

CHAPTER 2: 1-21

Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain.

But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me: But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:) And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision. Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do.

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.

For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.

COMMENTARY

{1} - Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also.

Seventeen years after his conversion, Paul returned to Jerusalem a second time. During the fourteen years between his first and second visits, Paul and Barnabas traveled extensively, preaching and establishing churches. It started in Antioch after the Holy Spirit specifically spoke to the prophets and said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:1-3).

They traveled to Seleucia, Cyprus and the island of Paphos. Somewhere in that journey, they picked up John Mark as their minister (Acts 13:5). From there they went to Perga in Pamphylia, but John Mark went back to Jerusalem. From there they returned to Antioch and preached Christ to the Jews in the temple, declaring Him to be the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the descendant of David through whom was preached the forgiveness of sin. When they were done and left the temple, the Gentiles besought Paul to preach to them the next Sabbath.

Many Jews and Jewish proselytes were converted by Paul's preaching and the next Sabbath day practically the whole city turned out to hear the word of God. But, the unconverted Jews grew envious of Paul and began contradicting his teaching. Paul and Barnabas waxed bold and retorted:

"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you; but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. And, when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." (Acts13:46-48)

The local Jews raised such persecution against them, that Paul and Barnabas were expelled from their coasts. But, they shook the dust of that city off their feet and headed for Iconium, where they abode a long time. From there they went to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonian, and all the regions round about them. Everywhere they went, both Jews and Gentiles believed. But unbelieving Jews who sought to end their preaching also dogged them constantly. In Lystra, Jews from Antioch and Iconium saw to it that Paul was stoned, and they dragged him from the city, presuming him to be dead. After his recovery, he returned again to Antioch.

From there they passed through Pisidia and Pamphylia, again. They preached in Perga and Attalia. From there they sailed back to Antioch. It was while they were in Antioch that certain men from Judaea began to teach the Gentiles that salvation was impossible without circumcision and adherence to Moses - the same teaching that had made it's way to Galatia. As a result of the dispute that arose between the Judaizers and Paul and Barnabas, it was determined that they should go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders to decide the question.

On their way to Jerusalem, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling of the Gentile conversions and bringing joy to the brethren. And, finally, after fourteen years, Paul found himself back in Jerusalem.

As for Titus, we only know that he was a Greek convert, who Paul called, "mine own son after the common faith" (Titus 1:4). He was a vital member of Paul's church-building team, and was essential in Paul's overseeing of the church at Corinth. "Whether any do inquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellow helper concerning you" (2ndCor.8:23). He was also Paul's emissary to Crete, establishing the church and setting up the leadership.

{2} - And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain.

It was not uncommon for Paul to be either hindered or inspired as he journeyed from area to area. He and Barnabas were specifically forbidden by the Holy Ghost to preach in Asia, and when they desired to go into Bithynia they were likewise stopped (Acts. 16:6).

On the other hand, Paul had a vision one night of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia, and off he went (Acts 16:9-10). So, Paul was sent by the Spirit to Jerusalem to present the gospel that had resulted in countless Gentile conversions.

But, unlike his former trip, where he openly disputed with the Greeks and was nearly killed, this time Paul met privately with those who were known to be believers. Otherwise, Paul figured, this whole effort was for naught. If he argued with unbelievers and paid with his life, he wouldn't be able to nurture the churches he had planted. And, if he could not come to some accord with the leaders at Jerusalem, he would be in continual conflict, always being undermined, as he sought to spread the word.

{3} - But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised:

This is an interesting bit of logic Paul was developing, here. The very error that Paul had encountered in Antioch had made its way to Galatia, teaching that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and submit themselves to the demands of the Mosaic Law. However, Paul pointed out that when he arrived at Jerusalem with Titus, the Greek believer was not compelled to undergo the flesh cutting ritual.

A Pauline Circumcision Theology

In order to avoid confusion, this might be a good juncture to get an overview of Paul's theology concerning circumcision. It is a commonly held misconception that physical circumcision was abolished for both Jew and Gentile with Christ's death, which then instituted the "circumcision of the heart" (Rom. 2:29). But, that's an overly-simplistic view. The circumcision of the heart is found in the Old Testament and was mandatory in both Moses and the prophets (Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer.4:4). It was not something new or exclusive to the New Testament. To put it another way, spiritual circumcision was contemporary with physical circumcision.

To understand Paul's theology, we must understand the Jewish perspective and history concerning circumcision. It was prescribed first as a "token" of the Abrahamic covenant and was mandatory for all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Gen.17:11-14, Acts 7:8). It was also prescribed under the Mosaic Covenant (we'll address this in more detail later) where it was mandatory for both Jews and Gentiles within the camp of Israel (Ex.12:48). But, even Jesus pointed out that the Mosaic version of circumcision was included because of the first covenant with the fathers - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (John 7:22).

New Covenant Theology argues rightly that the Mosaic Covenant was done away with at Calvary when the New Covenant in Christ's blood was instituted.

As a consequence, circumcision was no longer mandatory for either Jew or Gentile as a means of justification or in response to the Law of Sinai. However, the Abrahamic Covenant is an eternal covenant (Gen.13:15, 17:7, 17:13, 17:19, Heb.6:17-18) and Paul will argue in Galatians 3:15-18 that it was still in effect during his day. As a consequence, circumcision in response to the Abrahamic covenant was still a mandate - but only for Jews.

