Obedience to the Law of Christ. An inquiry into the function of the Mosaic law in Christian ethics from a Mennonite perspective

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Chapter 4

Crisis in the shape of the Church: Paul's social ethics

The discussion of the the letter of James not only showed that there was a pattern of Christianity that evolved around an affirmation of the continuing validity of the Mosaic law, but it also brought out the tension between the appraisal of Paul's central doctrine of justification and the implications of the letter of James. Whereas James seems more concerned with the gap between rich and poor Christians and the over-emphasis on faith in opposition to works-obedience, it is widely held that Paul defined the true gospel as righteousness by faith in opposition to any kind of works-righteousness.

In Paul's ecclesiology this could be found in the doctrine of the one Church in which the boundary between Jew and gentile had been lifted, and in his ethics it could be found in a specific pattern. The imperative of Christian living followed the indicative of God's redemptive presence in Christ. That imperative could no longer be considered analogous to the pattern of obedience to the laws of Moses. In this chapter we will try to show, that Paul's solution to the problem of Christian ethics resulted from his position with regard to the shape and nature of the Christian community; that he did not fully solve that problem as can be seen from the different approach of the Jerusalem Council, especially with regard to the so-called Noachide laws, and that nevertheless Paul's ethics remained orientated toward the fulfillment of the divine imperative. The brief discussion of Paul's canonical status is intended to convey that the presumption of a Pauline primacy is incorrect.

§ 18. The traditional approach to Paul's ethics

This is the common view: in his letters Paul responds to pastoral problems in the Churches he had founded or had assumed responsibility for, and in so doing he occasionally explains doctrinal issues insofar as they seem to be relevant to those problems. Since Martin Dibelius, it has been held that Paul's ethical passages are a form of paraenesis, blocks of moral maxims and advice without intrinsic connection to each other or to the doctrinal parts of the letter. Paul did not formulate an ethical code like the Mishnah, and his ethical discourse does indeed give the impression of being random collections. Dibelius argued that these ethical passages were written in a different style, without religious or theological foundation, often in the form of proverbs. They were not written with a specific community in mind but for a general pedagogical purpose; in short, the ethical blocks are repetitions of general instructions given to new converts. They are furthermore based on general Christian tradition and do not contain any specifically Pauline thought. The ethical vacuum that was opened up by the delayed coming of the kingdom was filled with a form of ethics that was derived from the outside world and was not specifically Christian.

It may be a matter of how the parenetical material is read and approached in the first place. H. D. Betz argued, much in line with the classic view of Dibelius, that the letter to the Galatians, our subject in the following chapters, did not contain a specific Christian ethics. "The Christian is addressed as an educated and responsible person...In a rather conspicuous way Paul conforms to the ethical thought of his contemporaries." The support for that thesis lies in the observation that the parenetical material is (1) without internal connections, as if it were a mere list of popular moral maxims that were Christianized in a superficial manner, (2) without direct reference to the Scriptures, and (3) seemingly imported from general Greek culture into the Church's early catechetical instruction. Because their form of presentation in the letters was the same manner in which such materials were taught in Hellenistic education, it
seemed obvious that it was simply borrowed from the environment.

Betz's view was published in 1979 and the matter seemed decided. But perspectives changed nonetheless. Dunn expressed in 1993, in his commentary on Galatians, that Dibelius's assumptions as to the manner of tradition that had governed thinking about paraenesis were unnecessary. "We need not assume use of fixed or established catechetical material. On the contrary, here [reference is to Gal. 5:13-6:10 – RAV] the terms of the paraenesis seem largely to have been determined by the circumstances addressed .." 171 By the circumstances? Could Paul have adapted himself to the "ethical thought of his contemporaries" because the most determining factor "in these circumstances" was the imminent parousia? Did Paul in fact expect his pagan audience to adopt moral norms from the surrounding culture and Christianize them? The imminence of the parousia might have led to the conclusion that there was no time and no need to formulate a specific Christian halakah. The Christians' ethic was an "interim ethics," a way of obliging the old order while the new was on the brink of making its appearance. Is this however sufficient? Or is there a more intrinsic connection between the paraenesis and the doctrinal foundation? After all, the doctrinal parts of both Galatians and Romans are dominated by the issue of justification, a term with which Paul certainly addresses the basic condition or situation of ethics. Bultmann's general contention, that in Paul's work the imperative follows the indicative, provides us with an example of such an assumed intrinsic connection. But even then, the parenetical material seems disconnected from Paul's major theological themes. Bultmann explains this with reference to the parousia and the fundamental change in the ethical situation.

We are left with the challenging question of whether the parenetical material was simply adopted from the environment's Hellenistic education, and if so, if it only had to be adapted to the belief in the imminent return of Christ. The idea that the indicative preceded and grounded the imperative, the notion that the imperative as such belonged to the old age, could then do the rest, or at least in part we could examine whether we are dealing with the intrinsic development and expression in written form of an existing halakah to which the pagan Churches contributed elements of moral discourse from their own background. We must then take particular notice of the form, the context, and the way the material is connected to find possible traces of deep differences between the material as received and its new meaning within a Christian context.

Let us take a look first at this general "indicative" that provides the basis for Paul's ethics as it appears in Richard Hays's book on the ethics of the New Testament. We will use that later on to see whether such a general outline of the indicative background of Paul's paraenesis gives us sufficient clues to understand the passages in question. Hays has managed to rework Bultmann's general thesis in an ethical context, and that is why we chose to discuss his thesis first. To be clear, this "general" framework is to be distinguished from Paul's doctrine of justification, which is the systematic outworking of the basic situation of mankind on the basis of God's redeeming action in Christ. Here we speak of the pattern of various motives that Paul brings into play or presupposes in his paraenesis, and which makes it possible to see organization in the contents itself, even where the discursive context will not provide one.

Hays gives three "recurrent, interlocking theological motifs that provide the framework for Paul's ethical teaching: eschatology, the cross, and the new community in Christ." 172

the eschatological motif

Hays contends that Paul's ethics is only intelligible when we keep in mind that he had an "apocalyptic" perspective on the historic reality of the Church. The vocation of the Church lies in its role within "the cosmic drama of God's reconciliation of the world to himself." But what perspective did Paul have? A major passage is 2 Cor. 5, where the crucial verse 17 is rendered most often like this:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; be-
hold, all things are become new. (KJV)

Such a verse may provide a general perspective on ethics. If we understand it the way the KJV suggests, we accept that a convert to Christianity (someone who is “in” Christ, has been baptized and is saved) belongs to the new age. As an individual he is transformed from the old sinful creation to a new order of life. That would imply that the behavior we can expect of such a person is fully congruous with an unseen reality: the present reign of the Kingdom of heaven. But the translation is faulty, as Hays explains. It must be:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, there is a new creation. (or:, a new creation!)

If in our present anyone can profess to belong to Christ, which would probably mean something like being part of Christ’s body, i.e., the Church, then that in itself means that the new creation is already present and active. But that new reality need not be fully realized by the individual in his or her practical life. The bearer of this new reality is the congregation or the Church as a whole. In other words, it is primarily through the social reality of the convert that his belonging to the new era is expressed.

Hays takes this to mean that the ethical life of the Church is determined by the double perspective of the cosmic conflict. The Church represents the new age in a hostile world. Its proclamation of the truth is the divine weapon in the struggle for the new world. The difference between the two translations is that in the second version the basic situation of ethics is defined as the realm of the Church (“in Christ”), and this as a renewed, re-created community: new creation, whereas in the first translation we talk about an individual’s subjective experience of having been transformed through faith in Christ or through baptism as a personal event and the ethical commitment that follows it. At variance with Hays, it seems to us that the passage presents the Church as the new creation itself, and not as “at the juncture between” the old and the new age. It is not about the imminence of the Kingdom of heaven in history, but about the immanence of that Kingdom in the Church. But notwithstanding that, Hays is undoubtedly right that this situation of being between the times, cf. Menno’s insistence that “now is the time of grace, defines the Church’s ethical situation. The brokenness of all human ethical action might lead to utilitarianism and a careful calculation of the good effect of one’s actions. If the Church is the community that holds on to faith in Christ’s imminent return, this at least bars the way to this kind of realism. Instead it signifies for the Church that there is now no barrier to doing the good intended by the creator right now, even if there is no visible result within the present order of life.

Yoder, who similarly accepts the corrected translation of the passage in 2 Corinthians, developed this same idea. The Church’s being present in this world as the sign of the new creation is morally determined by this fact. Far from making ethical judgments pointless, this eschatological perspective actually defines the specific ethics of the Church. The eschatological dimension of her existence, the then that is already now, defines her approach to obedience in many ways. Yoder listed them in his “Christ, the Hope of the World.” To quote just a few:

If eschatology defines us, then we can abandon, e.g., the need for a causal link between our obedience and the results we hope for (p. 203). “We obey in a world that we do not control.”

The immediate result might not be clear, but there may be results in a future beyond our reckoning. We may be pouring water into the desert, but the combined result of these actions might be that the water is there, and plenty of it, when some day a lonely wanderer needs it most. The meaning of what we do lies not in its productivity, but in its sometimes very real significance as a sign.

To have a “transcendent ideal” gives us the ability to unmask idols. The refusal to obey Hitler was meaningful even if one could not provide a clear social alternative by which to gain the right to criticism.

To act in accordance with a transcendent hope might be as relevant as seeing a mirage. Though the mirage shows us a reality in a different place from where it really is, it still accu-
rately depicts that reality in itself. The kingdom of God might not be on our doorstep, not on our horizon, but knowing it is there somewhere might give us courage based on a reality and not on fantasy. So the Church is the community of hope, which allows its actions to be guided by the transcendent ideal of the kingdom and not the realities of everyday life. And if it does, it actually becomes the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). The Church is a preview of the community of the future; it already unfolds the righteousness that is the characteristic of the new age, precisely because it already acts in conformity with that transcendent ideal in a world that is still governed by the rules of sin and power.

It is in this perspective that it can be understood why Paul emphasizes the role of the Spirit so much. In Galatians the experience of the indwelling of the Spirit serves as one of the major factors in deciding the issue of the role of the law and the necessity of circumcision (Gal. 3:2). The presence of the Spirit is not only a sign and foretaste of the things to come, but it is the reality of the coming era itself. (In 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5 the expression arapboon refers to the reality, not the sign.) The Spirit thus enables action in conformity with the kingdom right away, even if it is confined within the remains of the old age. That is why obedience takes on the shape of suffering and cross. But, contrary to Hays, Yoder holds that the Church does not stand “between the times” as does the world; she already belongs to the new era through the spirit. Moral exhortation in the perspective of the Church as being the new Creature must be different from both the traditional view of the individual’s bearing the responsibility for new behavior (and succeeding only in exceptional cases), or of new behavior’s being a sign of the coming but not present kingdom.

the motif of the cross

Hays takes as his second ethical paradigm that of the cross, which he characterizes as the “paradigm of faithfulness.” The loving, self-sacrificial obedience of Christ as depicted in the Philippian hymn (Phil. 2:1-13) is the pattern for Christian obedience. In passing we may note that to Hays this is the real content of the expression “law of Christ” in Gal. 6:2. To fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens is to act in conformity with the pattern of life and death of Christ. In general, the model for obedience itself is obedience to God, in the service of man, to death. It functions as the exact antithesis of Adam’s rebellion, which was defiance of God’s will for self-serving purposes and which brought death to all. Identifying with Christ will not mean the removal of death in a physical sense. But sharing in His life implies sharing His death and resurrection. The motif also signifies a meaningfulness of suffering, when this is a result of our obedience, and makes patience and endurance into one of the most basic Christian virtues. We will deal with this motif again at the end of this study.

the redeemed community

Finally, the third motif of Paul’s ethical discourse is the redeemed community. We will see in our discussion of Galatians how important this notion of the unity of the Church was to Paul. Circumcision for some in the Church would entail erecting fresh barriers where none could have been intended. The vices enumerated in Gal. 5 are offenses against the community. Paul’s decisions concerning the eating of meat consecrated to idols, in 1 Cor., tell the same message. Paul was adamant that there could be no social barriers within the Church. The particular community of the Church was to be ruled by new marks of participation: baptism, confession, experience of the Holy Spirit. All three served to define participants in the Church as members of the body of Christ, as unified beyond the pluralistic diversity within (formal) unity that society could offer.

All three of these motifs then work together to provide a framework within which Paul’s ethical discourse can be understood as a unity rather than as Dibelius’s blocks of paraenesis without context or coherence. Of course, all of them are interlocked theologically. The cross is
a paradigm of obedience as well as the real event that brings in the eschatological kingdom and grounds the new community. So, if we need to make a choice, the cross would be the most powerful paradigm of them all, since it by itself constitutes the others. On the other hand, one might be tempted to add to the list of motifs by making distinctions between the various ways they are brought into play and to list the other concepts that co-define Paul’s thinking, such as righteousness, salvation, faith, incarnation, covenant. All of these function in various ways to define the ethical situation as well. For our purposes, it is useful to adopt Hays’s suggestion that these three are the theological convictions that are at the basis of Paul’s ethical thinking and to demand that all three of them be used to adequately interpret any single Pauline statement. Nevertheless, though helpful in defining the background of the intent behind Paul’s paraenesis, especially in the context of doctrinal letters like Romans and Galatians, we must still seek what drives the shape of this paraenesis formally. We will contend that obedience in faith is still the best way of approaching the form of the Pauline exhortation.

We need to add one dimension to the three motifs of Richard Hays. Paul’s ethics, as defined by the three motifs, is pastoral in its nature. That means that its formulation was almost always connected to the real circumstances of Church life, addressed to real participants in particular conflicts, meant to change local conditions. Pauline paraenesis, far from consisting of separate and isolated blocks of tradition, was intended for a specific time and place from which it receives a specific coherence. Furthermore, Paul’s ethics was never intended for the whole Church, but only for the gentile Church that he ministered to, and he was never their only authority. The Jerusalem Church and the other apostles in general never relinquished their own apostolic mission for the Church as a whole, but yielded to Paul’s primacy only in his mission to the gentiles. That Paul needed approval from the Jerusalem Church is obvious from Galatians and Acts, as we will discuss shortly. But for the history of Christian ethics it is important to note in passing that this was not how the Church came to read Paul. Soon he became the sole authority in matters of doctrine and ethics.

§ 19. The canonical framework

Let us move away from this preliminary overview of the central motifs of Paul’s paraenesis, the framework in which he wrote, and move to the framework in which he was read. At stake is the primary role Paul’s writings played, and still play, in the discourse on Christian ethics. In other words, we must again discuss his apostolic authority. In order to understand how very early on a hermeneutic framework was devised that emphasized the idealized Paul as the center of apostolicity, over against the empirical Paul and his actual relations with different Churches, we must look for a moment at the history of the canonization of Paul’s letters. Beker has argued that the doctrinal need of the 2nd-century Church was the decisive factor in producing the image of a Paul who addressed the opponents of the Church as an apostolic and inerrant teacher, rather than his factual audience in Rome or Galatia as a concerned pastor, or his intended audience as a partner in an ongoing dialogue that stretched far beyond the confines of the letter. 178

Beker puts it like this:

The specificity and occasional character of the letters was felt to be a hindrance to their catholicity once the letters were collected and later canonized [italics mine]. Therefore steps were taken to minimize their particularity and heighten their catholicity and doctrinal uniformity.

