul’s use of the term “Jerusalem” to refer to the Galatian churches (v26). This term is oftentimes used in the bible to refer to the entire nation/people of Israel (e.g. Rom 9:33 w/Isa 8:14, 28:14-16).

Why this is important to GTGR = It is common knowledge to anyone who studies the Bible that Israel plays a special role in God’s redemptive plan. They are His chosen ones, the exclusive recipients of God’s Law, covenant and promises. They are also the nation from whom – and for whom Messiah will come (Rom 9:4-5). In other words, Israel *is* (and always will be) the covenant community of God’s people, the target audience of His gospel. As such, **if you are not a part of Israel, you are not a part of the people of God.** On these points, both Paul and his opposition (i.e. the Judaizers) agreed. They also agreed that the covenant community established by Jesus (i.e. the church) was the NC Israel (consider Mat 21:43; Luk 22:28-30; Rom 9:6 w/11:17 w/26; Eph 2:11-22; Rev 21:12-14)¹. Where however there was sharp disagreement was in relation to the criteria now used to identify her members.

What Peter and the Judaizers believed (and were conducting a strong campaign for in the Galatian churches) = It was the same as under the Old Covenant: only Jews could be Israel (or the people of God). And since the OC clean laws also served as the objective markers for identifying a person as a Jew, this too became a major contributing factor (or motive) in the Judaizers’ campaign with the Gentile converts: to make sure that such Jewish identity was preserved by requiring them to also become Jewish proselytes (see 2:14-16; v14 = “become/live like a Jew” = Ἰουδαίω = to “judaize”, – see also Est 8:17; Act 21:17-26).

“Works of the law’ is now recognizable as a phrase in use at the time of Paul. We have several examples of it in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There it refers explicitly to a particular understanding and practice of the law...which distinguished Jew from Gentile, which set apart [i.e. identified] the people of God...from all other nations. This is why the phrase in Paul usually seems to have in view such practices as circumcision and the food laws in particular. For it was these practices of the law, perhaps more than any others, which marked out the Jews as different from the Gentiles in the ancient Mediterranean world.” –James DG Dunn, Justice for Gentiles: Paul and Justification by Faith, p. 27

What Paul knew to be true under the New Covenant = Just as the means of justification had changed, so had the objective marker for identifying who was a part of Israel. Faith in Christ was now the means and marker. As such, Israel was no longer an exclusively Jewish covenant community. In other words, NC Israel would be the church as we recognize her today: a community comprised of both Jew and Gentiles - *remaining Gentiles (Gal 6:14-16)*. In this respect, Paul pens 4:21-31 as a series of arguments – each building on the former, with the goal of establishing this crucially important (esp. today!) truth: The church (made up of both Jews and Gentiles – remaining Gentiles) is the NC Israel and people of God.

15.1. The Old Testament Scriptures do not establish race, ethnicity – or other natural means/markers as the key to identifying God’s covenant people of Israel, but rather the supernatural means/markers of being those who have received the promises of God (21-23). IOW: this is where God’s redemptive plan for the covenant community begins. It’s precedent is promise NOT race.

15.2. The Old Testament Scriptures view the people of Israel existing under two different covenant communities: old and new (24-25)². IOW: There are two nations of Israel: Old Covenant Israel and New Covenant Israel.

15.3. The New Covenant community of Israel (or church) - in counter-distinction to the Old Covenant community yet consistent with redemptive precedent, is not a nation of exclusively Jewish people in bondage to the ethnic identity markers of the OC clean laws but instead a nation of Jews and Gentiles who are free from such means, having instead become the people of God through faith in Christ (26-27).

¹ Though Dispensationalism believes the church and Israel to be separate peoples/cov. communities of God, such thinking was completely foreign to the NT teachers and writers. As mentioned, they viewed the church as the NC Israel. No wonder Dispensationalism refers to their two-peoples view as a “prior mystery” – it was also unknown to those in the writing the NT! Even the texts used to support this view prove to be bogus in this respect (e.g. Joh 10:16: notice Jesus does not indicate the creation of a different flock but rather the bringing into one, the two folds.). The Scriptures consistently communicate only one cov. community and people of God, Israel.

² Again, how different from what is communicated by Dispensationalism today: two covenant communities, one Israel, the other the church.

The BOBMSHELL (blow your mind) implication = The future promises made to Israel in the OT (e.g. Isa 54:1-10 w/Gal 4:27) must be applied to NC Israel since *she* is the only Israel in covenant (now) w/God (i.e. she is the only one who represents the people of God and bride of Christ. The Old bride has been divorced – Isa 50:1 w/Jer 3:1-8 w/31:31 w/Mat 21:43 w/Rev 5-8, 19:1-8; regarding OC Israel as a former bride of Christ see Eph 2:11-12). Understanding these verses (and Paul’s point) delivers yet another crushing blow to the anti-biblical system of Dispensationalism. The condemning blow comes however in what remains (vv 28-31). Consider:

15.4. OC Israel – though no longer the people of God, will find support and take advantage of NC Israel through those churches possessing poor theology (28-29).