When Paul argued against circumcision for the church at Galatia, he was arguing against Gentile circumcision on the basis of the Mosaic Law. Thus, he would never have allowed Titus, being a Greek, to be circumcised. But, this same Paul had Timothy circumcised because he was partly Jewish -

"Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek."
(Acts 16:1-3)

Notice how specific the language is. Timothy was already a believer, but he would be traveling with Paul, who would be preaching in synagogues and traveling among the Jews. They would never have allowed Timothy in their company, or certainly in their temples, if he were a heathen. And, they knew that his dad was Greek. But, Paul wanted to verify his Jewish heritage, so he circumcised Timothy as proof of his Abrahamic descent.

Furthermore, the Jewish fathers in Jerusalem practiced circumcision and Paul took a public vow to show that he did not teach that Jewish believers should not practice circumcision.

"And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? The multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads. And all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we

have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them." (Acts 21:18-26)

If Paul advocated an absolute end of all things Jewish he would never have submitted himself to James' advice. He would have cried against them and showed how they "perverted" the gospel of Christ. However, Paul saw a clear distinction between the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Gentiles. He also recognized the church of God in which the middle wall of partition was broken down and God made of both one new man (1Cor.10:32, Eph.2:12-18). And, he preached that spiritual circumcision of the heart was mandatory for both. That's true for all men under all covenants.

Still, the seal of the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision and this remains mandatory for all Jews, believers and unbelievers. Paul's letter to the Galatians argues adamantly against circumcision for Gentiles who were never under either the Abrahamic or Mosaic covenants. Circumcision for justification or sanctification in either Jew or Gentile was eradicated in Christ's death. But, circumcision of Jews under the token of the Abrahamic covenant is both right and proper. It was not circumcision, per se, that Paul ruled out, but circumcision on the basis of the Mosaic Law. Since Jewish believers still fall under the physical and spiritual provisions of the Abrahamic covenant, they also fall under the rule of circumcision as a sign and seal of that same covenant.

But, as concerns Paul's argument at this moment, Titus the Greek was not compelled to be circumcised by the leaders of the Jerusalem church, and neither should the Gentile church at Galatia be compelled to do so.

{4} - And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:

Paul is establishing his position for the Galatian church that there is no demand for believing Gentiles to undergo circumcision - the token of Abrahamic descent - and submit themselves to the Mosaic Law. Titus is "exhibit A." Being right there in Jerusalem, the very center of Judaistic Christianity, Titus walked away uncut. But, that fact didn't mean there was no resistance.

The Galatian church had been under the bewitching influence of Judaizers who were also present in Jerusalem. Their "modus operandi" was to act as though they were fellow believers and infiltrate the church, spreading their doctrine of

works. In Jerusalem, false brethren sneaked into Paul's private meetings with "them which were of reputation" (Gal. 2:2).

From Paul's language, we can gather that they were brought in by others who had a good report, hiding their true intentions and acting covertly to "spy out" this doctrine of liberty that Paul preached. But, their ultimate aim was to argue Paul down and bring him back under the bondage of the law.

Paul's reaction?

{5} - To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

Paul was not impressed. He, Titus and Barnabas refused to be subject to their interference and gave them not even an hour of their time. Paul stood unbending, unwavering, declaring the gospel of free and Sovereign grace. And, he did it so that the truth he preached would continue unencumbered throughout the church. After all, if there were one standard for Jerusalem and another for Galatia, the church would be divided against itself. But, Paul gave no quarter to the purveyors of Moses' bondage so that the entire church could know the freedom that comes from, in, and through Christ.

And, those same forces are at work, today. But, it's imperative that we resist. A man or woman who defends the Sovereign Grace of God will most certainly undergo vicious attacks from the defenders of the flesh. The forces that want to take credit for their salvation will try to drive the "children of the free" (Gal. 4:31) back into the same bondage they suffer under. They will lie and act like brethren. They will infiltrate the most unified assemblies. They will act like they are in one accord with you until they gain your confidence and then they will attempt to clasp their yoke around your neck. But, take Paul's example. Don't give their words any space. Don't allow their argument to even get a foothold. Stand against the message of bondage with Gospel truth.

{6} - But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me:

The deceivers acted like men of great influence and men to be feared, respected and obeyed. But, whatever they considered themselves to be in their own minds, they were enemies of the gospel and any social importance they brandished made no difference to Paul. After all, he reasoned, God is not impressed by any man's stature or status. God receives no one on the basis of his or her works, merit or relative influence.

This idea was fundamental to Pauline theology. In his letter to the Romans, he declared, "For there is no respect of persons with God" (Rom.2:11). And, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, he instructed, "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening; knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him" (Eph.6:9).

James advanced this same idea, writing, "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons" (James 2:1).

And, Peter came to a similar conclusion when he was called for the first time to a Gentile convert, Cornelius. "Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35). Peter also wrote, "And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1Pet.1:17).

So, we should be instructed by their admonition. It's easy to be influenced by someone who appears intelligent, well read, influential, or politically powerful. Rich men or people with a "regal bearing" easily sway people. But, God is completely unmoved by any person's outward appearance or sense of self-importance. The truth is the truth is the truth. And, the truth must be defended at once and at all times against those who would pervert the gospel by means of their egocentric influence.

Those men who first appeared to be in agreement with Paul added nothing to his understanding and he was unimpressed with their opinions of themselves. When they showed their true colors, he was unaffected and unafraid. After all, the best maggot is still just a maggot. The highest worm is still a worm. The most righteous sinner is still a sinner. And, the gospel of gracious salvation is not to be altered to fit any man's assessment of it.

