

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 The outdated methods of justification (i.e. the OC clean laws of circumcision, animal sacrifices, Sabbaths and ritual separation) were being touted as back in force.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, **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 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 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 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.

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.

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

(24a) “Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.” = IOW: the accounts of Hagar and Sarah do more than just set precedent regarding the identity markers of God’s covenant people, they are also to be “interpreted” as symbols (i.e. allegories)³ of the two different covenant communities that will represent Israel in God’s redemptive plan: The Old Covenant community and the New Covenant community. How we know this is what Paul is referring to when he says “two covenants” is made clear by what he says next.

(24b-25) “One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.” = “Mount Sinai” was not only the place where God established the Old Covenant, but more importantly where the seed of Jacob (i.e. Jewish people of Israel) were first recognized as the covenant people/community of God (see Exo 6:1-7 w/19:1-4, 24:1-8). As such this also “corresponds to the present Jerusalem” since that was the capital city of that Jewish/ethnic community (i.e. the OC people of Israel). Because however Paul connects them to Hagar, as “her children”, they also (like her) are considered “in slavery”. The slavery Paul has in mind is spiritual not physical since that is the context of these verses (they are dealing with the spiritual bondage of those under the OC – the bondage those Galatians desiring to place themselves under the OC now, will also experience, see 5:1 – consider it is the OC clean laws that cause Paul to see it this way- v2; This is also what Peter is talking about in Act 15:10 – “yoke” = a device used to place those under it into bondage/slavery – e.g. 1Ti 6:1). This truth (OC Israel in bondage/slavery) – though important as yet another practical reason for the Galatians to reject the OC clean laws (since they too then would be placing themselves under the same bondage), is only of secondary importance at this point in the discussion (it will take front and center at the beginning of chapter 5). What however must first be established is the reality of two covenant communities of Israel since until that is proven, all negative aspects regarding OC Israel become irrelevant. Why? Because unless there is another covenant community of Israel that is better- OC Israel remains the only hope of salvation (Remember: every first century Christian knew that God’s promises were made and stayed in Israel, therefore to not be a part of her was to be outside those promises). Having then already accomplished his goal of establishing that two covenant communities/people of Israel do indeed exist (and that Hagar’s children represent the OC community), Paul reveals who represents the members/children of Sarah – the NC community/people of 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).

(26) “But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” = As before this term (“Jerusalem”) is being used as a synonym for Israel. This time however it is NC Israel Paul has in mind – the “Jerusalem above” (i.e. heavenly Jerusalem – Heb 12:22); the archetype of the Jerusalem/Israel of old – what God had in mind all along as the ideal covenant community. And who Paul is speaking about as her members/children are the Galatian churches-his original audience; churches whose membership consisted of predominately Gentiles (who up to this point, had remained Gentiles!). They were already a part of Israel (“she is our mother”)! Not again OC Israel in bondage to the OC clean laws, but NC Israel which was “free” from such ethnic (and very Jewish!) identity markers. They had received the promises, become its members – and the children of Sarah (subsequently also Abraham as we saw in 3:27-28) simply by faith in Christ—the new identity marker/means of justification. As such the church (understood as we know it today, as predominately Gentiles) is a not the “parenthetic” in God’s redemptive plan⁴. According to Paul they (we!) represent its fulfillment –

(27) “For it is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” = Paul is quoting directly from Isaiah 54, that portion of Isaiah’s prophecy which comes immediately after his most famous (ch. 53 – the prophecy concerning the coming Messiah). As a result it communicates the blessings to be bestowed upon Israel under the New Covenant by Messiah. And those blessings include the BOMBHELL (i.e. blow your mind) truth that “the children of the desolate one (i.e. those who prior *were not* in a marriage covenant relationship with God/the Gentiles; Eph 2:11-13) will be more the one who has a husband”(i.e. those who prior *were* in a marriage covenant relationship with God/the Jews). IOW: the majority of the children in NC Israel will not be Jews but Gentiles!

So then, who is Israel? There are two: there is ethnic/Jewish only/OC Israel (the former people of God, a people in bondage) and there is NC Israel – a community filled with Gentiles remaining Gentiles (and Jews remaining Jews) yet all the new people of God (all having received the promises of God) simply by the supernatural marker/means of faith in Christ (hence why Paul can say what he does in Rom 9:1-8). The only question that remains then is this, “what do we do w/OC Israel?” Paul provides the answer to that question in vv28-31!

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

³ Though at first glance it may seem as though this allegorical interpretation of Hagar and Sarah originated with Paul as part of his persuasion of the Galatians in this letter, we can be sure that it did not. Instead, it was something already accepted by the church as a legitimate/divinely inspired way to look at these two women since Paul knew no new interpretation/revelation could be established w/o prior approval from the church – i.e. only the church can recognize something as inspired/authoritative which is exactly how Paul is expecting the Galatian churches to receive his interpretation (Gal 2:2; Act 15:1ff; 1Co 14:27-29; 1Co 1:10, 11:19; Eph 4:4, 12-13). This “ecclesiocentric hermeneutic” is the key to removing the doctrinal/interpretive abuses we find in Christianity today whereas seeing Paul as the originator of this interpretation is its cause (think Pentecostal preachers). IOW: even apostles must submit to the authority of the church!

⁴ Based on Paul (and once more in contrast to Dispensationalism), OC Israel is the “parenthetic” or anomaly (abnormality?) in God’s redemptive plan.