It is doubtful, however, that this “hindrance” was only felt after collection and canonization.
John Miller will be our guide for a moment. The addition of the apostolic writings to the Hebrew Bible had in itself a specific intentionality. It was motivated in part by what has become common wisdom amongst scholars, i.e., that the canon was formed out of those books that had proved themselves over time to “to be the most useful in sustaining, informing, and guiding the Church in its worship, preaching and teaching...”

As John Miller states it, the Christian Bible was formed as a quick response to a theological challenge. In the third and fourth centuries the gentile Church began to publish the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in a specific order and combined them into one Bible together with a selection of apostolic writings to form the prototypes of our modern Bible, producing the Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Alexandrinus as the chief surviving examples. As Miller explains, before this era the Hebrew Bible was taken for granted as a common source of revelation for Judaism and Jewish Christianity. The issue that divided them was the question of the fulfillment of scripture in Christ. With the Marcionite challenge in the third and fourth centuries, this situation came to an abrupt end. The question now became whether Judaism and Christianity had anything to do with each other at all. It was only after Marcion had published his canon-codex of the New Testament that Church leaders responded by creating their own counter-canon.

Marcion’s position was simple and clear. Amongst all the apostles, it was only Paul who stood out as a faithful witness of the evangelical truth. All other apostles, in particular Paul’s opponents in Galatia and Rome, had been false apostles, because of their loyalty to the law and the prophets. The Church now took over Marcion’s collection, comprising Luke and the Pauline letters, but placed it in a different context. Luke was now surrounded by Mark and John, and the Pauline letters were surrounded by the letters of James, John and Jude before them, and Hebrews, Timothy, Titus, and Revelation after them. The Church had recontextualized Marcion’s letter-collection.

Miller explains the rearrangement of the Pauline letters as follows. Romans is taken up as the first letter, which placed Paul’s quite modest statement that the gospel “was promised long ago through the prophets in the holy scripture” (Rom. 1:1) at the opening of the collection. The letters that were added to the collection view Jesus as someone who was preceded by others, emphasizing the chain of tradition that linked the new to the old covenant (cf. Heb. 1:1). The opening four gospels, together, in contrast to Marcion’s Lukan gospel by itself, show Paul to be just one apostle in a missionary movement addressed to the whole world. In the oldest codices, Paul’s letters are preceded by Jewish-Christian letters, implying that James and Peter are just as important as Paul. By putting 2 Peter before Paul’s letters, the statement that Paul’s letters can be misconstrued and are difficult to read serves as warning beforehand. The whole was added to the Old Testament and closed with Revelation, implying again that Paul’s mission was just part of a larger narrative. Finally, all of this together meant that Paul had become just one of the perspectives within the apostolic tradition and no longer the single truth that Marcion had made him out to be. In a way, the order of the books in the canon now reflected the pre-Marcionite understanding of Paul’s relative role.

Marcion’s insistence on the shorter canon was of course theologically motivated by the antithesis between law and gospel that made him state that the Old Testament had a different God than did the writings of Paul and Luke. In opposition to that, when the 4th-century codices opened the New Testament canon with Matthew, the relevance of the law was again being stressed, owing to the far more positive statements concerning the law in Matthew 5. For our purposes this is far from irrelevant. It means that the anti-Marcionist intention behind the canon produced a Bible that was meant to contextualize and relativize Paul’s position, including his ethical position. It also meant that putting the letter of James before the Pauline letters, and the gospel of Matthew before that of Luke, intended to stress not merely a narrative continuity, and it was seen to be providing a chronological framework not for the age of
the books, but for the seniority of the witnesses. The concept of contemporaneity with Christ might have had a hand in this. The older strata in the New Testament were not simply abolished by the newer in the sense of a gradual unfolding of the gospel, with Paul, in the center, determining the meaning of the gospels in hindsight and laying the foundation for the practical application of the pastoral letters and the historical perspective of the Revelation of John. Through this narrative framework the unity and catholicity of all the apostolic writings could be maintained, and the order of books provided some suggestion that any interpretation of its parts needed to take account of all. In the New Testament the apostolic witness was measured by its faultlessness to Jesus' teachings, not its closeness to Jesus in time, the gospels therefore became more authoritative than the letters both in a doctrinal and a hermeneutic sense.

But the recontextualization was in a way undone. Beker describes the reasoning behind the process of making Paul more “catholic” as follows:

There is evidence that when 1 Corinthians headed the list of the Pauline collection, the superscription was enlarged in a catholic sense (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2, “together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours”). Because in all probability (cf. Tertullian and the Muratorian Canon) Corinthians opened the original list of the Pauline letters and Romans closed it, Rom. 16:25-27 functioned as the ending of the total collection. Its peculiar style, terminology, and general tone point to a non-Pauline hand; it most certainly displaced Rom. 16:24 when the letters were collected. On the basis of evidence of the early use of Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians, Nils Alstrup Dahl correctly surmises that even before the “official” collection of the Pauline letters, individual letters circulated in the Churches. In all these cases, geographical particularity was omitted for catholic reasons. This would explain, according to Dahl, the omission of Rome in Rom. 1:7 and 15, the omission of a geographic reference in Eph 1:1-2 (which Dahl considers to be a Pauline letter), and the catholic address of 1 Cor. 1:1. Moreover, 2 Thessalonians may have circulated as well without geographic address. (Poly-carp points to a Philippian address [Pol. Phil. 11.3; cf. 3.2].)

Beker’s argument points to an early attempt, even before and outside Marcionite circles, to make Paul into the deciding authority within the apostolic witness. Important for our purposes is Beker’s statement that the opening verse of 1 Cor. was read as an indirect affirmation of the authority of the whole of Paul’s letters for the whole of the Church. Paul’s contextual ethics thereby became a general code, even while it was obvious that it was not couched in the literary form one would expect. Dibelius’s contention that Paul had used older parenetical material can be seen as a corollary of that, since now the authority of Paul as collector and "tradent" of that collection is even more “general” than is suggested by the opening words of 1 Cor. Paul’s ethical authority would then rest on the prior acceptance of a common and older tradition, which was catholic in its own nature, and not on specific Pauline ethics being made universally valid for the Church by Paul’s personal apostolate. To move away from Dibelius here, as well as from the implications of this reading of 1 Cor. 1, implies recontextualizing Paul’s paraenesis and providing a fresh perspective on the issue of his authority.

A secondary observation is important for our purposes as well. If we “have” the letter to the Romans or Galatians only as already interpreted in their canonical context, then what does this mean for our present exegesis? This implies, according to Stowers, that there never was an “original” letter as far as the Church was concerned. The Church began to read Paul from the assumption that his teachings were not embedded in a specific situation, were doctrinal in nature, and had final authority over everything else, and precisely for that reason she excised from her collection of letters those elements that gave the letter an empirical shape. The collection of letters therefore became a literary genre that substantially reshaped the framework within which one ought to read such a letter. So, in effect, the Paulinism that preceded the
canonization of Paul must already have been working toward presenting the apostle as the final authority in the doctrinal issues that became important from the end of the first century. The anti-Marcionite canonization helped counterbalance this Paulinist movement only in part because it shared basic assumptions with Marcion about the catholic and doctrinal nature of the Pauline corpus.

Beker continues his treatment of the fate of the Pauline corpus with the era of canonization. We will quote the relevant passage in full here:

The particularity of the Pauline letters was diffused more decisively by the formation of the New Testament canon. The "ecumenical" Paul of Acts—who preaches the same message to a variety of Churches and who, as a supreme witness for Christ, faithfully adheres to the one Christian kerygma as authorized by the Jerusalem Church—was placed before the historical Paul and his collected letters. This placement actually functions as a hermeneutic key to the understanding of the Pauline letters, because the one ecumenical Paul speaks supposedly in them all with the same message. Second Peter 3:14-16, although acknowledging the difficulty of interpreting the Pauline letters, testifies that Paul proclaims the same catholic message, "speaking of this [the forbearance of our Lord] as he does in all his letters."

When the "Catholic Epistles" were placed in the canon after the Pauline letters, they suggested not only the "catholicity" of the Pauline letters but also the idea that the apostle Paul was one harmonious catholic voice among the unanimous voices of all the apostles. At the time of the canonization of the Pauline letters then, both their particularity and the specificity of Paul's gospel were felt to be a problem. Because the "apostolic" witness of the canon claimed universal relevance, Paul must have addressed himself to "all Christian Churches," just as such a universal address was ascribed to the so-called Catholic Epistles. After all, canonicity meant catholicity. The problem with "the apostolos" of the canon was not the plurality of the gospels but the particularity of the letters. Indeed, the plurality of the gospels in the canon was acutely felt, as the superscriptions reveal (e.g., the gospel according to Matthew) and to which the longevity of the Diatessaron in the Syrian Church testifies. How could the gospel be one and yet be present in four different forms? How could the "apostolic" witness be applicable to the universal Church if Paul had simply written to specific Churches about specific problems? Plurality and particularity are part of the same problem: How can the universality and the unity of the gospel be maintained in the face of them? Irenaeus argued for the universality of the gospel by speculating on the number four as a universal number. Just as the number four functioned as the universal number for Irenaeus, so did the number seven for the Pauline Epistles, as the Muratorian Canon discloses: in catholica habentur (1.69). And so Hebrews was finally conjoined to the Pauline letters to create a Pauline canon of 2 X 7.

The Catholic Church then solved the issue of particularity by diffusing the occasional character of the letters, that is, by positing their universal "catholic" relevance. This in effect negated the problem of the particularity of the letters and allowed a general consensus of apostolic doctrine to overshadow not only the contingent character of the gospel within the Pauline letters but also the specificity of the Pauline gospel among the other books of the New Testament.

The multiplicity of views within the New Testament can no longer be seen either as an obstacle for Christian theology or as a source of delight for industrious historians. Revelation in the New Testament does not come in a neat package of logical and systematic discourse. It comes to us in the shape of a recorded dialogue in which we are invited to join, not one that forces us to be mere recipients. The contingent character of the Pauline letters is directly important for historic exegesis. It does not preclude the use of these letters as authoritative for the modern Church, but it does imply indirectly that that authority functions in a dialogue, because it has never existed outside of a dialogue with rival positions within the Church. The primary authority attributed to Paul is not a timeless given for the Church, but a particular statement by the Church, defining herself in specific historical circumstances. In the era of canonization, the urgent need to find a common source for doctrinal definition presented itself
as the basic premise on which the collection of Paul’s letters was formed in the first place and then inserted into the order of books. If both the internal evidence of the New Testament and the canon history show us how that dialogue was the producing factor of the Bible as we have it, we can no longer pretend to be recipients of a closed doctrinal or ethical system, we can also no longer ignore our creative responsibility for discernment.

If this is true, of course, then the kind of “hindrance” that the traditional exegesis has experienced with Romans and Galatians can be addressed in two ways. Along the first route, we try to understand again what the historical circumstances were in which these letters originated. And that again we can do either by reconstructing those historical elements (audience, occasion, simultaneous developments) from the outside, as it were, using both our increased knowledge and informed hypotheses concerning the continuity between 3rd-century Judaism (Mishnah Judaism) and 1st-century Pharisaism, or by reconstructing the audience of Paul’s letters with the aid of the internal evidence of the text, i.e., we assume that the intended audience is more important than the empirical audience as “we” see it. We then reconstruct the meaning of Paul’s letters as if the Pauline corpus were a single entity that could be interpreted on its own without reference to the rest of the New Testament. This is of course necessary toward a description of the content of Paul’s letters. Only those relationships that are present in the text themselves can be used for understanding the text as it is. But we are seeking the normative contents of the New Testament as ethicists. That means that we must take Paul’s authority as apostle of Christ into account, which implies a concurrent reading of the available evidence about Jesus and using the whole of the New Testament canon as the “legal” context of Paul’s writings. That brings us to a second possible approach, which we will follow here. Along this second route, we may take the process that led from the empirical letter to the letters as doctrinal genre as providing us with a necessary hermeneutic key for doctrinal exegesis. We then deny validity to the image of Paul as it has emerged since the 2nd century, as well as transcend the exegetical image of Paul’s letters taken on their own, and try to work within the canon-history perspective that we have indicated with reference to the work of John Miller.

That has profound consequences. Paul’s authority as an apostle is then made relative (1) by the insight Beker provided into the Church’s tendency to move away from the contextual and pastoral Paul of the 1st century to the teacher of doctrine of the 2nd century, which gives us our exegetical clue, and (2) by the insight Miller provided into the intentionality behind the canonization of Paul in the first place, which is the cornerstone of the way we read Paul’s ethics. The intention behind the anti-Marcionite canon that makes Luke relative within the fourfold gospel and makes the Pauline corpus relative within the perspectives of James, Peter, and John, is then our most basic guideline. Only then can we prevent falling into the 16th-century temptation of neo-Marcionism, which was to reinstitute Paul as the champion of grace over against law, of evangelical freedom against Jewish obedience, etc., and only then can we avoid using Paul as the basic paradigm of New Testament hermeneutics.

The internal evidence of Paul’s letters (Beker) and canon history (Miller) not only provide us with the basis for accepting the authority of Paul’s letters, but instigate a hermeneutic of dialogue that does not submit to Paulinism, but listens to other voices as well. The position obtained thereby cannot pretend to be new. It is in fact nothing but the kind of hermeneutical situation that is prescribed in the gospel of Matthew. We cannot go into the entire context of the verse, but there is one aspect that needs lifting out at the moment. In Matthew 18:18 we read: I tell you (plural) truly, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. There are two meanings of “binding and loosing” to consider here. The one is directly connected to the context, where we find a description of the way to deal with brothers or sister who have sinned, Church discipline, in short. Binding then means withdrawing fellowship, and loosing means forgiveness. But the
most obvious meaning is derived from the Aramaic equivalent, which is used to denote the outcome of Rabbinic consultations on matters of law. Binding then means to declare a rule valid, loosing means to declare an inference from the law as invalid or not applicable. Binding and loosing are directed toward a situation in which a law might apply, so we can use the word discernment in this technical sense to describe the whole process. The result of discernment is a halakah as an application of a general law to a specific (type of) situation, i.e., a rule that defines a way of life. And through the context of forgiveness and exclusion we might add: the rule also defines those who are covered by it and the community that follows it.

In such discernment, a knowledge of what is right and wrong is presupposed, as is the source of that knowledge: the Torah, not simply the whole of scripture, but a part of it. Halakah also functions as a jurisprudence, a tradition of decisions that are passed along to later generations and form the background of a specific community that is bound by them. The objective of this binding and loosing is obviously forgiveness, i.e., the restoration of relationships that have been disturbed by sin and hurt.

From this perspective, not only the continuing authority of the Torah can be surmised, which we will deal with in discussing Matthew, but also a specific status of scripture. The status that Matthew was given as part of the New Testament canon is incongruent with the status Matthew ascribes to scripture as such. The Torah functions in Matthew 18 as the constitution of the community, and that entire community has the right and duty to apply its precepts to resolve matters of sin and hurt, i.e., to dispense judgment on sin in order to provide restoration and forgiveness. Because its goal is forgiveness and restoration, it is obvious that such a community, conditioned by the fact that it is assembled in the name of Christ, implying His presence both as the ultimate authority and the hermeneutical key for discernment, is as such the locus of this ethical discernment. The forming of halakah, which Judaism relegated to the rabbis as an intellectual task and to the people to accept or ignore, and thereby shaping it in practice, has now been given as a conscious task to the entire community assembled under the conditions mentioned and aspiring to the goal indicated. If Matthew, who belongs to the canon, defines what authoritative scripture can be as Torah, it thereby implicitly defines its own status with regard to ethics as being part of the “inspired” discernment of the Church.