And, Paul also seems to be pointing out the fact that the Apostles who genuinely were in agreement with him added no extra burden to carry back to the Gentiles. Therefore, Paul was vindicated in disallowing the advice of the Judaizers.

{7-8} - But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles).

Okay now - this verse points out a very important piece of New Testament history, which in turn helps us in developing a proper New Testament theology.

The church was initially an Israelitish entity. Over time the church became peopled with both Jews and Gentiles. However, outside the church, the clear and obvious division between those who were descendants of Abraham and those who were not was still very much in existence. When Gentiles were added to the New Covenant of salvation by grace, the theological "middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14), which excluded Gentiles from the covenants of God established with Israel, was broken down. Hence, God - who is no respecter of any person's estate, heritage, or even gender - added believers to the church from every nation and status. In Christ, there was no advantage to being Jew or Gentile, free or bond, male or female. In Christ, they were all one (Gal.3:28).

Nevertheless, the social distinctions remained in the physical body that made up the church on planet earth. You could still distinguish among believers who were male or female, who was a free man or servant, and who was ethnically Jewish or Greek. Of course, this last division - Jew or Gentile - was the most difficult hurdle for both sides to come to terms with. The idea that Gentiles were brought under Israel's promised New Covenant was mysterious and sometimes repugnant to Jews. On the other hand, the fact that the Jews were scattered and their temple was destroyed led many Gentiles to believe that they had the preeminence in God's economy, to the casting off of the Jews.

But, God established particular ministries to each of the two groups. Peter, John and James remained in Jerusalem to minister very specifically and particularly to the circumcised descendants of Abraham. Meanwhile, Paul was sent by the Jerusalem council to teach and convert the uncircumcised Gentiles.

From this simple fact we can see clearly that the physical distinctions within the church were not only clear-cut, but perpetuated by the apostles. And, God blessed both sides of the distinction. He worked mightily in Peter's apostleship to the Jews just as he wrought effectively in Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles.

A Continuing Circumcision Theology

There's been far too much confusion in the twentieth century Gentile church concerning circumcision and its relationship to the Sinaitic Covenant, or Mosaic Law. The common misconception is that they represent one and the same thing. But, neither Scripture nor Old Testament history bear out that notion.

Here's a plain fact - circumcision is not commanded as part of the Law of Sinai.

Surprised? It's true. Circumcision was assumed to be already in place and practiced among the people of Israel when the Law was introduced. Circumcision is referenced in the law, but never given as a command to Israel. As the "token" of the Abrahamic covenant, it was already commanded to Israel and was never reestablished as a sign, seal or token of the Mosaic covenant.

Okay, let's look at the evidence. The words "circumcise," "circumcised" and "circumcision" occur only six times in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. However, the two occurrences in Deuteronomy have nothing to do with physical circumcision -

"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked." (Deut 10:16)

"And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." (Deut 30:6)

Notice the progression of thought between these two verses. The first mention of the circumcision of the heart in chapter ten is a command from God to stiff-necked Israel and is in the context of their obligation to keep His declared law. The second occurrence in chapter thirty is in the context of God's ingathering and re-establishment of Israel as a nation, after the curses for breaking the law and after the scattering. God will bring the most distant Israelite back to the land He promised their forefathers and He promised to do them good.

The first of those blessings is that He will multiply them beyond their forefathers, and the second is that He will do in them what He commanded from them. God will be the Sovereign force that will circumcise the heart of Israel and cause them to keep the very command that Jesus quoted as the greatest –

"Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment." (Mat.22:35-38)

Now, the only place in the Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy where the word "circumcision" appears is when Moses was sleeping at an inn, but hadn't circumcised his son - long before the deliverance from Egypt or God spelling out the law -

"Then Zipporah (Moses' wife) took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his (Moses') feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he (God) let him (Moses) go; and she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision." (Ex.4:25-26)

The remaining two references to circumcision do actually appear as part and parcel of the Law. But, the first one is in the context of childbirth -

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child:

then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled." (Lev 12:1-4)

There's nothing new here. This set of commands has to do with ceremonial cleansing after childbirth, but the circumcision on the eighth day is assumed and continued in the same manner it was established in the Abrahamic Covenant.

The final reference is in the context of keeping the Passover -

"And the LORD said unto Moses and Aaron, This is the ordinance of the Passover: There shall no stranger eat thereof: But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof. A foreigner and an hired servant shall not eat thereof. In one house shall it be eaten; thou shalt not carry forth ought of the flesh abroad out of the house; neither shall ye break a bone thereof. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof." (Exod 12:43-48)

Here again, there's nothing new as concerns the Hebrews. However, if a stranger wanted to keep the Passover with the Israelites, it was necessary that he have the sign of circumcision on him. The Passover was a continual reminder of God's deliverance from Egypt in keeping with his promise to Abraham –

"Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance." (Gen.15:13-14)

So, any person sitting down to commemorate the Passover would have to have the covenant sign in their flesh.

And, believe it or not, that's it! There is nowhere in the Mosaic Law where Israel is commanded to observe or obey circumcision as a sign, symbol or token of the Law. It was already in practice among the Israelites, and God neither re-commanded, redefined, nor negated it. The token of the Sinaitic Law was the Sabbath. But, circumcision was the token of the Abrahamic Covenant, unchanged by the Law of Sinai.

"And this I say, that the covenant that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise." (Gal.3:17-18)

So, here's a vital point. If the establishment of the Law could not disannul the Abrahamic covenant and its token symbol, then the passing away of the Law had no effect, either. That's essential Pauline circumcision theology.

