

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 The outdated methods of justification (i.e. the OC clean laws of circumcision, animal sacrifices, Sabbaths and ritual separation) were being touted as back in force.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). In this respect, 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, identifying those people equally means identifying Israel. 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; Heb 8-10, 12:22-28; Jam 1:1; 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 in the Galatian churches for) = 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” = Ἰουδαῖζω = to “judaize”, where the word “Judaizer” comes from – see also Est 8:17). As discussed in the prior study, this is what Paul is referring to in 4:17.

As additional proof that the Jews (in general) viewed the OC clean laws as “jewish identity markers” consider:

(Act 21:17-26; also Act 6:14)

“The features of Torah which loomed largest were those which functioned specifically and obviously as cultural, social and religious boundary (or identity)-markers, i.e. Sabbath, food-laws, circumcision.” –NT Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, p. 168.

“‘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 indentifying 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).

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.

*“We can now see more clearly what Paul was getting at when created his classic antithesis: God justifies (accepts) people through faith and not by virtue of works of the law. He was not hitting at people who thought they could earn God’s goodwill by their achievements, or merit God’s final acquittal on the basis of all their good deeds. Paul’s point was rather that God accepts Gentiles in the same way that he accepts any person – by grace through faith. That is to say, God accepts Gentiles as Gentiles, without requiring them to take on a Jewish lifestyle or change their nationality or race. Justification by faith is Paul’s fundamental objection to the idea that God has limited his saving goodness to a particular people. What a tragedy that this expression of the Christian gospel has been so much neglected!” – James DG Dunn, *ibid*, p.25-26*

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.

(21a) “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law” = the Galatians who were considering circumcision (i.e. placing themselves under the authority of the OC). The phrase (“under the law”) is used 13x in NT always w/reference to something/someone under the authority of the OC (Heb 9:18-22; Phi 3:6; 1Co 9:20; Gal 3:23, 4:4-5, 5:18).

(21b) “do you listen to the law?” = IOW: Do you understand what God is teaching in/through the OT Scriptures? This phrase, “the law” (or similar – e.g. “the law of the Lord”; Psa 19:7) is used over 300x in the bible and refers to the entire OT Scriptures (including those portions/books whose genre is non-didactic). This is seen most clearly by considering that what Paul is referring to in (verse 22) are narrative (i.e. non-didactic!) portions in the book of Genesis!

(22) “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman” = Paul’s presentation (“For it is written”) gives the impression he is quoting directly from a particular text in the OT. It is however, a summary statement based on two different chapters in Genesis: chapter 16- dealing w/the birth of Ishmael to Hagar (Sarah’s “slave woman”), and chapter 21 – dealing w/the birth of Isaac to Sarah (i.e. the “a free woman”). This first argument (however) is NOT established by knowing this, but rather what Paul implies about it in (verse 23).

(23) “But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise” = Ishmael was born to Hagar as a result of natural means (i.e. “according to the flesh”), Isaac on the other hand, was the result of God’s supernatural promise to Sarah of conceiving in her old age. As such Paul intends to communicate this: from the beginning, God’s plan for His covenant community (Abe representing the “father/progenitor of Israel –or the covenant people and community of God, see Luk 1:54-55, 3:8; Act 3:25, 13:24-26; Heb 7:4; Rom 4:1, 12; Jam 2:21; Gal 3:7; *Mic 7:20) was not based on natural –but supernatural means. It would be a community of those who had supernaturally received His promised blessings. Such thinking therefore makes a powerful case for the church as the NC Israel since Paul has already established that Gentile believers are the supernatural children (i.e. recipients) of Abraham’s blessings in the same way as Isaac - as children of promise (see 3:28-29).

Why this is not the same as saying “the identity markers don’t matter” = The problem is not w/identity-markers in and of themselves. It is instead an issue regarding what they represent. As racial/ethnic signs, they are worthless (at least from a soteriological perspective since God is not—and never has been, a respecter of persons – Rom 2:11; Act 10:34). However, as the means by which we determine who has received God’s promises-they are incredibly important (i.e. they matter!). Under the NC (and according to Paul in 3:16), those promises now reside w/Christ and the prescribed marker identifying our union w/Him (according to Paul in 3:27) is baptism (Rom 6:3-4).

What happens when we don’t receive the prescribed markers (i.e. covenant signs) = We don’t receive the promises associated w/them. This has always been true (consider Gen 17:10-14; Exo 12:13, 23; also 1Pe 3:21 w/Act 2:38 w/Mar 16:16).

Important tangent for our closing consideration:

What these verses tell us about how Paul viewed the OT Scriptures:

15.1.1. As authoritative for NT Christians.

Consider again the phrase in verse 22 “For it is written”. Though Paul is not indicating a direct quote (as discussed), he is saying something about the continuing authority of what is taught in those OT texts (2Ti 3:15-16 – speaking about the OT!).

15.1.2. As always establishing some timeless truth.

Paul takes narrative text from the OT and establishes the truth discussed under this point. This is the hermeneutic demonstrated not only by Paul but Jesus (e.g. Mat 19:4-6). This is also what we are explicitly told as the reason for God giving the OT Scripture (or Scripture in general) in all its different genres (Rom 15:4).