This passage, then, gives us a clear view on what scriptural authority may and may not be. Certainly Matthew’s Jesus affirms the eternal validity of the law, as we have seen. Jesus’ interpretation not only radicalizes the law, but it also radicalizes the processes of its application. The completion of the law that is the core essence of Jesus’ fulfillment of it also comprises this change in the relationship between the Torah as constitution and the people of God who are governed by it. The development of the status of Paul’s letters, from apostolic missionary to canonical authority, brought with it a decisive shift in hermeneutical framework. Having been placed into a canonical narrative framework in opposition to Marcion, it gained inspired authority and doctrinal status. After that, to a degree Paulinism was restored, and the final sequence of letters, placing Romans behind Acts, and adding James and others at the back of the collection, made Paul into the primary apostle again, in a historical framework in which Paul could be seen as the doctrinal center. All of this tended to strengthen doctrinal interest in Paul at the detriment of his ethical teachings, and it certainly changed the ecclesiological setting in which Matthew, and to an extent Acts, had placed apostolic authority, and made it into an equivalent of imperial power. To understand Paul in an ethical setting without destroying the apostolicity of his writings must therefore mean: to reconstruct the original dialogue within the Church as the background of Paul’s writings, and to view the different voices in the New Testament not as a hindrance to unity but as its basic mode. The canonicity of the letters provides us after all with an ambiguous concept: doctrinal authority with regard to and dependent upon the present situation of the Church, and an inspired status only as secondary commentary in the form of spirit-guided discernment on the absolute source of revelation: the
§ 20. Outline of the argument of Galatians

We found in the letter of James that a part of Christianity had no reservations about the validity of the Torah and used it as a standard for Christian ethics. The letter obviously opposes the notion that, for Christians at least, the law has been abrogated. If we accept an early date for the letter, it must have been written in close proximity to the letter of Galatians, both around A.D. 50. But there seems to be quite a gap between these two apostolic messages! Even if we come to the conclusion that James is a late addition to the corpus of New Testament literature, we still have to accept that there was an intention behind the canon to provide a counterweight to Paulinism by its addition. Again, canon history provides us with a clue as to how the letter should be approached. If that is so, its anti-Paulinist intention must assume even greater importance, because that was part of the reason for its inclusion. We must turn now to the other end of the scale and discuss the letter of Paul that seems to ground the notion of the complete rejection of the law. In this paragraph we will provide a general overview of the letter, which we will later discuss in as much detail as is necessary for our purposes.

From the beginning, Paul stresses in this letter that his gospel was not a human interpretation, but was based on a revelation of Jesus Christ as if "apostolate and gospel [were] interlocking realities" (Gal. 1:12). The experience of his conversion, or rather the experience of his commissioning, is vital to the understanding of this status of the gospel. It also implies that the authorities that his opponents in Galatia are referring to were not the source of his message (1:17). Still, in all respects Paul is like a true apostle, as is demonstrated by his success (1:23, 24) and by the analogies between his experience and those of the other apostles (1:18, the hint at a three year period of being instructed by Christ). The historical situation of the letter is of great importance to an understanding of its doctrinal intent, as has been stressed by Dunn and others. We must first reconstruct the audience Paul had in mind and the problem he was trying to address.

Beker reconstructed the argument of Paul’s opponents as follows:

[It] runs along the following lines: You Galatians were gentiles when, through the gospel which Paul preached, you turned to Christ. This turning away from idols and the "elemental spirits of the universe" (Gal. 4:3, 9) is an important first step. It is like the step gentiles take when they turn from idols to the God of Israel and attach themselves as semi-proselytes or God-fearers to the synagogue. However, do not mistake the first step for the end of the road (Gal. 3:3). Paul misled you when he told you that your new status as sons of God in Christ depends on faith alone.

If that is what Paul had said, it was misleading indeed. As we have seen in the letter of James, for earliest Christianity, and in keeping with the gospel of Matthew, e.g., it was taken for granted that obedience to God in the eschatological age did not mean a change in the contents of that obedience. I.e., the Torah remained in full force. It merely meant using the Torah in a different perspective, with an understanding of the nature of the final days, when gentiles and Jews both would share in the gift of the Spirit and experience the new Covenant of Jeremiah 31.

That is an opportunistic misconstruction of the gospel and short-circuits its full implications. You realize—of course—that our Christ was the Messiah promised to the people of Israel, the true sons of Abraham. Jesus Christ is indeed the messianic fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, and therefore the promise pertains to those who belong to the people of Israel. It does not mean that gentiles are excluded from the promise: They can participate in the full blessings promised to Abraham if they join the people of the promise. When Paul opposes the Torah and Christ, he is not only wrong but also opportunistic, because he wants to make it
religiously and sociologically easy for gentiles to become Christians in order to enhance his apostolic grandeur. 193

Apart from the accusations against Paul and the distrust of his motives, the portrayal of Paul opposing Christ and Torah seems to be right, if it means that the boundaries the Torah had set to separate Jewish existence from the pagan world were abolished by Paul for the gentile believers in Christ. This would imply also that Paul’s opponents in Galatia were not following James in his decision to allow the gentiles to remain as they are. Or, if they were, their argument against Paul would have to be reconstructed differently. Perhaps they had been saying that the gentiles, including Peter, had not lived according to the Noachian set of rules that was agreed upon in Antioch. As could have been the case in many such conflicts, Paul would then be overstating his opponent’s argument to bring out a major principle more forcefully. If that is so, we have the peculiar situation that Paul, who, according to Acts 15, had agreed, or had at least been present when an agreement was reached about the Noachian law, would have opposed that same element in the preaching of his Jewish-Christian opponents in Galatia, because it became connected to an emphasis on the possibility that gentiles could accept circumcision and go beyond the limitations of the Noachian status. If he was going to prevent circumcision’s becoming a stumbling block for gentile conversion, he had to oppose the Jewish-Christian gospel where it stretched the limits of the Antioch agreement, and perhaps he even passively accepted the wish of Noachians to convert fully to Judaism.

It is simply false that gentiles can remain participants in pagan society without the “yoke of the Torah.” The Torah and Christ cohere, because it is only within the realm of the Torah that the promise is fulfilled in Christ. To be sure, the observance of the Torah does not mean the observance of all its statutes and ordinances (cf. “the whole law”: Gal. 5:3, 14; 6:13). Although Jesus Christ, the Messiah, acknowledged their validity, they have been fulfilled by him in his death for us. Nevertheless, “Torah-keeping” means the obligation to become a member of the Jewish people and therefore circumcision marks your entrance into the line of salvation-history that started with Abraham and finds its fulfillment in Christ. The Torah then, has primarily salvation-historical significance; it assures your participation in Christ by placing you in the correct salvation-historical scheme. 194

As for this latter issue: it seems obvious that Paul understood his opponents to see the Torah as part of salvation history. But did they? Is it not more obvious that they considered the Torah to be part of the blessings of the new age for Jew and non-Jew alike? In the letter of James, the Torah is never mentioned as a source of redemption, but obedience to it is still required as the self-evident necessity of life in faithful obedience to Christ’s rule. Part of Beker’s description of Paul’s opponents rests on the assumption that every emphasis Paul made is a precise counter-measure against an exaggeration or distortion on their part. Is it possible that Paul deliberately misrepresented his opponent’s viewpoint? We can only guess, of course, but we cannot rule out that Paul’s opponents were not demanding circumcision as a prerequisite for salvation, but were merely offering that possibility to non-Jewish converts who already had accepted the Noachide law. They might have argued along the lines Beker gives here in setting up full Jewishness as a completed conversion. But on the basis of Torah and their understanding of the gospel, they might have argued that the non-Jewish Christians could be part of the Church by accepting the Noachian Code for themselves, which would also have settled the issue of table communion between the two groups. To these Jewish Christians, therefore, the Noachian Code was still the minimum requirement, to which circumcision and entrance into Israel was a good follow-up. To Paul, however, it seemed to have been the maximum, and going beyond it was highly dangerous.

Paul’s gospel was not only based upon a revelatory and personal experience of conversion, but it was also in its contents a new revelation (2:2). It involved the idea that gentiles who converted would not have to, or indeed should not, be circumcised; in other words, that the
gospel could reach the gentiles without their having to become Jews. Those who maintained that gentiles should be circumcised are called “false brethren” from the start (2:4). Since Titus was not forced to be circumcised when Paul was in Jerusalem, apparently all agreed on this. But the issue went beyond circumcision alone. In Antioch the issue deepened into the question of under what conditions table fellowship could exist between Jewish Christians and believers from the nations. Apparently Peter had been eating with the gentiles without using any of the special provisions that 1st-century Judaism would use in such a case, with the probable exception of pagan idolatrous rites. (On the arrival of emissaries from Jerusalem who are identified as disciples of James, Peter withdraws from these meals. Paul sees in this the implication that gentiles should follow Jewish law in this respect, and if they do not, Jewish Christians would have to withdraw from the communal meals.

To Paul, this meant that justification still would have had something to do with specific commandments under the principle of law, and he interprets these as in contradiction to the gospel of Christ (2:16). The issue of the conditions of communion between Christians of Jewish and pagan descent was therefore seen as a practical test case of the reality of the gospel. The concept of justification, of being righteous, defines also to which community you belong. If justification is partly determined by law, then circumcision and dietary laws define the boundary between the just and the impious. If Christ is the measure, then such “works of the law” are no longer in effect. Then Jews and gentiles really have become one people, one Body of Christ.

This historic occasion and its immediate consequences for the issue of table fellowship now gives rise to a prolonged argument about the relevance of the law, now that Christ has come. Paul states as his major principle that the law actually condemned me to death, and having died, I am resurrected with Christ so that he lives in me. All therefore is based upon grace, and the law can have no say in determining what righteousness is. A second argument opens chapter 3. If the Galatians already experienced the fruits of the new era through the infusion of the Holy Spirit, they should remember that the life in the Spirit they had been given was not earned by any kind of obedience to commandments of any sort. Circumcision does not grant the Spirit. Furthermore, the Torah states exactly the same principle when it states that Abraham was justified through his faith, and this was connected with the promise to bless all the nations. So Abrahamic faith was received by the gentiles through Christ, who sets them free from the law.

And yet another argument is brought forward: the law demands obedience and grants life on condition of that obedience. Yet nobody can say he is justified on the basis of law, we are cursed because we did not obey, and besides, the prophet Habakkuk states clearly that the “just will live by faith” (2:4). How can we therefore become free from the curse of the law, and on what is this faith based? The link is in the fact that Christ, who is the object of our faith, became cursed under the law. But He was resurrected as a sign of God’s approval of His life, an argument which is not here, but can be adduced from Rom. 1:4. And this life of Christ beyond the cross is, through the Spirit, a reality within me (2:20). So by our participating in the event of Christ, the curse is lifted and the blessing of Abraham is bestowed upon gentiles.

This raises questions about the function of the law. First of all, Paul defends the idea that the promise to Abraham was given before the law and was not annulled through the giving of the law. So why was the law given? It was intended to prepare for the coming of Christ by making clear that man had transgressed it. By showing that all men are under sin, the law showed the necessity of redemption on the basis of faith. The coming of the reality of faith annulled this function of the law (3:25).

This also shows that man’s status is changed from being enslaved under law to being freed in Christ; we are sons and heirs to the promise. To try to remain obedient to the law while in this new condition is a paradox. The law makes it clear that the reality of being under the law
is expressed in the birth of Isaac: born from the free woman Sarah, out of God’s power and promise. By reducing the Torah to the institution of law, Israel has in fact changed God’s intention, as if it were not Isaac, but Ishmael, and not Sarah, but Hagar who is the real metaphor of the covenant of the promise. This view of the law as demanding slave-like obedience and as defining the status of men by circumcision and works is therefore actually a distortion of its intention and function. If we as believers accept the law after Christ has come with the intention of adding to the righteousness of God revealed through it and made effective through the Spirit, we in fact remove ourselves from the sphere of grace (Gal. 5:4). We then pledge allegiance to an institution that is proven to be without efficacy. Righteousness, given by God, lies in a faith that works through love.

Such a life is not without ethics. We are to serve each other through love, for in that unselfish service to others the demand of the law is actually fulfilled. A life in the Spirit will produce a behavior that is in harmony with the kingdom of God. The law cannot add to but only detract from the reality of such a life (5:18, 23). So when read like this, we can conclude that, to Paul, the “ethics” of Christianity had become decisively different from the Jewish matrix out of which it originated. Salvation in Christ meant (1) the abolition of the boundary markers between Jew and gentile, (2) the abrogation of the demands of the law as such, and (3) the institution in its place of the presence and indwelling of the Spirit that grasps the believer from within and brings forth a fruit of salvation. The latter is then better expressed in Stoicist lists of virtues and proper behavior than in citing the commandments from Torah. Let us now look into the letter with more attention to detail to see what all of this means.

§ 21. The Antioch incident

Paul’s letter to the Galatians must then be the starting point of our inquiry into the relationship between justification and sanctification. In this letter, written at the latest around 54-55 to Christian assemblies in Galatia (the area to the south of Ankara in present Turkey), Paul mentions justification seven times: once in opposition to justification by works of the law (1:16), three times in opposition to righteousness under the law (2:21; 3:11-12; 3:24-25), and once in a reference to future redemption (5:5). The letter has been considered a “charter of freedom” (C. Kruse), as a description of the Spirit’s work beyond any law (Zuurmond), “one of the most important religious documents of mankind” (D. H. Betz) that “helped shape the character and self-perception of early Christianity, both in terms of its fundamental principles and in relation to the Jewish matrix from which Christianity emerged” (Dunn). Nowhere else is the connection between justification and the role of (a different) ethics so clearly stated as here. Nevertheless, the letter presents us with major difficulties. The exact nature of the “Antioch Incident” that plays a major role in the introduction of the letter is difficult to assess, yet its meaning is of the utmost importance. It not only shows to what historical situation the doctrine was related, a situation that provides part of its necessity and logic, but it also shows that Paul’s solutions represented at that time only a minority view in the early Church; one that very rapidly, however, became the dominant one.

It is not unusual for Paul to take his incentive to write from a specific “pastoral” and historical situation; in fact, as Beker shows, Paul’s thinking is highly contextual, even in letters that have been traditionally portrayed as doctrinal. This is certainly the case in Galatians. Apparently the newly founded Galatian congregations had received visitors from Palestinian congregations, maybe even from James’s Jerusalem Church, or perhaps from gentile Christian missionaries who wanted to stay closer to Palestinian Christianity. If they were sent by James, that in itself cannot have been a rare occurrence because there is ample evidence of a large Jewish population there. According to the terms of the agreement in Jerusalem, Paul
would have a free hand in his mission to the gentiles, without interference from the Jerusalem Church. This leaves us with the question of who these “Judaizers” were that tried to influence the Galatian Churches. Whoever they were, it is obvious what they tried to do in Paul’s estimate: they wanted to convince the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law to complete their conversion to Christ. In order to convince the Galatians, they even spoke disparagingly about Paul’s status as apostle and questioned his authority and sincerity. So Paul had to defend himself against charges that his apostolate was of men, i.e., false (1:1-2:14), against the opinion that circumcision and keeping the law were necessary for Christians of gentile origin (2:15-5:12), a matter that takes up the bulk of the letter, and to speak out in favor of Christian freedom as a way of life in the Spirit that went beyond compliance with the law but could still be considered a way of obedience (5:13-6:18).