My point for the moment is that circumcision and the Law were not one and the same. They were entirely different entities, serving entirely different purposes. Even Jesus testified to the fact that circumcision predated Moses and, though it was prescribed in Moses' law, it was included because of God's promise to the forefathers - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

"Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man." (John 7:22)

Okay, you say. Let's assume I'm going along with you, Jim. How does this affect our New Testament understanding and particularly our Galatians understanding?

Oh, good. I thought you'd never ask.

The Judaizers were so convinced that the New Covenant was a strictly Israelitish outgrowth, that they wanted believing Gentiles to become proselytes to Judaism. Hence, the phrase - "Ye must be circumcised and keep the law..." (Acts.15:24). A complete conversion to Judaism would require both circumcision - to be in the Abrahamic Covenant - and keeping the law - to be under the Mosaic Covenant.

But, to overstate the case, they are not one and the same, nor do they symbolize the same thing. Paul adamantly objected to the circumcision of Gentiles, because the only place that was prescribed was in the Mosaic Law. So, if any Gentile submitted to circumcision, he was indebted to accomplish the whole law. It was tantamount to attempting personal justification by works.

However, circumcision of Hebrews was not prescribed in the Law, it was already in place. Paul objected to the Jews who believed their circumcision was a first-class ticket to Heaven. Later in this letter he will argue that where justification before God is concerned neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything - salvation is only accomplished through faith in Christ.

Now, to return to the verses before us, a very particular distinction is spelled out in this section of Paul's Galatian letter, and we'd be remiss if we passed over it without digging in a bit. In verses 7-9, we read:

"But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles). And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision." (Gal 2:7-9)

Three times in this section we read that there was a division of ministries among the apostles. Whereas Paul was sent to the Gentiles, John, James and particularly Peter were committed to "the gospel of the circumcision." And, God dealt powerfully with both divisions, working effectually in Peter and Paul.

So, who were "the circumcision" to whom Peter was committed? Let's start with a little history and then we'll deal with the implications -

After the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the kingdom was united under King David. However, under Solomon the kingdom was divided. The northern ten tribes were henceforth called Israel, or Ephraim, and the southern two tribes were called Judah. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians captured Samaria, carrying the northern tribes into captivity. During their captivity, Syrian families occupied Ephraim's land, Samaria. When they were released, some Israelites returned to Samaria and intermarried, becoming half-breeds, or Samaritans.

Meanwhile, the balance of the northern tribes remained in exile, traveling in bands across middle Europe and Asia. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians conquered not only the northern Samaritan area, but also took captives from Jerusalem. Those captives eventually returned with Nehemiah after the decree of Cyrus. But, some stayed behind in the areas of Persia and northern Syria.

Over the years, the Northern tribes became increasingly scattered and separated from their kindred in Judah. Several occupations of Jerusalem led to waves of captivity and rebuilding as the Greek and Roman empires rose and fell. Some Israelites chose to stay in the lands of their captivity, having established families and trades. About the middle of the second century B.C. the Sibylline Oracles could say of the Jewish people: "Every land and every sea is full of thee" (3:271).¹

In New Testament times the largest concentration of displaced Jews was in Egypt. But, they also had a significant presence in Mesopotamia and Syria. Josephus said that Syria had the largest percentage of Jewish inhabitants in his day, centered in Antioch. There were also thousands in Damascus. There is also evidence that Jews took up residence in Greece and Asia Minor, particularly

Pamphylia, Cilicia, Bithynia, Macedonia and Corinth. Of course, there was also a Jewish prevalence in Italy and the islands of the Mediterranean, such as Cyprus and Crete.

As a consequence, Paul found well-established synagogues during his journeys, and it was his habit to begin his work among his own people in each new location.

These scattered members of Judah and Israel (Jews and Israelites, or Ephraimites, respectively) were called "*golah*" - or "exiled" - in the Hebrew tongue, and the "*diaspora*" - or "scattered" - in Greek. The word "diaspora" has been transliterated into English as "dispersion." The term "diaspora" is a comprehensive term used to designate any and all Israelites living outside Palestine, whether or not they are maintaining their customs and religious observances among the Gentiles.

On one notable occasion, Jesus said to the Pharisees –

"Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me; and where I am, thither ye cannot come. Then said the Jews among themselves, Whither will he go that we shall not find him? Will he go unto the dispersed [*diaspora*] among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles?" (John 7:34-35)

Now, some of these dispersed religious Jews, in keeping with their dedication to the Mosaic commands, traveled three times a year to Jerusalem. Well, it was during just such an event, one particular feast of Pentecost, or Feast of Weeks, that Jews from all over were assembled at Jerusalem. There were –

"Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians..." (Acts 2:9-11)

Because of the wide range of Gentile cities named in this list, some writers have mistakenly concluded that this gathering included Gentiles and Jews. But, there were clearly no Gentiles keeping the Mosaic feasts. These were all religious Jews, including Jewish converts, gathering in Jerusalem in accordance with the law. In fact, in verse 5 they were specifically identified as, "Jews, devout men out of every nation under heaven."

Of course, Peter (the apostle to the circumcised) stood up and preached to these men and they all heard in their own language. Three thousand were converted and the church was born out of this gathering of the "*diaspora*."