(28) “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.” = A reiteration of what was said in 3:29 as well as the conclusion to what has been established in the previous verses (21-28). More importantly however, Paul is confirming the Galatians’ membership in NC Israel –not (again because of a change from Gentile to Jew through the OC clean laws), but through becoming heirs of God’s promises through faith in Christ (3:29). In this way, all Christians are “like Isaac...children of promise” but also as Paul states, “brothers”. IOW: this familial term also points to the Galatians as already a part of NC Israel (consider 1Co 10:1 – Paul connects the Israelite “fathers” to his Corinthian “brothers”).³ However, according to Paul, the reality of another Israelite community would create similar problems to those experienced by the two families of Abraham.

(29) “But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.” = As before, the individual Paul is referring to when speaking of “he who born according to the flesh” is Ishmael (Abe’s child through natural means to the slave Hagar) whereas “him who was born according to the Spirit” is a reference to Isaac (Abe’s child through the supernatural means of God’s Spirit opening the old womb of Sarah). In (Gen 21:9) we are told Ishmael mocked or as Paul states –“persecuted”) his younger half-brother Isaac. This Paul views as more than just coincidence, but prophetic paradigm – i.e. what should be expected in the relationship between Old and New Covenant Israel (“just as” = ὡσπερ = used in the NT oftentimes to indicate that a particular pattern in the natural world is/will be the pattern regarding supernatural things as well – e.g. Mat 24:27). That being said, what Paul reveals here as the means through which such persecution takes place is anything but what should be expected – it is persecution by proxy! Based on the context and circumstances that prompted the writing of this letter, who Paul is referring to is NOT OC Israel –but the Jerusalem church (i.e. those who are a part of NC Israel). Their actions in attempting to circumcise the Gentiles of Galatia (and make them Jews), is more in line w/OC Israel. IOW: Through their poor theology, the Jerusalem church (like OC Israel) is persecuting NC Israel⁴!

The modern day example of churches (through poor theology) supporting OC Israel in persecution (of NC Israel) = Dispensationalism!

This particular brand of poor theology teaches that the church (the NC Israel and Christ’s precious wife for whom He died – Act 20:28) is nothing more than a “rebound wife” since God’s love still resides with His former people (OC Israel –think “whore”) whom He will eventually reignite the romance with - once of course He gets rid of the other gal (think rapture). As such, the church is denigrated and degraded to a place of sub-par existence within God’s redemptive framework which sees ultimate value only in being a Jew – or blessing one. Paul’s biblical response to such things and subsequently (then) how NC Israel is to view – and what she is to do, w/OC Israel is shockingly clear and straightforward...

15.5. OC Israel is no longer to be treated as the people of God (ever again) (30-31).

(30a) “But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son...’” = Paul is again referring to (Gen 21:9). This time however it is the latter portion of the verse - Sarah’s response to Ishmael’s mocking (or persecution) of Isaac, that Paul is applying to Old and New Covenant Israel. NC Israel (i.e. the church, “the son of the free woman”) is NOT to pander to – or treat as special OC Israel but rather “Cast out” (ἐκβαλε = to throw/cast out; Mat 25:30) OC Israel (i.e. “the slave woman and her son”). IOW: remove her from consideration as it relates to God’s redemptive promises. She (OC Israel) is no longer to be treated as the people of God ever again. As shocking as a statement that may be for many in our day (esp. those drinking out of the sewer of Dispensationalism), one only need to consider the remainder of what Paul says to be convinced:

15.5.1. There is NO inheritance for OC Israel (“the children of the slave woman”)

(30b) “for the son of the slave woman (i.e. OC Israel) shall not inherit (the promises associated w/the kingdom of God and being the covenant people of God; “inherit” = salvific inheritance - 5:21) with the son of the free woman (NC Israel, the church).”

This is why Jesus says what He does in (Mat 8:10-12, 21:33-45, 23:38; Luk 5:33-39)

15.5.2. The promises (inheritance) belong to NC Israel, the church made up of Jews and Gentiles remaining Gentiles (“the children of the free woman”)

(31) “So, brothers we (the Galatian churches of Jews and Gentiles) are not the children of the slave but the free woman (IOW: we are where the promises reside).”

This is what God is promising in (Eze 16:46-63). This is what Paul is talking about in (Rom 9-11).

Closing consideration - TWO QUESTIONS: 1) How does this change who we should be supporting as Israel (the people of God) today? 2) How does this change the way we read/interpret those future promise/blessing passages in the OT regarding Israel (hint: how is Paul interpreting them?)

³ The difference between OC Israel and NC Israel becomes even more apparent when one considers it is a Jew (i.e. Paul) who is referring the Gentiles (i.e. the Galatians) using this familial term.

⁴ The NT is filled w/examples of OC Israel’s persecution of the NC Israel-the church and Christians (e.g. Act 8:1-3, 9:23, 14:1-2, 19, 17:5, 18:12, 19:9, 21:27-31, 23:12; 1Th 2:14-16).