The historical circumstances of the Antioch incident are now skillfully used by Paul, perhaps to set it up as an analogy with the situation the Galatians were in, but primarily to defend his own authority. The Galatian Churches had been established by Paul’s preaching (1:8), but they were hearing a different interpretation of the gospel. So the issue of Paul’s authority had to be raised. Paul insists that they were hearing an “other,” a twisted, and even a “deviating” (2x) gospel. The gospel he had brought to them was not an interpretation of a tradition he had received but a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:12). Paul boasts that after his encounter with a risen Christ on his way to Damascus, he had no contact with the apostles in Jerusalem but went to Damascus by way of Arabia, where he spent an approximate three years in preparation for his mission. These three years in Arabia with a risen Lord apparently are meant to outweigh the unmentioned three years the apostles in Jerusalem had spent with Christ on earth. So full weight is given to his apostolic authority in presenting the correct gospel to them.

Here we encounter our first problem, and we need to go into this in order to appreciate the specific character of this letter and the weight we ought to give to its doctrinal contents. If we take the account of Luke in Acts to be more trustworthy in a historic sense, all of this must be a deliberate exaggeration on Paul’s part, since verses 3 and 8 of Acts 9 inform us differently. Here it is stated that Paul saw Christ near Damascus and, being blinded for three days as a result, he was brought by his companions to Damascus without delay. Acts 9:19b intends us to marvel at the power of the Spirit that made Paul such an effective witness after having spent only a few days with Ananias and the other disciples in Damascus. That of course in itself raises doubt as to the nature of the account in Acts. It remains puzzling that Luke tried to set up Paul’s authority in this manner, while he contradicts the evidence of Paul’s own letter which by the time of his (Luke’s) writing had been around for some thirty years.

After what was again a relatively short period of time, Paul went to Jerusalem and with the help of Barnabas gained access to the circle of disciples there. Paul then returned to Tarsus, where he is later found by Barnabas and sent to Antioch for a year. So when Paul states that he went to Jerusalem after three years, this either contradicts Luke’s rendering of events in Acts or it is an apparent exaggeration by Paul to enhance the idea that his gospel was independent and based on private revelation only. However, Acts was written about 30 years after the letter to the Galatians, and the contents of the letter were probably known to Luke. Did Luke think his account of the Damascus Episode was in harmony with that of Paul in Galatians (cf. Acts 11:25, 26)? In general it can be maintained that, to Luke, the doctrine of justification was one of the most important teachings of Paul. Some have argued that this is the reason this doctrine is set in the context of Paul’s Antioch sermon in Acts 13:38ff. One of Luke’s intentions could have been to show the continuity between Jesus and Paul by putting Pauline doctrine into Jesus’ mouth.199 And this device again is an early element of the tendency to make Paul into the one and only apostle who spoke with divine authority about all issues that the Church faced. Luke therefore makes Paul’s gospel, independent of circumstance, the epit-
ome of Christ’s gospel in the fact that it reached Rome, supported by the Jerusalem apostles.

Having stated the divine origin and authority of his gospel, Paul goes on to show that the Jerusalem apostles accepted his apostolate and agreed with his mission to the gentiles. On the basis of a revelation (which may either refer to his going to Jerusalem or to the contents of his gospel), he explained his gospel to the gentiles. He approached the Jerusalem Congregation as a whole, and probably the Apostles separately. Paul then shows that the agreement was in full effect: Titus, born of a Greek father, did not need to have been circumcised as would someone under Jewish law and was not forced to become so, not even after “false brethren,” spies perhaps from the synagogue, or Pharisees who accepted Christianity, “slipped in” (RSV) to see to what degree the new messianic sect was abiding by the Mosaic law. In this instance pressure from the outside did not make the Church budge from its position. The point of the Titus-passage is obvious: someone who was not circumcised, though part of the new messianic movement and living in a Jewish environment, need not be circumcised at all, even when that failure to comply with Jewish law, for so it would have seemed to the Pharisaic party (Acts 15) or the Judaizers (Paul’s opponents in Galatia), and to the disciples of James (in Antioch, cf. Gal. 1), who most probably all held on to circumcision, brought difficulties along with it. Paul can thereby contend that he had never before preached circumcision, against his opponents’ apparent suggestions to the contrary. It would have made his life a lot easier if he had done so.

The Jerusalem Church, Paul asserts, accepted his mission to the gentiles in such a way that Paul alone bore responsibility for it. Problems that would arise in the congregations founded by his gospel would be his to deal with. His suggestion is that when these problems were in the area of circumcision, the Jerusalem Church, by not demanding circumcision for Titus, clearly showed that no enforcement of Jewish law was necessary for those in the jurisdiction of Paul’s apostolate. This led to a problem when non-Jews had been converted by missionaries from the Jerusalem Church or when Jews were converted by Paul’s mission, gentiles would be circumcised by James and expected to keep the commandments, whereas Jews, converted by Paul, would become de-Judaized. The status of Jewish-Christian proselytes and Christian Jews was therefore uncertain. Gentiles were being pushed into Israel, and Jews were being severed from their Jewish ties.

In the Antioch incident, the consequence of this separation of missionary fields becomes obvious when the two parties (Paul and James) meet. Peter came to Antioch and ate with the gentiles in some form of table fellowship. Apparently Peter dropped all Jewish restraints in order to do so, because Paul later refers to it with the term “lives as the nations” (2:14). That seems to exclude the possibility, mentioned by Tomson, that Peter conformed to an already established halakah that enabled Jews to eat with gentiles, even if the latter still practiced idolatrous rites. For if Peter had eaten with them on the basis of halakah, that would not have constituted a breach of his Jewish way of life, and the only thing remaining would have been a dispute with the party of James about the proper contents of the halakah. Tomson’s position would also need to presuppose that James’s party favored the most rigid interpretation of Jewish law, which seems improbable if we remember that, whatever their Jewish positions were, they were Christians and already acquainted with the notion of the gentiles entering the covenant. So Peter’s eating with the gentiles apparently occurred outside of Jewish halakah and in a situation in which his gentile hosts did nothing to alleviate the problems of idolatry and impurity that arose for a Jew in such a situation. As Tomson states: “...the libation ritual undoubtedly performed by his gentile host would not affect the Jewish wine he would be drinking.” That would be the case for the specific lenient halakah that prescribed the use of separate tables, the handling of the wine for the Jews by Jews only, and other measures of separation. It was of course no problem if the Jew was the host. But the libation ritual in itself must have remained a problem in all circumstances, especially if it occurred in the
setting of the Lord’s supper. As we are informed in 1 Cor. 11:17-43, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated most often in the context of an ordinary meal. So we must conclude that Peter did indeed drop all of his Jewish restraints and really “acted like the gentiles.” The consequence of that will be seen in the following.

When members of the party of James arrive in Antioch, Peter stops eating with gentiles. Paul states that Peter did this out of fear for the circumcised, i.e., the Christian Jews. Paul’s discontent with this act shines through forcefully in his statement that “he [Peter] did not walk straightforwardly according to the gospel.” This is a momentous statement! If Peter did indeed act completely according to gentile custom and disregarded the specific conditions of Jewish halakah for communion with gentiles, adopted by the Jerusalem council, this was the situation that Paul would refer to as “walking straightforwardly according to the gospel.” Paul’s objection is therefore not motivated by the decision to separate the missionary fields, but by the fact that the one gospel, as he saw it, should extend its freedom from the law to Jewish as well as gentile believers, including the restrictions of table fellowship. Peter’s non-compliance with a prescription of Jewish law that made a visible provision for communion between Jew and gentile, thereby in principle accepting their distinct identity, is set up as an example of Christian behavior for those out of the circumcision! In the same vein, Peter’s compliance with Jewish law after the men from James have entered the scene sends the message that circumcision and keeping the law are prerequisites for communion. That’s why Paul can interpret Peter’s action as his wanting to Judaize the gentiles, to make them submit to the Jewish way of life.

It is not clear, however, that this is what the emissaries of James really had in mind. After all, they did not force Titus to be circumcised, and the issue here is only that of table fellowship. If the host was a Jew, there was no problem of gentiles participating, so in Jerusalem there might have been no practical problem whatsoever. It is Paul who sees this consequence: if Christian Jews are going to abide by Jewish law and impose conditions on table fellowship with gentiles, this implies that gentiles should become Jews. What Paul had in mind was a Church without inner boundaries between Jews and gentiles, and the only way he thought he could reach it was by removing Jewish restrictions on fellowship with Christian gentiles. We do not think Paul’s mind was set against the halakah in itself, but against the practical implication of the halakah that a gentile Christian must still be considered to be impure according to the reasoning of Jewish law. To alleviate that, James had probably introduced the adoption of the Noachide code, giving gentile Christians the status of the ger toshav. It is not clear whether the resident alien was allowed to handle Jewish wine or was trusted enough to be left alone with the wine or prepare Jewish meals.

But how does this incident relate to the matter of forced circumcision for gentile believers? If it is only a matter of table fellowship, it serves as an illustration of the general attitude of Paul towards institutions in Judaism, and the prohibition of eating with gentiles is treated just like the institution of circumcision. And if it could be shown that Peter disregarded the prohibition in order to have fellowship with gentiles, then it is obvious that he would also have to accept that circumcision was not to be imposed on gentile believers. So it seems to us that Paul was extending his law-free gospel to include Jews. And by default, if Jews were no longer under the law, then gentiles need not submit to it either. So we must conclude that the Antioch incident showed that Peter had adapted to pagan customs that crossed the boundaries of Judaism, while it was James and his emissaries who kept the Jerusalem agreement in the sense that they maintained the validity of the Jewish law for Christian Jews, and so they expected Peter to conform to that principle as well. It is unclear whether James would have accepted the lenient view that allowed Jews and gentiles to eat together in specific circumstances that were already permitted by provisions of Jewish halakah. To Paul, however, Peter’s violation of Jewish law seemed unimportant, or rather, it motivated him to state what
must have been to him the common principle of Peter’s act of eating with gentiles outside of Jewish law and the ultimate consequence of Paul’s gospel. In the more recent literature very different pictures of this incident are given.

Tomson has argued that the Antioch incident showed a difference of opinion between Peter and Paul, on the one hand, and James, on the other, concerning a matter of Jewish law. Peter and Paul would side with those more lenient teachers in Israel who accepted that it was possible for Jews to eat and drink with gentiles. First of all, their eating together could not constitute a breach of purity laws because outside of Palestine no issue of general purity could emerge, seeing that all Jews outside of Israel were already ritually impure and had to submit to a cleansing ritual before they could enter the temple on their return. Secondly, there were ways to circumvent the prohibition of table fellowship with regard to idolatry and food laws. A Jew could drink his own wine at a meal served by his gentile host, even if the latter did perform a ritual libation to his pagan deity, if that wine was not handled by gentiles and was drunk at a separate table. One could serve kosher foods or refrain from serving foods forbidden to Jews. James would then be the one to argue the more restrictive view that all such common meals with a gentile host were forbidden on account of idolatry.

On the arrival of James’s emissaries, Peter would have felt their criticism and withdrawn from table fellowship. Notwithstanding the impressive display of knowledge and insight that Tomson presents us with, we are not fully convinced by his arguments. If he is right, Peter still could have been following an acceptable Jewish halakah in his meals with gentiles. But if that is the case, why would Paul have called his previous actions: living according to heathen ways? We would then need to know why Paul was dissatisfied with this halakah from Jerusalem that seems to be in full accordance with James’s position in the Jerusalem Apostles’ Conventicle. Tomson describes the issue like this:

The whole sentence is charged with rhetoric and functions as a power center of Paul’s argument against forced circumcision in Galatia. It does not describe Peter’s diet but the liberal attitude towards the gentile brethren in which he used to be at one with Paul, vis-à-vis Antioch but more so Galatia. At this point the representatives of James disagreed, and Paul seems to rhetorically adopt their speech, “live like a gentile.” The sentence may then be paraphrased: “Before, you agreed to live and eat as a Jew together with the gentiles, and although some call that ‘living like a gentile’, why do you now separate and wish to eat with them only if they become Jews?” This interpretation concurs with our analysis of Paul’s report on the Jerusalem agreement: the agreement was based on mutual trust in view of Paul’s law-free gospel to the gentiles and Peter’s law-abiding one for the Jews. The conclusion is that here Paul does not urge Peter to join him again in a non-Jewish way of life. On the contrary: he urges for a Jewish life which does not force gentiles to Judaize, in line with the agreement.

Tomson’s solution necessitates an explanation of the expression “live like a gentile” as without its plain force, and even inaccurate as to Peter’s real position. It would imply that Paul would use the language of the Pharisaic party (“though some call that”) to describe and even exaggerate Peter’s position. But there is no necessity to infer that from the text itself. The context might in general give us the opportunity to establish the force of an idiomatic expression, but in this case, it is the expression itself that must aid us in determining the context. To Paul, we might infer, the sharing of meals with gentiles, even under the more lax of Pharisaic provisions, constituted a step in the right direction. If Peter had already consented to eat with gentile Christians, surely he could take the next step of letting go of all forms of separation between Jews and gentiles.

Furthermore, Tomson’s approach changes the nature of the conflict in such a way that it be-
comes almost unintelligible in the light of the rest of the letter. The dispute is then not about being free from the law, but about conflicting ways of being true to the law, which is not in accordance with the main thrust of the letter. It is difficult to accept that the proposed rereading of the Antioch incident has the force to change the contents of chapters 3 to 5 on its own merits. The halakhic incident that Tomson reconstructed, that serves as the starting point of Paul’s analysis is in his treatment of it transformed into the actual topic of the letter, requiring us, on this insecure basis, to relativize other statements that refer on their own to an abolition of the law.

Let us first examine the issue itself again. If Peter was participating according to a Jewish halakah that made table fellowship possible but maintained the restrictions for Jews in a visible way, how could his action be taken to imply that all gentile believers should Judaize? In such a case his previous actions would have accorded with a strict observance of Jewish law, and James’s emissaries would have had to accept that. And why would James have objected to that, seeing that the reported agreement in Jerusalem was intended to make such table fellowship possible? Peter would then have been acting in conformity with James’s basic opinion that the difference between Jew and gentile could not be erased within the Church, though they might differ on the degree and means of their separation. If, on the contrary, he acted completely like his gentile hosts, with disregard for the Noachide conventions, and then afterwards acted completely as a Jew once more, this would indeed have been an affront to James’s emissaries and would have had the implication that Paul ascribes to it. The change in his attitude, then, has the force of a statement vis-a-vis the Christians of gentile origin. Finally, the insertion of the passage makes more sense if Peter’s attitude is similar, in Paul’s view, to that of the Judaizers who are his main opponents in the matter. After all, if even Peter was set free from the law and showed this by abandoning ritual and/or food purity, this case should make a stronger argument with a view to Paul’s later reasoning about the abrogation of the law as a principle of life than does a mere statement that James and Peter conflicted about a provision of the law.