Now, it's important that we keep this particularity in mind when we approach the epistles of Peter, James and John. While John addressed one of his letters to

"the well-beloved Gaius" (3John 1:1) and another to "the elect lady and her children whom I love in the truth" (2John 1:1), his first epistle had no address at all. On the other hand, James and Peter were very specific about their intended audience. James first -

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered [diaspora] abroad, greeting." (James 1:1)

In keeping with his station as an apostle to the circumcision, James was not writing to Gentile believers. His intended readers were the dispersed believers among Israel's twelve tribes. If we remember that, it will help clear up some of the debates concerning James. On to Peter -

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers [alt. - exiles, pilgrims, sojourners] scattered [diaspora] throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." (1Peter 1:1)

Just as the book of Acts and Galatians point out Peter's specific ministry to the circumcised, his epistle is specifically addressed to the scattered believers of Israel, the outgrowth of the church born among the Jews at Pentecost. This is perfectly in keeping with Jesus' directive to his apostles -

"These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And, as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." (Mat. 10:5-7)

"But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come." (Matt 10:23)

The original apostolic directive was to Israel. And, as we see in Galatians, the inclusion of Gentiles through Paul's ministry did not negate the ministry of the Jerusalem elders to the circumcised. Peter's second epistle was addressed -

"Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." (2Peter 1:1)

While this second address is less specific, it certainly includes the dispersed group and, in keeping with Peter's specific ministry focus, probably does not include Gentiles.

Now, what are the implications of these facts?

When we read Peter's epistles, we must understand them from a Jewish perspective, keeping Israel's promises and history in focus. They were not intended for Gentiles and any theology which springs from these epistles must take these facts into account. However, far too often, these facts are ignored or confused.

For instance, 1Peter 2:5 and 2:9 are often used in defense of the "Spiritual Israel" position. The advocates of the "Spiritual Israel" or "True Israel" position approach this epistle with the assumption that Peter was writing to the Gentile church. As a result, they postulate that the promises made to national Israel that they would become "a peculiar treasure unto me [God] above all people...a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation..." (Ex.19:5-6) were fulfilled in the Gentile church. Hence, the Gentiles must have in some fashion become "Israel".

But, the background and history of Peter's ministry and specific target audience makes such a conclusion impossible. Peter was writing to circumcised Hebrew believers who had become the first fruits of God's promise to national Israel. They were indeed "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people..." (1Pet.2:9). The same people God promised these titles to were the very recipients of these promises, according to Peter, the apostle to the circumcision. No Gentiles were in Peter's mind, sight or audience when he penned these words.

Biblical, historical facts and overall context must guide and determine our theology, or else we will fall prey to all sorts of speculative thinking and false teaching.

{9} - And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.

So, faced with the undeniable truth - attested to by miracles and widespread Gentile conversion - James, Peter and John, who gave every appearance of being sturdy pillars of the Jerusalem church, embraced Paul - the former enemy of the church - into their fellowship. And, they struck an accord that Paul and Barnabas would go to the uncircumcised "heathen" Gentiles and they would continue to minister among the circumcised Israelites and Jews.

This entire event is recorded in Acts 15. James concluded the meeting by declaring -

"Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things

strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day." (Acts 15:19-21)

The council decided that the best way to convince both the believers and the naysayers in the various regions was for two of their own men, Barsabas and Silas, chief men among the Jerusalem brethren, to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. That way they would not only have a letter from the apostles themselves, but there would be physical witnesses that an accord had been reached.

"And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well." (Acts 15:23-29)

{10} - Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do.

This particular detail is not mentioned in the Book of Acts. But, Paul remembered and included it in his directives to the Galatian church. The "*poor*" here is most likely a reference to the destitute believers in Jerusalem. They had been suffering under both Roman and Jewish persecution, their homes and properties were burned or sold, and they were reduced to meeting in catacombs of the dead to avoid the penalty for worshipping Christ. They were certainly the focus of most of Paul's collections.

"But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are; for if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things." (Romans 15:25-27)

So, Barnabas, Paul, Barsabas and Silas headed for Antioch with their letter to put the false teachers' doctrine to rest. When Barsabas and Silas were released

to return to Jerusalem, Silas decided to stay there awhile. Meanwhile, Paul and Barnabas continued preaching and raising up other men to preach. Then, one day Peter came to town...

{11-12} - But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.

Of all the characters in Scripture, the one for whom we get the most complete "personality profile" is Peter. True to his basic nature and character, we find him repeatedly saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing and going the wrong way.

The gospels are replete with stories of Peter's confusion and failure. He was the only apostle whom Jesus ever called "Satan" to his face because he could not discern the necessity of Christ's death (Mat.16:23). Peter was the apostle who Satan specifically desired to "sift as wheat" (Luke 22:31). It was Peter who misunderstood the Mount of Transfiguration and wanted to build tabernacles to Elijah, Moses and Christ, putting them on an equal par (Luke 9:28-33). Peter, along with John and his brother James, gave in to their flesh and slept while the Lord was praying in agony (Luke 22:44-46). Of course, Peter's most infamous acts was denying his Lord three times (Mat. 26:34). And, while Jesus lay in the tomb, it was Peter who, in an act of weary resignation, decided to go back to where he came from. "Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing..." (John 21:3).

Now, I'm quick to point out that despite the low points, no apostle ever experienced the extreme high points that Peter did. Peter walked on more water than any man in shoe leather, save Christ. Peter heard the voice from Heaven say "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him." (Mat. 17:5) Jesus specifically prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. Peter was restored three times by Christ Himself, the same number as his denials. It was Peter who preached the message at Pentecost, bringing the New Covenant church into existence as three thousand Jews were converted. Later, walking with John, Peter healed a lame man lying outside the temple gate. Peter and John continued inside the temple and preached Christ, bringing yet another five thousands Jews into the church (Acts 4:4).

But, Peter had a blind spot. He was convinced that the New Covenant was a strictly Israelitish promise. And, after seeing eight thousand Jewish converts, he had plenty of evidence that he was right. He could not imagine that the fulfillment of centuries of Hebrew prophecy would also include Gentile "sinners." So, God needed to change his mind.

The first Gentile believer mentioned in the book of Acts is a Roman centurion named Cornelius who lived in the coastal city of Caesarea. We read about him in Acts 10. He may have heard the gospel from Philip (Acts 8:40), but more than likely he heard the gospel when Paul passed through on his way to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). Anyway, God gave Cornelius a vision instructing him to call for Simon Peter. So, he sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to seek Peter at Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa, a day's journey away.

The next day, as the messengers were drawing close to Joppa, Peter was up on the housetop around noon to pray. Suddenly, he became very hungry for lunch, but he fell into a trance and saw Heaven open up. Down out of Heaven came a large sheet, with the four corners joined and knit together, coming down to earth. Inside it were all sorts of four-footed beasts, wild animals, creeping things and birds. The one thing they had in common was that none of the animals were "kosher". They were not fit for consumption according to the Mosaic Law. But, a voice said, "Rise, Peter. Kill and eat" (Acts 10:13).

Uh-oh.

So, Peter argued and said, "Not so, Lord. For I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." But, the voice corrected him. "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." Three times this conversation went back and forth and then the whole sheet rose back up into Heaven (Acts 10:14-16).

Just at that moment there was a knock at the door. The men called out asking if Simon Peter was lodging there. The Spirit spoke to Peter, saying, "Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." (Acts 10:19-20) Peter brought the men in, heard the story about Cornelius and his vision, and invited them to stay the night. The next day they all journeyed to Caesarea, taking some of the brethren from Joppa with them.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house he found a large gathering. Suddenly, Peter understood the vision. He explained to the gathering, "Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation, but God hath shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28)

After hearing Cornelius' account of the events leading up to their meeting, Peter declared, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10:34-35)

As Peter continued preaching, the Holy Ghost fell on all those in the house, and those Jews who were traveling with Peter were astonished because the Holy Ghost was poured out on the Gentiles and they spoke with tongues, magnifying

God. So, Peter concluded, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" (Acts 10:47)

Well, back in Jerusalem the message came to the apostles that the Gentiles had received the word of God. And, when Peter returned, they argued and contended with him. Obviously, they weren't too keen on the idea of Gentile inclusion, either. They chastised him, saying, "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised and didst eat with them!" (Acts 11:3).

But, Peter explained the whole event, detail by detail. He concluded, "Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." (Acts.11:18)

My point in recounting that bit of history is to emphasize the fact that the early Jerusalem church was not expecting, or initially pleased at, Gentile inclusion into Israel's covenantal relationship with God. They had to learn it the hard way, and there was always an undertone of resistance and discomfort whenever Jews and Gentiles assembled together.

So, while Peter was in Antioch he was eating with Paul's Gentile converts, sitting at the table and sharing the same food. But, when he saw certain Jewish members of the Jerusalem church, who he was sure would report back to James, he was afraid of their "power in numbers" and separated himself. Given James' previous chastisement and Peter's history for folding under pressure, it probably wasn't surprising.

Big mistake. Paul came down hard. Peter, according to Paul, was to be blamed for his actions. It gave mixed signals to the believers and was blatantly hypocritical.

{13} - *And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.*

The James crowd supported Peter's move and they all disassociated themselves from the Gentiles. In fact, so pervasive was the pressure that Barnabas joined in and left eating with the very same people he had preached to save.

{14} - *But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?*

Paul - ever vigilant to see that the gospel was never confused and that grace and law were never mixed - confronted Peter before the whole crowd of Jews and Gentiles. Peter's dissembling undermined the truth of the gospel that worked equally among Jews and Gentiles. While God was no respecter of persons, Peter certainly was. So, Paul put him to the test.

First, he made sure that the Jews were aware that Peter had been eating and living among the Gentiles prior to their arrival. Peter was not going to get away with his self-righteous act. Paul asked, "If you, being a Jew, live like a Gentile and not as the Jews do..." Loaded question.

He made sure the Jews knew that Peter had been living as a Gentile. "...why do you compel the Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Very clever. Paul said, in essence, "Peter, since you weren't acting like a devout Jew, even though you are a Jew, why in the world would you require Gentiles - who are clearly not Jews - to act like devout Jews?"

Paul is carefully constructing his defense against the Galatian Judaizers. Even Peter, who was a pillar in the Jerusalem church, had defended Gentile converts. And, this same Peter ate and lived among Gentiles. So, clearly, the contingent of false teachers who claimed to have Jerusalem authority to bind the Galatians with circumcision and the law were not the genuine article. Peter, John and James gave the right hand of fellowship to Paul, and Peter was withstood to his face when he gave in to the Judaizers' pressure.

So, Paul could defend his condemnation of the false teachers, claim support from Jerusalem, and show that even when a "pillar" crossed the line, Paul was instant to defend the truth.

{ 15 } - *We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,*

Paul is continuing his polemic against Peter. His argument is building - "If you, being a natural-born Jew, live and eat the same way as the Gentiles, and not as the strict, law-keeping Jews do, then why do you compel the Gentiles to keep the Jewish law that you, yourself, don't keep? After all, we believers who are Jews by natural birth, and not heathen sinners, know that no man will be justified in the sight of God by attempting fleshly obedience to the law..."

Now, as long as we're here, let's take another quick side road and address a parallel bit of controversy that rises from the phrase -

"We who are Jews by nature..."