James Dunn, who advocates the idea that the issue here is focused on “identity markers,” must also presuppose that Paul’s saying of Peter that he walked according to gentile ways reflects the viewpoint of the Jamesian party rather than his own. But it is far less complicated to see it, with Kruse, as a neutral description: first Peter accepted gentile customs, which implied fellowship beyond the law, and by retreating re-erected the boundaries that denied fellowship outside the provisions of the law. Furthermore, as G. Kruse has pointed out, Paul continues his statements about the law by speaking of “dying to the law,” which seems to indicate something more than a difference of opinion about its application (Kruse, 68). Dunn argues, on p.131 under (2), that:

Despite the protests of some, “to live like a gentile” need not mean a complete abandonment of the law. Once again we are probably confronted with factional language: “living like a gentile” was the accusation which one sect within Judaism would throw at another which denied or disputed its halakoth (as infix. 6.32-35 and Pss. Sol. 8.13). From the perspective of the men from James, the modest level of law-observance in the table fellowship at Antioch was tantamount to abandoning the law altogether; the Jewish believers at Antioch were already too far down the slippery slope to complete apostasy. To maintain table fellowship at a level governed, say, by the conventions later regularized in the “Noachide laws” (Gen. 9:3, 4), was quite inadequate for a child of Abraham, a member of the covenant people governed by the law of the covenant as distinct from the other nations.

“Need not mean” and “probably” are the key words here. Dunn wants to find a Jewish faction that insisted upon Judaizing the gentiles in this incident because the remainder of the let-
ter is directed against Judaizers, at least against those who favored circumcision for gentiles. But the incident in itself is not about circumcision, which would imply a clearcut issue of being in or out of Israel. It is about Peter’s “living like a gentile,” i.e., his giving up the relatively moderate distinctions between Jewish and gentile Christians that the Jerusalem Church expected to be maintained in deference to Paul, and then re-adopting them after James’s emissaries arrived.

That means that Peter must have gone beyond the apostolic agreement of Jerusalem, and James’ emissaries would have been right to oppose him, remember that the letter presupposes an agreement on this issue, at least with regard to the distinction of missionary fields, especially if it concerned the prohibition of libations and non-kosher foods that even the semiprofessors would have wanted to obey. So it must be concluded that Paul overstated the Antioch incident on purpose. To him, the relatively moderate demands of the Jamesians had implications that went beyond the letter of the agreement. To thwart what may have seemed in Paul’s eyes a growing reluctance to accept gentiles without circumcision, a reluctance perhaps furthered by growing opposition from the Jewish side, Paul comes to insist upon a gospel that departs completely from affirmation of Israel’s status as the people of God. So the function of the incident within the letter is to show Peter’s acceptance of the Pauline gospel of complete freedom of the law for both Jew and gentile, and the explanation of his attitude towards James as a matter of fear! So Paul’s message is clear: if the Galatians would accept circumcision, their only motivation would be fear, not the intent of the gospel.

Dunn has argued the case, in an article called “The Incident at Antioch” (1980), that the expression “live like a gentile” did not only mean: live without any observance of the law, but could also comprise relative laxity, e.g., in the shape of the Noachic lifestyle vs. the Sinaitic lifestyle. On the other hand, the expression “to live like a Jew” is also interpreted as a relative term: not to live according to a well-defined set of rules, but rather to be “more” observant as opposed to less observant.

But the issue cannot be settled in this manner: even if we would suppose that Paul did not accuse Peter of first having lived completely without law and now returning to the orthodox extreme; even if Paul merely meant to say that Peter had returned to a more Judaized way of life that made the breaking of communion with Antiochian gentiles necessary, the point is that Paul attacks Peter on the principle that the gospel makes the issue of obedience to law irrelevant, and he implies that any observance of principles of the law as a basis for making distinctions projects a message to the gentile Christians that they are not acceptable. The Jerusalem Conference, on the other hand, obviously accepts the application of Jewish law and enforces the acceptance of Noachic rules (forbidding idolatry of any sort as defined in Jewish doctrine), and thus it arrives at an intermediate position.

We do not know what the party of James was responding to and how they responded. But under the terms of Acts 15, taking that as a previous event, James would have been right if the Antioch gentile Christians were not keeping the Noachic commandments that were commanded them, and if the Jewish Christians there did nothing to change that situation. If gentile Christians were in the majority in Antioch, they might have celebrated with Peter the fact that they were freed even of the minor commandments that were applied to them as semiprofessors, and so they would fall under the minimum requirements of the Jerusalem Council. It is mainly because of the apparent disobedience to the Jerusalem decision that is described here that we have argued for the possibility that the letter to the Galatians predates the Jerusalem Council and provides a plausible cause for it to happen in the first place.

It seems clear that Peter’s response to James’s emissaries was prompted by the legitimacy of their claim that the manner in which he dined with gentiles constituted an act of idolatry which was in fact covered by the Noachic commandments. Peter’s fear of the circumcised is better explained by the presence of a real case for this allegation than merely his deviation
from a minority view within Pharisaic Rabbinism or a Pharisaic faction within the Church. It can be ruled out, though, that the issue was particularly that of the Lord’s Supper, and that in Antioch Jews and gentiles did not share a meal at all apart from that, because the issue of the purity of the wine and the presence of pagan ritual before its use would have become urgent in that case, since the Lord’s supper meant in effect “sharing one table.” The subterfuge of separate tables and separate wine was not enough in such a case. But if 1 Cor. 10:14-22 portrays Paul’s position accurately, he would undoubtedly have agreed with James, and he certainly would have considered any libation practice around the Lord’s Supper as idolatrous.

So our conclusion must be that Paul showed that Peter, in accordance with “the” gospel, i.e., Paul’s interpretation of it, had not insisted on keeping Jewish law in whatever modest form, including the shape it got in the Jerusalem Council’s decision, while eating with gentiles in Antioch. If he did not abide by the law even in that respect, why would the Galatians want to return to a law that they were not subject to before? Or to put the matter in Paul’s words: if Peter did not try to be justified by works of the law, why would the Galatians? But what does this expression mean?

§ 22. Justification by faith and not by works

The Antioch account turns smoothly into a homily on righteousness from ch. 1:14 onwards. The “we” might very well be Peter and Paul. Though they are Jews, and not sinners (idolaters) from out of the gentiles, they know that “a man is not justified by works of the law.” Now what does this statement mean in its context?

Traditionally the “works of the law” have been explained as the performance of the ritual and moral commandments that amass merit before God. If the scale was ultimately tipped in favor of good works, a person was acceptable before God in the final judgment and merited the life of the world to come. The common interpretation of “works,” therefore, is that they (1) are deeds of outward obedience intended to earn merit before God. As Luther explained it, God would be forced to respond with grace to a deed of merit, an opinion that he ascribes to the “Papists.” It has been recognized that Luther’s explanation identifies Paul’s opponents in the letter with his own Catholic contemporaries, though there is considerable doubt that Luther even represented Catholic doctrine faithfully.

After it had been made abundantly clear after WW II, that 1st-century Judaism could not be considered a religion that based salvation on works of the law in that sense, it became obvious that Paul had to be interpreted differently. The effort was made to interpret the works of the law as (2) those elements of the law that served as identity markers for Israel: circumcision, Sabbath, dietary rules. That would make it possible to hold that Paul was not against the law as a way of life for Christian Jews, but did not see it as a prerequisite of salvation to either Jew or gentile, which Judaism did not hold either. But we have seen, in the discussion of the Antioch incident, that what was at stake is not merely a difference of opinion between Peter and James on the application of the law, but the principle of law itself.

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So we are left with these two possibilities: either the phrase “works of the law” refers back to what was at stake in the Antioch incident in a narrow sense: table fellowship and the boundaries between Jews and gentiles, and then “works of the law” can mean those elements of the law that protect these boundaries (see 2 above). That interpretation follows from the contextual reading of the letter and from drawing heavily upon the Antioch incident to explain the motive for Paul’s discussion of the term. But it remains to be considered that although the incident exemplifies the issue and motivates its discussion, the doctrine cannot itself be restricted to the contextual usage. Yet it is not possible to ignore the context altogether and to state, with classical Reformed exegesis, that Paul intended to show the absolute rejection of
Jewish law (see 1 above). If the Antioch incident is about Peter’s wavering between being without law and being in conformity to the law, the issue here is the law itself, but still with emphasis on that element of the law that brought with it exclusion and strife. Without that emphasis, Paul’s position on the law implies that he misunderstood 1st-century Judaism as a whole. If Peter’s attitude is a consequence of a difference of opinion on Jewish halakah with James, works of the law are merely identity markers, and the connection between the incident and Paul’s doctrine on law, as outlined subsequently in the letter, is severed. How could we evade the dilemma of overstating either the independence of the doctrine or the context-related nature of the text? And do we need to drop the traditional approach to the antithesis between works and grace altogether?

This may be of fundamental importance to the question of Paul’s ethics. If that ethics is born from the pragmatic assumption that in Christ all boundaries between Jew and gentile have been removed, then the Torah is no longer the basic shape of obedience of the Church, since it was devised as a means of separating a people unto God from the world of the nations. That implies, ultimately, that Christian ethics becomes a pneumatic ethos that derives its formal nature from the principle of neighborly love, and its contents from the situation, the example of Christ, and some awareness of ethical values as in Stoicism. The eschatological background of the apostle Paul serves to explain the lack of interest in developing a more detailed ethical code. If, however, the law is abrogated only with respect to the boundary markers, then the rest of the law might still be a guide for the contents of ethical behavior, and obeying the commandments is still its basic form, though perhaps now transformed by the impact of the New Covenant, i.e., by the notion of a spirit-driven obedience. If the Torah is seen as primarily involved in this separation of Israel, the whole of the law must be abrogated; if the separation is just part of its contents, its principle remains in effect. So what does it mean that justification is not by works of the law? If justification is not through the separating mitzvoth, in distinction to other ethical rules, then justification by faith might refer to a life in obedience to Torah under the principle of faith, in this case as it is informed by Christ’s coming into this world and the eschatological effect of His coming. If it is not by mitzvoth as such, since it is assumed that all of them have a separating purpose, then the whole principle of law is abrogated. Which is it?

Let us turn to another element of this complex question. Can it be said that “works of the law” defines a specific way of obeying the law? Is it impossible for a man to live a life of strict obedience and holiness? And would the attempt to lead that life imply an “amassing” of merit to force God to acquit him? It is most often understood in that way. Paul’s Pharisaic background would mean that he was acquainted with the opinion that justification was “earned” by deeds of righteousness. However, Paul would then have learned from Christ that (1) it was impossible to attain perfect righteousness, since man’s heart was unable to achieve complete allegiance, and (2) that Christ had come to reveal a righteousness that consisted in the acquittal of all believers, above and beyond the requirements of the law. So “works of the law” was taken as an expression for the meritorious deeds by which the Pharisaic Jews tried to impress God and win righteousness on their own; a kind of outward obedience that merely strengthened or covered the inner rebellion of man against God. The opposition was between God’s free gift of righteousness in Christ and man’s striving for self-righteousness as a refined element of self-deceit and an expression of arrogance and pride. Later proof for that conviction was sought by Christian theologians going over the Rabbinic writings in search for claims of salvation through merit. By quoting these writings selectively with a method called proof-texting, and leaving out both the context and the related passages, the conclusion was drawn that Judaism taught salvation through merit and not by faith. We need to go into this matter now and will return to the above question later.

That the traditional view on the opposition between works and faith is quite resistant to new
insights can be illustrated from the relevant passage in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, where it states with regard to “ergon” (work):

“This gives us the Pauline understanding of the contrast between faith and works. The *erga nomou* which are at issue for Paul have become a means of self-righteousness for the Jews. Hence they are no longer an expression of the absolute requirement of God—the law is this for Paul in Gal. 5:3—but they spring from man’s arrogant striving after self-righteousness (emphasis mine).”

By no means, however, is it that self-evident that in the 1st century anybody, including Paul, would agree to describe Judaism (and we must also ask: which Judaism?) like this. The works of the law seems to refer to the law in its aspect of specific commanded acts, called *mizvoth* in Hebrew. As such they can be enumerated alongside the whole of Torah, prayer, and earthly occupation, as in bBer. 32b Bar: “For four things man needs constancy, and these are: the Torah, good works, prayer, and one’s worldly occupation.” To call this an “ethos of work” that Judaism preserved “in spite of everything” is highly problematic in our time, but it was quite persistent and natural when most theologians had only Strack-Billerbeck to teach them about Judaism. No effort is made to understand what such a phrase would mean, and to 4th-century Rabbinic Judaism at that

Now, let us take a close look at the context of this baraita (a Mishnah not present in R. Judah ha Nasi’s collection of the Mishnah) that Bertram quoted in his article on “works of the law.”

“Whence do we know this of Torah and good deeds? Because it says, Only be strong and very courageous to observe to do according to all the law: “be strong” in Torah, and “be courageous” in good deeds. Whence of prayer? Because it says, “Wait for the Lord, be strong and let thy heart take courage, yea, wait thou for the Lord.” Whence of worldly occupation? Because it says, Be of good courage and let us prove strong for our people.”

The context of this dictum, however, is exactly what Bertram thinks is missing in early Judaism and is dominant in Paul: the works of God that Paul was contrasting to the works of man. Let us examine this quote. As is appropriate in the tractate on prayer and blessings, the Gemara discusses the order of priority between prayer, fasting, charity, and the like, and inserts the baraita because it too is a statement on the order of priority. But still, the context remains the efficacy of God’s actions on which everything else is based, and that passage we will quote in full here:

“But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, [taking up the discussion of the relationship between prayer and God’s actions – RAV] and the Lord hath forgotten me. Is not “forsaken” the same as “forgotten”? Resh Lakish said: The community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, when a man takes a second wife after his first, he still remembers the deeds of the first. Thou hast both forsaken me and forgotten me! The Holy One, blessed be He, answered her: My daughter, twelve constellations have I created in the firmament, and for each constellation I have created thirty hosts, and for each host I have created thirty legions, and for each legion I have created thirty cohorts, and for each cohort I have created thirty maniples, and for each maniple I have created thirty camps, and to each camp I have attached three hundred and sixty-five thousands of myriads of stars, corresponding to the days of the solar year, and all of them I have created only for thy sake, and thou sayest, Thou hast forgotten me and forsaken me! Can a woman forsake her sucking child [“ullah”? Said the Holy One, blessed be He: Can I possibly forget the burnt-offerings [“olah] of rams and the firstborn of animals that thou didst offer to Me in the wilderness? She thereupon said: Sovereign of the Universe, since there is no forgetfulness before the Throne of Thy glory, perhaps Thou wilt not forget the sin of the Calf? He replied: “Yea, ‘these’ will be forgotten.”
Because God does not forget the earlier deeds of His people and because He is involved in the history of His people, He can forgive. In fact, all of the stars in the infinite universe were made exactly for the purpose of aiding Israel and to keep “track” of her deeds. And by “forgetting” the evils, Israel can have a renewed start after she lapses into sin. Prayer, forgiveness and sacrifices are thereby taken together as one expression of God’s sovereign grace extending to Israel within the boundaries of the covenant of God’s promises to her, not within the “identity-markers” that define Israel’s relationship to the other nations. And in that context of affirmation of God’s covenanted pardoning grace, the statement about the “good works” is made. Bertram, however, continues by giving us the Pauline doctrine as a whole:

In opposition to them we can only point to the act of God which creates faith in us. All thought of works retreats behind this, and can emerge again only within the community in relation to the working of the Spirit of God in the apostle and in believers, since it is God who works all in all (I C. 12:6). It thus comes about that the word ergon, already suspect in the Old Testament, acquires in Paul a completely negative sense whenever it is a matter of human achievement. For the work of man cannot stand before the exclusive operation of grace. If nevertheless there is reference to good works in the message of the whole of the New Testament, and this not merely after a human manner of speaking, it is in virtue of a return to the legitimate use of the term in revelation. It is true of fallen humanity that its works are evil. [And here the anthropological presupposition is inserted to make the point — RAV] But the time of salvation restores the situation as it was by creation. All man’s work is God’s work through man. Thus the erga tou nomou, the misunderstood and depreciated legal works of the old covenant, are confronted by the erga tou theou of the new covenant. Or rather by the one work of faith active in love (Gal. 5:6: John 6:29).