Historically, the word Jew specifically denoted someone from the Southern Kingdom, Judah - made up of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, along with the Levites who served in the temple. During the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim was scattered, abandoning the religion

of their forefathers. However, despite periods of apostasy and captivity, the Southern Kingdom retained its Judaic heritage and the historic Jewish religion. Both the nation of Judah and the Law of Moses had to be retained intact in order to fulfill the prophetic appearance of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Prophet greater than Moses, David's greater Son.

In the New Testament, the people who continued in the tradition and religion of historic Judah were specifically denoted as Jews. But, "Jew" was also an ethnic designation given to anyone naturally born into the heritage of Judah.

When an ethnic Jew came to faith in Christ, he retained his ethnicity. Hence, Paul would refer to them as "Jews by nature," as opposed to those who kept the religion of the Jews - the Law of Moses and the rabbinical traditions.

Jesus encountered fierce opposition from the religious Jews. Though they shared a common ethnic heritage and were all descendants of Judah, Jesus "came to His own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). However, among the descendants of Israel Jesus found plenty of converts, as demonstrated by Pentecost.

Now, Saul of Tarsus, a Benjamite, was raised a law-keeping Jew, zealous for the traditions of the Torah, who was chosen by God to preach the gospel of sovereign grace to the Gentiles. Nevertheless, his heritage, ancestry and ethnicity remained unquestionably Jewish. Importantly, Paul was very specific about, and never mixed, his terminology. Whenever he used the term "Jew," he wrote specifically of the particular people who retained the heritage, ancestry and religion of the Jews.

Yes, there were converts to Judaism intermingled with the nation of Judah, but Paul never, ever used the term "Jew" when referring to Gentiles, in either a figurative or literal sense. Paul consistently used the terms "Jew" and "Gentile" as two separate classifications and he never intermingled the terms, blurring the lines of distinction.

Now, the controversy concerning this subject stems from Paul's letters to the church at Rome when he declared,

"For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." (Rom.2:28-29)

The context of Romans 2 makes obvious that Paul was comparing believing, faithful Jews to legalistic, law-keeping Jews. Paul was not creating a formula whereby believing Gentiles were mysteriously converted into "spiritual Jews."

The entire passage in Romans was addressed to people who had a particular distinction –

"Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God." (Rom.2:17)

Eleven verse later when Paul concluded, "For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly..." (Rom. 2:28), the context had not changed.

Paul was denouncing the notion that simply keeping the outward signs of Judaism - circumcision and the law - was sufficient to justify any man before God. An inward change of attitude was also required. However, according to the Deuteronomical Law, God would perform just such an inward change on Israel and Judah –

"And, the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." (Deut.30:6)

So, on the basis of God's word, Paul contrasted the legalistic, outward Jews with those who had come to faith, been changed internally, and were the outgrowth of what Judaism should ultimately be.

Again, to put a sharp point on it, nowhere in Paul's discussion did he introduce Gentiles. Nor was Paul including Gentiles in his theology of who was or was not a Jew and what genuine Judaism would look like. Gentiles becoming "true Jews" is a concept that must be forced onto the text, despite being utterly absent from Paul's words.

So, the phrase, "we who are Jews by nature..." is a reference to natural-born Jews, as contrasted against "...sinners of the Gentiles". Jewish tradition concluded that all Gentiles, separate from the promises and covenants of Israel, were born into a sinful state from which they could not extricate themselves. Only Jews, born into the revealed religion of God, could have communion and forgiveness from God, by the sacrifices of the temple and the intercession of the high priest.

However, in the midst of all this historic religion and tradition, Paul announced a new class of Jews --- believing Jews. These Jews understood the prophetic Messianic passages of their scripture and had embraced Christ as their deliverer.

He will build his argument from that platform. To paraphrase - "We naturally-born, believing Jews who were not counted as dogs and sinners among the Gentiles, know about Christ's redemptive purpose and how it changed our standing before the Mosaic law..."

{ 16 } - Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Let's take this in parts -

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law...

Paul's dogmatic statement was an absolute contradiction to the very fundamental, bedrock belief of the Jews' religion. Failing to understand the true purpose of the law - to make sin more obviously sin - the Jews had set out to establish their own righteousness, using the Mosaic Law as their benchmark. Paul was pulling the rug out from under their self-righteousness in order to declare the righteousness that is "by the faith of Jesus Christ."

The first thing any believer must sacrifice is any reliance on their fleshly work to save or justify themselves in the High Court of Heaven.

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20)

The law was added to the covenants of Israel to convict them of their desperate condition. It was never able to lift anyone from his or her sinful estate and make them acceptable before God. That's Christianity 101.

...but by the faith of Jesus Christ...

Justification before God can only be achieved by, through, and on the account of, Christ's sacrificial work. What the law could not do because it was only able to condemn, Christ did once for all to the complete salvation of His people. That's Christianity 102.

Paul was also building an interesting contrast. In this phrase, he emphasized the faithful work of the eternal high priest, who - through faith in His Father's promises - sacrificed Himself to purchase and redeem His people. In other words, we are saved by the faith of Christ, Himself. His faith and His faithfulness, as the "author and finisher of faith" (Heb. 12:2), were the catalyst of the justification and salvation of those initially faithless sinners for whom He died.

...even we [Jews by nature] have believed in Jesus Christ...

Here's the core of Paul's argument - Even "we" natural-born Jews have realized the weakness of the law where justification is concerned. "We," then, have

turned to faith in Christ, believing - *pisteuo*, having faith - in the finished work of Christ. Whereas Christ's faithfulness accomplished our redemption, that act culminated in His elect believing in Christ. The faith of Christ ultimately produced faith in Christ.