It may certainly be true that Pauline doctrine emphasizes this point; it may even be true that Judaism and Christianity differ on elements of this because in fact they stand in different covenants, but to state and imply that Paul’s adversary is the Rabbinic doctrine of good works that does not recognize the priority of God’s grace is flatly wrong.

In the first place it is wrong because it is anachronistic to identify the Talmudic Judaism of the 4th century that is responsible for this subtle contextual exegesis as Paul’s partner in dialogue. Having discarded the text as a direct historical source of understanding, however, we must acknowledge that it still may be a source of understanding a specific “pattern of religion,” as Sanders taught, but then the context as a whole, not only fragments thereof, needs to be taken into consideration. In the second place it is also short-sighted, since the above quotation shows abundantly in what context of “God’s work” the rabbis discussed this issue of “good works.” If on the other hand the quotation is meant to emphasize the meaning of the baraita alone, Bertram is presupposing or providing a context that would give a meaning to a text that produces a connection with his (Paul’s) issue. But the context provided is not to be found anywhere outside his own interpretation of Paul. That circularity can only be avoided by not immediately identifying such terms as “good works” with “works of the law” in Paul, as has been done, e.g., in Strack-Billerbeck’s collection of Rabbinic references and parallels in the New Testament from which Bertram is quoting. The use of Rabbinic Judaism, either to identify what Paul had in mind or to identify the opponent that Paul is fighting against, is doomed to failure if there is no historical or theological exegesis that explains the connection in a systematically coherent fashion.

There are more modern views on the phrase “works of the law,” which try do to justice to what we know of 1st-century Judaism. James Dunn, e.g., explained the concept like this:
The phrase *ta erga tou nomou* belongs to a complex of ideas in which the social function of the law is prominent. The law serves both to identify Israel as the people of the covenant and to mark them off as distinct from the (other) nations. "Works of the law" denote all that the law requires of the devout Jew, but precisely because it is the law as identity and boundary marker which is in view, the law as Israel's law focuses on these rites which express Jewish distinctiveness most clearly. The conclusion of the previous section is thus confirmed: "works of the law" refer not exclusively but particularly to those requirements which bring to sharp focus the distinctiveness of Israel's identity.

But this approach is also not without its problems. G. Kruse notes that this approach resolves some of the tensions that earlier exegetes like Sanders and Räsänen have pointed out between, e.g., the positive and negative statements about the law in Romans. It identifies the "works" of the law with the mitzvoth, but within the perspective of the social identity of Israel, i.e., "works" refers primarily to the food laws, circumcision, and purity laws defining the barrier between Jew and non-Jew. Kruse, who more than any of the other exegetes quoted in this work has tried to maintain the traditional doctrinal reading of Paul's letter, agrees that such an interpretation must be taken seriously. He comes to the conclusion, however, that "works of the law" must mean "all that the law requires," as Dunn had allowed for as "not excluded" in a later response to criticism on this point, since the statement that "all are under the curse of the law" would then be restricted to all those who believed that law defined the people of God (Kruse, 79). Paul could hardly have been claiming these two things at the same time: that the Judaizers were merely fighting for the preservation of identity markers for Israel and at the same time wanted to make Christians obedient to the entire Jewish law. This does not mean that "works of the law" should therefore mean the fulfilling of the commandments as a means for acquiring merit before God, as the Reformation had thought. There is a third way, according to Kruse: the works of the law refers to the fulfillment of all the commandments "because this is what the covenant required." In 3:6-14 the issue is that when some argue that justification is dependent upon the fulfillment of a few commandments, they fail to see that the principle of law involves the law as a whole. That would then have been Paul's main point.

But there are other problems in Dunn's approach, as noted by Stanley Stowers. He wrote concerning Dunn's approach to the intended audience of Romans:

Dunn's reading, for example, assumes as a patently explicit and obvious Jewish doctrine that God punishes gentiles severely but mercifully overlooks Jewish evil. I find the evidence vastly more complex and, on the whole, very different from Dunn's assumption. We find no Jewish texts explicitly saying that God will ignore Jewish sin because of the covenant. One finds numerous examples of confidence in God's justice and mercy and ultimate faithfulness to Israel. Many texts also unsurprisingly assume that Jews are typically more faithful and more pleasing to God than polytheists, but Christian and Moslem texts say the same thing about Christians and Moslems. God's justice and impartiality is also a pervasive theme in Jewish texts. Indeed, the most widespread view seems to hold that Jews are punished even more severely and held to a higher standard than gentiles, at least in this world. As 2 Macc. 6:14 explains, God shows his mercy to Israel by continually punishing Jews in order to keep them in line and in order that their sins might be continually atoned. One finds in ancient Jewish texts a persistent theme of reading Israel's calamities as severe punishments wrought out of God's love in order to discipline her, whereas God is frequently said to overlook gentile sin, allowing gentile liability to accumulate (see chapter 3). The evidence of Jewish texts betrays the implausibility of Dunn's presumed reader.
If this is correct, then the major assumption of Dunn's reading of Galatians and Romans falls away: that Paul wrote with Jewish-Christians in mind, who introduced the Judaistic concept of identity markers as means to entry into Christianity. If that Judaistic concept was not in Paul's mind, and could not have been in the mind of any 1st-century writer who had some first hand knowledge of Judaism, then there could hardly have been a Jewish-Christian faction who tried to Judaize on that basis. Stower's conclusion is that Paul wrote Romans with gentiles in mind, who on the basis of their own Graeco-Roman understanding of "law" as a principle both of ethical life and social order, tried to integrate their "flawed" understanding of the Torah into that own bias. The Jewish law served them as the paradigm of the ideal constitution that they derived from their own social and political background. Torah was then being used to set up what we might call a pre-Constantinian "rule of law" in the Church. Against that background, Paul wants his gentile audience to understand that the Jewish law actually is based on the principle of election and sovereign grace and is understood as such by the Jews. The Torah they want to abuse as "law" is actually speaking on the side of Christian faith, especially where it speaks of Abraham's faith and justification, and even if this aspect of the Torah as "law" would stand on its own, it could only contradict the reality of Christian life, because then it would show itself as the basis of equal judgment over both gentiles and Jews. The constructed partner in dialogue of Romans 2 is then the champion of these gentile Judaizers and as such a construction on Paul's part to embody these gentile reasonings in a vehicle to carry his case to his audience.

It does raise the question of why the Jewish nation has not become followers of Christ if the Torah testifies to the righteousness that is manifested in Christ. Paul answers it in chapters 9-11 by reiterating that God's promise will not fail with Israel as it did not fail with the gentiles who received the blessing of Abraham. So the basic intention of Romans is not to develop a specific Christian concept of righteousness and salvation, but to settle the matter of the principle of law: not imperial power and the acquisition of righteousness, but God's sovereign grace, faithfulness to promise, and grace that enables man to do righteousness in Christ. All of this then serves as the basic presupposition of the exhortatory chapters 12-15.

So the identification of good works with meritorious deeds and the narrowing down of that expression to boundary markers have both run into serious trouble. It would be better to argue that although the contextual meaning of the doctrine shows a main emphasis on table communion and circumcision, the "whole of the law" remains very much in Paul's mind when he writes about the "works of the law,"

G. Kruse has proposed a third possibility that avoids assertions that Paul had no real insight into Judaism because he did not presuppose that the Judaizers were trying to set up the Torah as a means for salvation, or that he only speaks about identity markers, by invoking the distinction first made by Sanders between nomism and legalism. The "works of the law" must refer to all that the law requires and not merely to those laws that protect the social identity of Jews. That was the thesis of Dunn against which Stowers argued. But the conclusion still cannot be that these works are the means to acquire merit before God. Paul's conflict is not with Judaism in principle, but "with those who, by the demands they were placing upon his Galatian converts, were insisting that salvation depends upon [or can be added to by, RAV] the observance of certain demands of the law" (Kruse, 69). Kruse puts forward the interpretation that we discussed briefly in our opening paragraph when we quoted Beker's description of Paul's opponents. The issue would be the salvific function of the Torah for non-Jews.

In Kruse's view, Paul and Peter were united in their rejection of legalism; i.e., the conviction that fulfilling the demands of the law was a prerequisite for salvation, but Paul disagreed with Peter on the issue of nomism: Christian Jews and Christian gentiles needed to comply with the demands of the law as part of their Christian obedience, but in a separate manner, since the law spoke differently to Jew and gentile. To this Paul responded by arguing that
Christian Jews had also lost any relationship with the law, so they had become like gentiles in that respect (Gal. 2:19). So, in this view, the works of the law refers to the opinion that Paul protests throughout the letter: (3) that the fulfillment of the specific commandments of the Torah in itself leads to salvation or can add to salvation in Christ. In doing so, Paul leaves the parenetic function of the law aside as probably self-evident.

In passing, we may note that this nomism that Paul rejected is present in some way in Luther’s exegesis, where he states that obedience to the Mosaic law in civil life is still a necessary corollary of grace. Life under the law is a matter of works, and life under the gospel is a matter of faith. A Christian is under both! If this is true, then clearly the matter of the antithesis between grace and works came into existence in the 16th-century Reformation, and not in the 1st-century debate with Judaism. Paul’s rejection of legalism, however, the law imposed upon gentiles, does seem to go along with his rejection of nomism, the law as principle of life for Jews. From the letter to the Galatians it cannot be shown that Paul accepted an ongoing role of the Torah for Jewish believers, but it cannot be completely ruled out either. We have to decide on that question later.

If justification is based upon sovereign grace, even in Judaism, and if this is the main polemical intent against Paul’s gentile readers who misinterpreted the function of the law, then his statement in Galatians 2:16 can be interpreted with some clarity: Paul and Peter knew that a man is not justified by works of the law no matter how much merit he has acquired: the fulfillment of commandments in itself, whether they express the social identity of Israel or any other good deed according to the principle of law, does not make a person righteous before God. No man can be righteous on the basis of deeds that exclude grace and on which he is judged by God, as we find in Psalm 143:2, quoted in 2:16: “And enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight no man living shall be justified.” If there could be righteousness through works of the law, then Christ has died in vain (Gal. 2:21). The rejection of righteousness on the basis of performance, of compliance with the law, is to Paul directly linked to the meaning of Christ’s death. It is either salvation through the law (as gentiles thought), or salvation through God’s grace (as Jews thought), but the third option is the best: through Christ. But it cannot ever be justification and salvation through law and Christ.

Paul and Peter therefore had an argument only on the issue of the ongoing role of the law for Jewish believers beyond the issue of salvation. Apparently Peter, under pressure from James’s disciples, by his withdrawal from community with gentiles in which he abandoned all performance of the law, makes the explicit statement in doing so that the law remains valid for Jewish believers. His behavior shows that it matters where one stands in respect to the law. That would imply a message to gentile believers that they could perfect their faith by adopting Mosaic law and submitting to circumcision. Because of the burden under which that would place the gentile Christians, and because of the impression it gives that a Christian should be concerned with anything beyond that which is vital in salvation (i.e., the life within the Spirit, as we will see in Romans), Paul goes on to reject not only the necessity of Torah for gentiles, but even for Jews. We must conclude, therefore, that justification by faith means to Paul, in Galatians, being set free from the law in its legalist sense, i.e., from any righteousness that comes from obedience to a law or from being part of the nation that received the law. But in that respect, Paul did not say anything that was outside the boundaries of 1st-century Judaism.

Enhancing Kruse’s statement (see above), we also hold, however, that Paul rejected Peter’s nomism not only for gentiles, but for Jews as well. And that is indeed a clear breaking away from 1st-century Judaism.

That can be made clear from the following. If we read (with Zuurmond) the genitive in “works of the law” in Gal. 2:16 as saying: “the work that the law performs” (i.e., as a subjective genitive) then we have a perfect antithesis to the “faith of Christ.” Law and Christ are then diametrically opposed as forces (cf. 2:21) working within our lives. The force of the law
is seen to be working in a conditional way by demanding man's active consent and obedience (Gal. 3:12), in the statement, "And ye shall observe my statutes and my judgments, by which the man [on condition of the fact] that [he] does them [he] shall live," and as the standard of future judgment (Lev. 18:5). The law is portrayed in its ultimate and eschatological effect as a power that kills, for "I through law have died to law, that I may live to God." The problem is not of course the law, but the inability of man. And we must remember that here, as is the case in the letter to the Romans, "law" can only mean "Torah itself." So how can we be redeemed? The law only has jurisdiction over a man during his life (cf. Romans 7:1), so the identification of the believer with the crucified Christ means the end of the validity of the law, both as a social identity marker (cf. Eph. 2:14-15) and as a way of righteousness and salvation. The law, though perfect in itself, has power over the living but is unable to give life. It is Christ who now becomes the new principle of life, through His Spirit that works within us. The faith of Christ is then not our faith in Him, by which the opposition would be made between what the law demands and what Christ demands. The opposition is now between what the law does: giving a way of life with a conditional promise of life to those who comply with it, and the unconditional gift of the Spirit on the basis of Christ's "faith," i.e., his trustworthiness and loyalty to God unto death. Our faith as obedience is the effort to cling to that faith of Christ as the new principle of our life.

If that is the case, Peter was indeed in conformity with the Pauline gospel when he broke Jewish law at Antioch. The principles of the right Christian way of life, according to this letter, cannot be found in the teachings of the law, in commandments and prohibitions that belong to the world before the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. One of Paul's arguments is that the Galatians have already had such a Christian way of life in the Spirit. How did they receive the Spirit? Not because they performed the commandments or realized any kind of condition, but because they heard the preaching of the gospel and fell under the spell of the image of a crucified Christ (Gal. 3:1-2). With this crucified Christ the Galatians have identified themselves: they too have been crucified with Christ, and now the principle of their life has been changed. They no longer live, but Christ lives in them (Gal. 2:18-20a). But insofar as we can still speak of a life in the flesh, the believers live through their faith in Christ's death and resurrection and His work (2:20b).