Cool, eh?

...that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law...

The eternal justification of sinners was accomplished "by the faith of Christ." So, the flow of Paul's argument to Peter - repeated for sake of the Galatians - is building like this: These Gentiles have embraced Christ for their justification, just as "we" believing Jews have. And, "we" know that the law is of no value in justification, so why should we impose that same law on these believing Gentiles?

Justification is ultimately, and exclusively, accomplished by Christ's finished work without the addition of our fleshly efforts. And, that justification is evident and effectual in any person's life through faith. Believing in the redemption from Calvary is all it takes to accomplish perfect acceptance.

...for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Paul was being purposefully redundant for those who were slow to grasp his meaning. The Law of Moses, the righteous standard from Sinai, the holy law of God, will never be the means of any person's acceptance before God. No flesh, not one single person, will ever plead their own fleshly accomplishments to the saving of their souls. The glory of Christ will never be superceded by the acts of sinful flesh.

{17} - But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.

Ahh, but here's the rub. Some argumentative sort out there will pipe up and say, "Well at least the law gave us a standard to live by and measure ourselves. You believers claim that you're justified and accepted by God, but I see you transgressing the law, breaking the Sabbath, eating with Gentiles, and falling into all sorts of fleshly problems. But, you still claim that Christ defends you. So, then Christ must be the servant and minister of sin and sinners!"

Paul's response?

No way, man! God forbid! It just ain't so! You don't understand the way things work. And, I won't turn again to the law and attempt personal justification.

{18} - For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.

To decipher this cryptic phrase, Paul is about to tell us that the things he destroyed were his own self-will and attempted self-righteousness. They were buried along with Christ and should never be resurrected. And, the sins that the naysayers point out are of no consequence, being purged and cast into the sea of forgetfulness.

Real transgression, then, is not constituted by the sins of the flesh that God forgave and cast behind His back. Real transgression would be any attempt to raise ourselves back up, seeking to establish our own righteousness, the way the religious Jews did.

"For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." (Rom.10:2-4)

To a Jewish legalist, Paul's freedom in Christ would be considered outright sin, and a source of criticism against Christianity. But, Paul countered that returning to the old method of fleshly performance after he had put his flesh to death, would be a greater and much more grievous offense.

{19} - For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God.

The law kills. The law holds men guilty and requires punishment. The wages of sin is death. And, Paul found himself to be judged and killed by the law. The good news is, dead men are no longer bound by the law. The law requires performance and dead men cannot perform. The law killed Paul, and he was then freed from the demands of the law, being dead by and to the law.

But, the resurrection power of Christ indwelt the dead man. The power that lifted Christ from the grave indwelt the putrefying sinner and made a new man of him. Being freed from the demands of the law, the resurrected man could live for, and through, God.

"...for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." (2Cor. 3:6)

{20} - I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

What marvelous theology! Christ, as our substitute, as the head of His church, died for our sins and paid the sufficient price to purchase our eternal redemption. In Christ, the believer is crucified, paying the price of sin.

The wages of sin - death - have been satisfied.

BUT! Having been killed and freed from the demands of the law, the sufficient price being paid and God's justice being satisfied, we are also resurrected with Christ, free from the law, not under the guilt of sin and able to serve God with a clear conscience. Why? Because we are no longer living our own lives. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Ghost, lives in us and works through us.

So, our fleshly lives are no longer enslaved to sin and the threat of the law. The power of the law is sin, but our sins have been atoned for. Now, the life we live in the flesh we live by the power of His everlasting life. We have faith, being fully persuaded of His finished work, and we have peace with God. This peace, this salvation, this freedom, was accomplished on our behalf because of the everlasting love of God, shining through Christ, demonstrated by taking our punishment and justifying us eternally.

Now, don't forget the context. This was Paul's proclamation. He was representative of "we who are Jews by nature" (Gal. 2:6), who believed on Christ. This contrast between the law and salvation by grace through faith was a critical and emotionally-charged debate. As magnificent as the claims of the gospel were - and are - they flew in the face of everything the legalistic Jews held sacred.

Nevertheless, Paul would not bend to the demands of the law, his own heritage, the history of Israel, or the pressure of the lawyers, Pharisees and Sadducees. To turn from this newly declared salvation by faith and return to attempting justification by works would be to overturn the grace of God --- which Paul refused to do.

{ 21 } -] do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.

And, that's the crux of the whole argument, really. If any person were able to achieve a standard of fleshly righteousness so perfect that even God was obliged to recognize and reward it, then there was no purpose to Calvary. If there were any possibility that men could, in and of themselves, achieve justification before the law, then the sacrifice of Christ was an empty exercise.

Either Christ accomplished the final, irreplaceable, complete and utter salvation of His people - an accomplishment that law-keeping flesh could never achieve -

or, He was beaten, bloodied, pierced, tortured and died in agony for no good reason.

To whatever degree we insist on being accepted before God on our personal merit, to that degree we make the cross of Christ of no effect. It's an all or nothing at all proposition. He is either everything, accomplishing everything, achieving everything, and receiving everything, or He is a weakling who died in vain in the hope that someone would come along behind Him and finish what He started.

I'm on Paul's side. I frustrate not the grace of God. In fact, I am completely dependent on it. And, we need preach no other justification, no other approach, no other gospel, but that which proclaims our utter peace and acceptance before God through faith, by grace.....

Alone.

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