The heart of the matter is, therefore, that if the Christian life begins with the identification of the believer with Christ in His death and resurrection, and that, therefore, faith in Christ and life in the Spirit is its principle, then to add to that by concentration on specific commandments, on works of the law, does not make any sense. The gift of the Spirit already makes the believer a member of the people of God and he does not add to this by doing the works that were commanded to Israel. Justification is received without and outside of the works of the law. The law as a separate force outside the authority of the Messiah cannot grant this. So in the ongoing Christian life there is no need for works of the law either. But in Galatians this means without doubt that the gospel is free from law to both Jewish and gentile Christians but is still not without a specific and radical form of obedience to Christ. So we can conclude: the Antioch incident results in Paul's clear statement of the principle of his gospel: that the believer is justified by faith in Christ, and no longer obeys God through the intermediary of (knowledge of) the law, whether in its function as boundary between Jew and gentile (the ecclesiological view) or its function as God's righteous demand (the traditional view). The position that works of the law are being denied as works of merit has no place here at all, since that was not an existing position within 1st-century Judaism.
Paul stated twice that the reception of the Spirit, an expression for conversion and the beginning of Christian discipleship, was not based upon doing the works of the law (3:2), it was not based on the principle of obedience to law and was not for the purpose of making such obedience possible (3:2, 3, 5). After this reference to the faith experience of the Galatians, Paul argues further with the aid of the example of Abraham. It is “in the same way” that Abraham had faith in God, which was accounted to him as righteousness. In the promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:3, all gentiles were included since “in you all nations will be blessed.” Resting on the fact that Abraham was declared righteous before the giving of the law, his faith in God’s promise was considered by God to be an act that constituted the “right relationship” with God, the opposite can now be stated. “For as many as are under [the principle of] works of the law are cursed” (3:10). Why are they cursed? The text in Deut. 27:26 that is quoted here states: “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all that is written in the book of the law.” This must be a quotation from the LXX, though with some variation; e.g., the LXX use of logos, which also indicates the spoken word and is closer to the Hebrew davar, is exchanged for ge gramm enenos, the written word.

But there is a major problem here. Most importantly, the Greek translation changes the Hebrew original on three accounts. First of all, the Hebrew word translated as “continue” can also mean “to uphold,” to consider something to be the standard (דַּבָּר). Secondly, the Hebrew text speaks of “the words of instruction” (דַּבָּר), and not about “all” the words of the law, which would imply the idea that if one commandment is broken all are. Thirdly, the Hebrew arur (כָּרְע) does not mean retributive damnation and is not the opposite of salvation, but of being blessed. Someone is cursed if he is cut off from the source of well-being and blessings, and that source is precisely life in obedience to God’s Torah. The meaning of the Hebrew, therefore, is something like: Cursed (i.e., without blessing, without the fullness of life) are those who do not uphold as a standard the words of this instruction. Cursed are those who do not live under this instruction that gives life to all who obey it, and not: God will punish those that do not obey. Through the LXX, and Paul’s application of it here, we get the meaning: those who do not obey each and every instance of the law, i.e., those who break even one single commandment, have lost salvation and will be punished with a curse. In Paul’s view, therefore, the Torah as law demands full compliance and only then gives life, i.e., salvation. But how can this be an accurate assessment of the law? Did Paul forget that the law allowed for atonement to be made through sacrifices for all transgressions bishgaga, “without intent”? Is he implying that such a work of atonement is not enough for the gentiles who have formerly engaged in such “works of the flesh” as he mentions in Gal. 5:19-21 (as it would not be sufficient in the case of intentional sin)?

The same problems in connection with the translation can be raised with regard to Paul’s second quotation. Nobody is justified by the law, because it states in Habakkuk: “the righteous will live by his faith.” But Habakkuk has no direct bearing on the matter of the meaning of the law. The text refers to the difficult circumstances of the assault on Israel by the Chaldeans, who oppress all, during which time the righteous will have to put their trust in God for their survival since the law and its intrinsic moral order no longer protect them. Paul uses it to imply that being righteous and therefore to live, to survive judgment, is by faith, while the Hebrew text states that one who is righteous by the standards of Torah will survive oppression because of his ‘emunah, his trust in God. He can then continue by stating that the demand of the law is a conditional gift: he who obeys it will live. Performance of the law precedes life as its reward. (But that obviously contradicts the intent of the passage.)

So Paul is stating that faith, not obedience, is a prerequisite for justification, and through it man will survive the judgment, will “live.” The opposition we had before between the works
of the law and the faith of Christ Jesus (Gal. 2:16) is worked out as an opposition between
being under the curse for failing to obey it all, and being liberated from the law. How are we
liberated from the law? We read in 3:13 that Christ has liberated us from the curse of the law
by becoming a curse. By showing that the law could only condemn him, i.e., Christ, the va-
lidity of the law was nullified insofar as it demanded obedience to all of its precepts as a con-
dition of life, because one of its decrees has been nullified by God. If one of its statements
was rendered invalid, then the whole loses its absolute validity. Of course this is very much in
keeping with Paul’s calling. He had an encounter with a Christ who had kept the entire law
and yet had to face death on the Cross. He had acted in conformity with Jewish law by perse-
cuting a sect that turned out to be the body of this resurrected Messiah. In both cases strict
enforcement of the law was counteracted by God’s own act. If righteousness under the law
could not keep Christ alive, and did not make Paul righteous, then it could not save any
Christian. That could be called the demonstrative force of Christ’s death with regard to the
law, since it shows that the law lacks of efficacy to fulfill the promise that those who obey it
will live, the perfectly righteous one actually died because of the Torah.

A secondary observation begins with the contention that “ransomed” (exegorasen) must be
given the full force of “paying a price to liberate someone,” specifically the paying of a ran-
som for the liberation of slaves. It answers the question of how the Messiah could be the
source of blessing for all the gentiles while at the same time being cursed by God. Well, the
answer must be that he bore the curse instead of those who were under the curse and set them
free from it. That must of course refer to all who identified with Him through faith, Jews and
non-Jews alike. Rom. 2:14 actually states that Jews and non-Jews alike are under its curse.
However, specifically “under the curse” were the gentiles who lived outside the law and the
blessings that accompanied its keeping, so Paul might be thinking here specifically of the ac-
ceptance of gentiles. This latter view, of course, exerts a great attraction for those who argue
that the issue here is that of communion between Jews and gentiles (cf. Kruse, 87). If gentiles
entered the covenant community because their curse had been lifted by Christ’s being cursed
under the law, then of course the law can have no role in their being blessed as a consequence.

All of this leads up to Paul’s statement that the blessing of Abraham did not come unto the
gentiles because of the law, and that is why the reception of the spirit is not based upon the
works of the law. Paul finds a close connection between the righteousness of Abraham by
faith before the giving of the law, the blessing of the gentiles through him, and the reception
of the Spirit in fulfillment of the promised blessing, all outside the sphere of the law. If all are
redeemed by the fulfillment of a promise that was given before the law specified command-
ments to be obeyed and identity markers to be used to separate Israel from the gentiles, then
Jews have become just like gentiles in these final days.

Paul now needs to explain what the function of the law was before the coming of Christ. He
takes up this argument in 3:19-25. The law here is merely seen as an addition that in the end
served a purpose in the greater scheme of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Its reve-
latory status was therefore only secondary, since it was given through the hands of angels,
implying that in it God did not disclose Himself as He had done in Christ (3:19b), though it
might have the ordinary sense of divine origin that we find, e.g., in Acts 7:53. The law was
added “for the sake of transgressions” (3:19a), i.e., to show that human conduct transgresses
the law, and to “shut up all things under sin” (3:22). Such a law cannot make alive; it is a
guardian and tutor to those who have been promised a future life under a new principle, that
of faith. In its provisional function it has guarded (3:23) the boundaries between Israel and the
nations and it has tutored (3:24) all of mankind by showing that justification cannot be a goal
of human aspirations for perfection. Life under the law is portrayed as a life of immaturity,
needing a pedagogos or tutor-slave who accompanies man in his service of God. When a boy
comes of age, he accepts his heritage and the full responsibility for his actions, which the be-
liever can, because Christ, the heir, is the principle of his life.

So the Torah as written law-code has no redemptive relevance any more, neither with regard to entrance into the Church nor (directly) with regard to the lifestyle of Christians. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (3:25). What then are the consequences for the new life outside the sphere of the law? First of all there is a change of status. Verse 3:26 informs us that "you are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus." All distinctions that were maintained by the law: Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female, have been abolished. Not only did the law deal differently with all of these groups, it maintained their separation through its provisions. Baptism, not circumcision, is the sign of belonging to that new community. All are one in Christ Jesus because each of them has "put on Christ" (3:27). Paul explains what it means to have sonship in 3:5ff. First of all, as heirs to the blessing that was promised to Abraham, we are no longer slaves under the law, but sons. We have the "right of sons" (4:5). This refers to the notion of freedom that is explained further in ch. 5.

Paul summarizes his view on Christian ethics in Galatians by stating that we live in the light of the resurrected Christ. "I live by faith, the [faith] of the Son of God, who has loved me and given himself for me." (2:20) That involves dying with Christ, having put on Christ (3:27). All of this implies a particular way of life that is characterized by the new freedom from the law and righteousness on the basis of works. So the effect of justification is at the same time (1) the constitution of a new community that lifts the boundaries between Jew and gentile, and in doing so invalidates the Torah as principle and shape of obedience, and (2) the radical change within individuals who have received the spirit. These two aspects are dealt with by the Apostle as being completely connected.

Let us now look more closely at Paul’s reasoning in ch. 5. Vs. 1 takes up the notion of ransom of 3:13 and explains again why Christian freedom is incompatible with submission under the law. Christ has liberated us to become truly free. Circumcision and its consequence, the demand to keep the entire law, is in contradiction to this principle of freedom. Submission to the law entails a kind of obedience that is like that of slavery. It is the law that prescribes action and man should be ready to conform to it. A life of freedom must be, put negatively a life without such external motivations for action. We must not let ourselves be put under a “yoke of slavery” again (5:1). But then, after this impressive catalogue of arguments against being under the law, Paul must warn his Galatian audience. The freedom that they have from the law in its double aspect of identity marker and tutor should not be abused. They should become slaves to each other through love. If they act in conformity with this principle, the law, insofar as it can demand something from man, is actually fulfilled. The essence of the law is: to love your neighbor as yourself (5:14). The entire law is fulfilled, says Paul, in this one word or commandment. A life that can be described as showing this (neighborly love) to be its principle of behavior is actually the life that the law intended to be lived. What is meant here? Is Paul setting up a spiritual principle of the moral life over against mere outward obedience to the Torah? Is life in the Spirit then a mere inward life?

The implications of this statement by Paul are enormous, as becomes evident when we compare it to statements attributed to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 19: 18-19 we hear Jesus say: “But if thou wouldst enter into life, keep the commandments. He said to him, Which? And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is far from stating that the essence of the law is the commandment to love one’s neighbor, though it is interesting that the commandment of Lev. 19:18 here concludes a series of commandments taken from the decalogue. In Matthew 22:36-40, we are informed that the “great commandment” in the law is first of all to love God, and secondly, equal to it, to love your neighbor. Vs. 40 states that on these two commandments
the whole law and the prophets "hang"—which means that all commandments in their application must be interpreted from the viewpoint of these two. Not only do we find that the essence of the commandments is expressed in these two commandments, or in the second part of the decalogue, but we can also find that the keeping of these commandments provides us with entrance into life. In such words, the content of the Torah is transposed into the messianic Torah, changed in its character and addressed to a new community with new priorities, but not abandoned. Is Paul contradicting this?

Furthermore, Jesus' sayings actually describe the same conditional aspect of the law that Paul seemed to describe as contrary to the promise. According to Matthew 23:3, Christ wanted His disciples to conform to standard Jewish interpretations of the law ("whatever they may tell you do and keep"). Furthermore, it is obvious that Jesus did not state that the conditionality of the law hangs on the law's being either fulfilled completely or not at all. In the practice of the law's provisions, it is not being blameless that counts, but accepting all of it with regard to its objective: the love of God and fellow-man. Here also, Jesus' implicit view of the law seems contrary to that of Paul. Finally, Matthew 5:17 makes it abundantly clear that the Christ of Matthew's gospel has not come to liberate from the law or to make it void, but to fulfill it, which in its context must mean: to uphold the standard of the law. (The passage refers to the same text in Deut. 27:26 that we looked at before.) We are told that to do away, i.e. abolish, not merely disobey, with the least of these commandments, is wrong, and that the righteousness of the disciples in the same sense must surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees, which would be very difficult to understand if that righteousness were based on faith alone instead of on works of the law.

Nevertheless, as we will see later, Jesus' affirmation of the law does imply a change of perspective with regard to the goal of keeping the law and the conditions of its fulfillment. Doing the Torah can no longer be directed at raising the holiness of a minority, but should affect the whole of the life of God's people, and, in the eschatological vision, the whole of the world. We contend, and try to show later, that this makes Jesus' attitude to the law conform to Paul's rephrasing of that same reality. In the eschatological situation, life in the Spirit is the same as life under the law.

In the Galatians passage we discussed earlier, Paul uses the same word for "to fulfill" πληροασι (plerōasi) that Matthew used as a translation of what was probably Jesus' Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew דַּלַּי (jaqim) of Deut. 26. He used the same word, but not in the same sense of "upholding" or even, apparently, "doing." Fulfilling the law is "living a life in which the great moral concerns of the law are exemplified" (G. Kruse, 104). The entire law, from that perspective, can be reduced to one general commandment as a rhetorical device. This must be: faith, which works through love (5:6), which can be expressed in the language of the law as the commandment "love your neighbor." But it is not the form of the law at all that is sought after here. It is not about a human faith that works and is effective through love as if it were an alternative to the kind of human conduct and activity that we have under the law, which would then constitute a different kind of obedience, but the power of Christ's faith is working through a love that the Spirit works in our hearts without our cooperation. Therefore Paul can state that whosoever is led by the Spirit, who, in a way, lets the image of Christ become the contents of his self-awareness, is not under the law, not even the law that states "love your neighbor." But at the same time, such a believer is actually fulfilling that same law by acting in conformity with its goal.

So what then is this new life of the Christian outside of the law, even the law of love? In 5:16 Paul directs his main exhortation to the Galatians: "live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." The law seemed an answer to the permanent question of man's inability to do good. By living a life under restrictions that formed a hedge around the Torah by providing commandments that were meant to secure that man could not even begin
to break the really important commandments, Judaism tried to tutor man from wickedness to righteousness. Paul recognizes this zeal since he was once part of that tradition. But now the tutor is gone, since Christ has come. That leaves us with the question: can Christians live without any kind of law? Does Christian freedom mean doing whatever you want?

Obviously not, since there are two powers within man that are at odds with each other. The desires of the Spirit are set against the desires of the flesh, and man is but a tool in the hands of each. If you are in the power of the flesh, you have no freedom (5:17). If you are in the power of the Spirit, then Christ is expressed in your life (2:20). If you are led by the Spirit, the law is of no use, you are not “under” it (5:18). The fruit of the spirit (not its work or its demand) is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, self-control (5:22). This fruit is set against the works of the flesh, the acts in which the flesh is expressed. The flesh, however, belongs to a previous life; it has been crucified along with its passions and desires. Man has been transformed, not only changed, in his status before God, from slave to son. Life in the Spirit is still a life of obedience, but not an obedience that is directed at the intellectual understanding of a law and its application. In that sense, Paul’s statements about the Spirit are in conformity with Jesus’ statements about the law. Both submit the Torah to a higher principle of obedience that is materially identical and analogous in the shape of its obedience, but not identical to the law’s aspect of demanding obedience to specific prescriptions.

The exhortation that begins in 5:16 can therefore hardly be called a commandment. It is a reminder of the principle of a life that is already active (5:25a), and which can bear its fruit if we do not obstruct it by changing our allegiance from the Spirit to the law. If the flesh is crucified, the proper attitude is to bury it and forget about it, not try to curb it by obedience to laws that work against it. Not submission of the flesh by conforming to the demands of the law, but living spontaneously the pattern of life that the Spirit works inside the believer, and that is the pattern of the life of Christ. Paul is here very close to his statement in Romans 7:14-25 that the law actually provokes desire by prohibiting it, in contrast to the free gift of justification which evokes the desire (and gives the ability) to live life in the power of the Spirit. If it is not a commandment, but a description of what is actually taking place, its exhortatory effect can only be awareness of what is happening and giving up resistance to a work already under way. What is left are general guidelines for what is proper behavior in the Church, which are in a way descriptions of the new Kingdom of God as it takes on reality within the community.

That this new life in no way resembles a life under “law” is also clear from Paul’s statement in 6:4 that each should “prove his own work...for each shall bear his own burden,” meaning that there is no imperative that can be used to condemn others. The function of the imperative has come to an end; what is left is “reminding” ourselves of what we have become in Christ and helping each other make it possible for the Spirit to bear its fruit in our lives. Such, apparently, is the “law of Christ” of Gal. 6:2. By bearing each other’s burdens, going to the full length of brotherly and sisterly love, a believer shows himself to act beyond the formal demand of the law of Moses.

**§ 24. The Noachide commandments and Antioch**

We must ask a “legal” question now. Was this picture of life in the Spirit beyond the imperative of law accepted by all the Church? Is there really no place for the imperative in the Christian life? We have seen that Paul placed much emphasis on the acceptance of his gospel to the gentiles by James and John in the Jerusalem Council. In the description of that Council in Acts 15 there are some details that raise doubt as to whether Paul is referring to that meeting with the Jerusalem Church at all. Furthermore, the impetus for the meeting in Acts is the
action on the part of the Judean brothers in Antioch. They taught that circumcision and the law of Moses were prerequisites for salvation. According to Gal. 2:2a, Paul went up on the basis of a revelation; in Acts 15 Paul and Barnabas were sent by the congregation in Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss this matter. But whether Paul is referring to this meeting or not, it is clear that the Antioch situation was treated differently in Jerusalem than it was by Paul. When the matter is settled by James, a specific part of Jewish oral law (halakah) is required of the gentile Christians:

19 Wherefore I judge, not to trouble those who from the nations turn to God; 20 but to write to them to abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses, from generations of old, has in every city those who preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

The commandment in vs. 20 was not the mere trifle it might seem to us today. To abstain from the pollution of idols involved not only abstention from all things offered to the idol in the privacy of one’s home, or the refusal to participate in idolatrous feasts demanded in ordinary civil life, but it even ruled out participation in a domestic meal with friends and relatives, at least as to the foods being eaten, and maybe even with regard to the wine libations. Meat sold at the marketplace very often had its origin in the temple. If one had to ascertain beforehand what its origin was, it must have been obvious that relying on Jewish kashrut laws was by far a better means of procuring meat under this regulation, bringing the Christian community closer to the synagogue in this respect. That this was a real issue is obvious in Paul. Such incidents are referred to in 1 Cor. 8 as well.

This sets us up with a clearcut dilemma: (1) If the Jerusalem Council took place before the Antioch Incident, then either the gentiles in Antioch did not adhere to these instructions and Peter did not object, or they did, and the emissaries of James in Galatia shared the harsher opinion of the “brethren from Judea” and not that of the James mentioned in Acts 15. (2) If the Jerusalem Council was after the Antioch Incident, it served as a way to settle such matters against Paul’s own view as expressed in this letter. It would explain why Paul does not mention this very important part of the agreement, since it would also have settled the matter of table fellowship, and he could easily have referred to that as part of the solution. As matters stand now, Paul refers to the council only with regard to the separation of missionary fields (Gal 2:9) and the collection for the poorer brethren in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:10). So we must conclude in either case that the decision described in Acts 15 was not in Paul’s mind in Galatians, either because it preceded it, or because Paul intentionally ignored it. A third possibility could be that Luke for some reason distorted the outcome of the Jerusalem Council, or combined various sources into one, a possibility which we will ignore here for the moment but cannot rule out.

But there is even more to it. The list of Acts 15:20 mentioned four prohibitions or abstentions: idolatry, fornication (i.e. illicit relations), the eating of the strangled (e.g., animals caught in a trap), and the eating of blood, i.e., meat with blood in it. It is easy to recognize here four out of the seven so-called Noachide commandments that were developed as a means to express the basic conditions under which devout Jews could consort with gentiles. Keeping the Noachide laws was a prerequisite of being a “righteous” person. Noah was called a righteous person in his age (Gen. 6:9), but of course it particularly refers to the matter of communion between Jews and gentiles in the land of Israel. In the Babylonian Talmud a person who has abjured idolatry is called a "son of Noah," a righteous one from the gentiles.213 The Noachide rules were valid first of all for those who lived in Israel and had the status of ger toshav, i.e., resident alien (Lev. 25:35). James’s proposal in Acts 15 is therefore to use these commandments to regulate the behavior of gentiles outside the land of Israel as well as to
make possible communion between them and Jewish Christians living abroad.

It is clear, then, that the decision by the Jerusalem Council increased the application of Jewish law beyond its original confines, while removing some of its more formal elements. E.g., one could obtain recognition for this status as Noachide by promising before a court of three judges to abstain from idolatry, but apparently the matter of the status of being Noachide was not decided in a court, but by entering the Church. Furthermore, in the time that the New Testament was written, the development of the Noachide Code was still in full progress. The account in Acts 15 may well be the second-oldest text relating to this subject. Around the year 100 B.C. we already find in the Book of Jubilees (7:20, 21) a summary of six commandments that were given to the sons of Noah (i.e. all of mankind):

And in the 28th jubilee Noah began to teach his children the ordinances and the commandments and all the law that he knew, and he instructed his children (1) to do justice and (2) cover their nakedness and (3) to bless Him that had created them, and (4) to honor father and mother and (5) to love one’s neighbor and (6) to stay away from fornication and impurity and all injustice.

Blasphemy and idolatry do not seem to be a part of this list, but according to Guttmann they can be inferred from the commandment (3) to bless the creator. Later, in Talmudic times, a list of seven commandments became authoritative and was worked out as the final say on the matter, but that does not concern us here. What does concern us is the fact that this Noachide Code was an extension or application of the Torah to gentiles that expressed conditions for being righteous. Only those gentiles who kept these commandments could be considered righteous in practice, i.e., could enter into fellowship with Jews. On a practical level, the keeping of these commandments would be sufficient to allow Jewish and non-Jewish Christians to have fellowship together without either party’s renouncing its separate status under law. It would have been a fair compromise if it allowed for the Jewish law to stay in full effect without continuing the separatist side-effect of the Pharisaic Halakah and therefore would reject that the gentiles had no option but to become full-fledged proselytes in order to be a part of the New Covenant.

However, the Noachide Code does not deal directly with the issue of separation or with issues of salvation. The righteousness that is its concern is of a social nature, regulating relations between communities, and not directly the relationship with God, and we must conclude that its basic concern is “ecclesiological.” There could have been no argument that the righteousness that is by faith surpasses the concerns of the Noachide Code, seeing that the latter is a minimal requirement with a social purpose. Now if these commandments were in effect for gentile believers in Antioch, it would have been hard for James’s emissaries to find fault with Peter. So if they did, unless they form a third party or reflect James’s position before the Council, the Antioch Incident took place before the Jerusalem Council, and therefore the letter to the Galatians must have been written before it, and the Jerusalem Council’s decree must have been an answer to the problems that this incident revealed.

On the assumption that Paul did not simply ignore the matter, which we would have to suppose if he is referring to a meeting that has already taken place, we must argue that either Luke’s account has no historic reliability, or that Paul’s letter precedes that particular meeting. The trip to Jerusalem that is mentioned in Gal. 2:1 is then the one described in Acts 11:30; 12:25. Paul’s mention of a previous visit to Galatia, in Gal. 4:13, must then refer to a single visit, mentioned in Acts 13:13-14, 20. Galatians would then be the oldest letter of Paul, being written in 49 or 50. This idea is most often rejected because it seems unlikely that there were two councils on the same issue of circumcision. There are, however, major differences between Luke’s account and that of Paul, making it hazardous to base the dating of Galatians on
Luke’s description of Paul’s journeys. It is also not impossible that Luke combined materials in a way to make it appear that the Jerusalem Council decided on all relevant issues pertaining to Jewish-gentile relationships at once. Paul did mention that his visit to the Jerusalem apostles in the first place was on his own initiative, whereas Luke’s account in Acts 15 mentions an initiative of the apostles themselves, instigated by the Judean brothers. The Jerusalem Council then merely reaffirmed the missionary decree, cf. Acts 15:12, which affirms the notion that Paul’s role here was that of portraying the success of his mission, a mission therefore already accepted and not only affirmed at that time, as indeed Gal. 2:9 states. The Council’s major contribution then lies in the solution by James that the gentiles should accept the Noachide Code, thereby ending the dispute with Peter and Paul that his emissaries, and the Judean brethren, must have had in the mission field where they met each other.

What we have found so far is a Paulinist theology that is very much concerned with safeguarding the essential notion that justification is by faith, that Christian life could not be regulated by any kind of imperative or commandment. What was left for Jew and gentile alike was a life in the Spirit without any kind of conditional imperative that formulated a precise behavior in specific circumstances. We will study this notion of life under the spirit further in connection with the letter to the Romans. We will have to bear in mind, as a result of this chapter, that Paul’s vision of complete lawlessness for gentile believers, in the specific double sense that we explained above, was in fact changed by the Jerusalem Apostles’ decree, though the essence of Paul’s gospel of justification by faith and not by works of the law was reiterated there, according to Luke. At least we can say that to the Jerusalem Council proper Christian behavior was very much also a matter of proper obedience to a set of rules, the Torah for Jews and the Noachide Code for gentiles.\footnote{217}

What then does righteousness mean, if it cannot be found by the works of the law? And what is the relationship between righteousness by faith and the Noachide commandments? Paul’s argument seems to run like this: man is not justified by works of the law, i.e., by what the law itself does. Man can however be justified by the faith of Christ, that is by what the faithfulness of Christ does. Our faith in Christ results in an identification of myself with Him, so that His faith and life and resurrection become my own; that is, I die because of the workings of the law to which Christ Himself was subjected, the effect of the law is death as the ultimate atonement for sin, but I become resurrected with Christ because of this identification with Him. Though convicted under law and condemned by law, God gave evidence of the new thing He did in Christ through His resurrection. Christ lives in me and my “self” no longer lives. The law brings me death, condemnation for my sins, curse and not blessing. Being made one with Christ gives me resurrected life, the blessing of Abraham, righteousness, and the gift of the Spirit. In as far as the law brings me death, I die, but with Christ. Insofar as the law brings me a curse, Christ bore that curse. Insofar as the law demands that I perform the commandments, I now live a life of faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20), which determines my life in the flesh, so I am no longer under the law. The shape of a life that aspires to achieve righteousness by performing a commandment as a condition thereto is taken away. Justification is then clearly seen primarily as it contains the results of life under the law. We might expect to acquire it through the law (5:4), i.e., through a life of submission under a diverse whole of commandments, since the law provides this as a way to achieve life: do this and you shall live. But in this manner the law will not achieve its goal. Law can only achieve its own lawful demand by punishing the sinner. If we do not become perfect under the law by doing all of its commandments, which is impossible on the basis of Paul’s anthropology and understanding of the perfection of the law’s demand, righteousness is lost.

The righteousness that is demanded by the law can be summed up in one word, according to Paul: thou shalt love thy neighbor like thyself (5:14). So in terms of the law, the new life in the spirit that is nothing but “faith working through love” gives the righteousness that is all
the law can possibly demand of a man. By having the faith of Christ working inside me, a love has become active in me that is the love of Christ (2:20), so I achieve righteousness by a faith that works through love (5:6). So by restating the goal of the law as the achievement of righteousness (equal to life in 3:11-12 and with future redemption in 5:5), to be justified (more literally: be righteoused) must mean being in a particular condition. It means being identified with Christ, being set into a new realm where not the law, but the Spirit reigns (5:18). It means being set on a new path of life where the conditionality of performance has been replaced by the unconditionality of a free gift. To be justified means: fulfilling the law by adhering to its goal in a new way: not that of obedience and submission, but allowing the Spirit of Christ to do it inside of me.

If this is the way God has acted to save the gentiles who were without the law in the first place, then the question arises of how God’s saving action in Christ relates to the Jews who are living under the law. As to the element of salvation, obviously Paul makes no difference. He is not arguing that faith-without-law is the way for gentiles to enter the covenant people, so that Christian Jews would still have to submit to law after all. He is arguing that circumcision is not necessary because it is in itself without meaning after Christ has come. Jews and non-Jews alike are saved without recourse to the law, but if that is true, the law has no essential function. It might be argued that the problem of the (easy) entrance of gentiles into the Church was the starting point of Paul’s argument. But he did not stop there. By claiming that faith in Christ was the only means of entrance to gentiles and that the law should not be used to uphold the barrier between Jew and non-Jew, Paul had in fact abrogated the law for Jews as well.

His opponents probably saw it differently. We can not be sure how much of this theology was actually considered and debated by the “pillars of the Church” in Jerusalem. The text in Acts 15:12 indicates that Paul’s testimony was limited to describing the great signs and miracles God was performing through him and Barnabas amongst the gentiles. It is Peter who raises the matter of the distinction between Jews and gentiles. God has made no distinction between Jews and gentiles, though it is said specifically of the gentiles that God did something extraordinary to make their entrance possible: He “purifies their hearts,” a clear reference to the covenant written by faith in the hearts of Jer. 31. Salvation, Peter states, is therefore in principle alike to gentile and Jew. And the barrier between Jews and gentiles has been replaced by the coming of the New Covenant in which the Spirit inscribes the demands of the law in the hearts of both Jews and gentiles.

But then James in his concluding statement does not accept this gospel as implying that the Jews should become like gentiles, but prefers to find a way to uphold Jewish law and its boundary markers, and by appealing to the gentiles to conform to the Noachide commandments, he makes it clear that gentiles can and should draw nearer to Israel because of this. James’ quotation of Amos 9 speaks of the resurrection of the House of David first, and only then of the conversion of the gentiles. It seems clear that to the James of Acts 15 the adoption of gentiles into the covenant-people implied a decisive change in the way of life of gentiles, even beyond the requirements that were placed on the so-called God-fearers, who were allowed to practice the civil rituals that were demanded of them. The Noachide Code’s prohibition of idolatry would make such a compliance with civil religion difficult, if not impossible.

So while it is true that the Mosaic law was not seen as the prerequisite of the gift of the Spirit, or of salvation, it was clear that to be part of the covenant-people, i.e., the Church, compliance with a halakah was demanded. To James this would have meant the continuation of the law for Jews and, as a necessary condition for gentiles, the imposition of the Noachide Code, implying further that James had no objection to gentiles who did want to undergo circumcision and become full fledged Jews.

In Peter’s words in Acts 15:8-9, we therefore find the position that is closest to that of Paul.
But it is concerned only with salvation and the gift of the Spirit, without making distinctions, the purifying power of faith for gentiles and salvation by the grace of Christ in the same manner. That position apparently was deemed completely in accordance with the implementation of the Noachide code as necessary and minimal requirement, and the acceptance of circumcision for gentiles who so desired. We must conclude, therefore, that if there is any credibility to the statements made by Luke in Acts 15, the position defended by Paul in Galatians was in profound disagreement with that of James, and maybe even that of Peter. We have some insight into how history favored the view Paul took: it would have been an advantage in his mission to the gentiles to make no demand of circumcision nor any other demand that could be explained as an element of the Jewish way of life. And yet, the attitude that was advocated by James did not fully depart from the Church.