**GOD’S TRUE SONS**

***What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. 2He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. 3So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. 4But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. 6Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” 7******So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.***

**Galatians 4:1-7 (NIV)**

This passage concludes Paul’s first argument from scripture (3:1 – 4:7). The preceding passage ended on the note of the Gentiles being part of Abraham’s true ‘seed’ and so heirs in keeping with the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15. 4:1-7 elaborates this theme. Since only ‘sons’ are heirs in Greco-Roman culture, the heart of the passage spells out how the Galatian Gentiles have become ‘sons’ so as to become heirs. 4:1-3 expands and reapplies the theme of the law as a pedagogue leading us to Christ, while 4:4-7, still using the pedagogue imagery, spells out how it is that ‘we’ became ‘sons’ and so ‘heirs.’

‘*What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. 2He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father’* (4:1,2). When Paul first used the pedagogue imagery in 3:23,24, his emphasis was on the historic role of the Law. It was to serve as Israel’s custodian until the time that faith would be revealed. That argument concluded with the affirmation that through Christ, the Galatian Gentiles themselves became part of ‘Abraham’s seed,’ and so ‘heirs in keeping with the promise.’ In picking up the pedagogue imagery again (4:2), Paul’s emphasis is now on the ‘heir-in-waiting’ – the one who has all the privileges while still a minor. The conclusion to the argument is that all people, Jew and Gentile alike, who are under the Law are potential ‘sons’ and heirs and are brought into the family through Christ and the Spirit. Paul at the same time picks up the ‘slave/free’ contrast (from 3:28), which in that case was a cultural reality, but is now used metaphorically to refer to those under the Law. The son-heir is no better off than a slave as long as he is under the tutelage of the slave-tutor.

In Paul’s thinking, the Jewish community, who until the coming of Christ had lived all their lives under the Law, are like a son who is heir of the whole estate; but until the son reaches the time appointed by the father, he is no better off than a slave. One day he will rule the estate, but until that time, he ‘*is**subject to guardians and trustees.’*

*‘So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world’* (4:3). As elsewhere in this letter, Paul’s ‘*we’* (‘*when we were children’*) is in the context of his being part of the Jewish community. The ‘*so also’* that begins the sentence is more likely meant to be read as the more emphatic ‘so even’: ‘so even we Jews, when we were under-age, were enslaved.’

But in place of the expected ‘enslaved to law,’ Paul uses language from the Greco-Roman world describing their ‘enslavement’ to ‘*the basic principles of the world’* (literally: the elements of the world). In Greek, as in English, the word ‘elements’ has two meanings. First, it can be used in the sense of ‘elementary’ things (c.f. Hebrews 5:12 where it is used in this way). If this was Paul’s meaning here, he was likening the Old Testament period to the rudimentary education of the people of God, which was completed by further education when Christ came. The second way ‘elements’ can be interpreted is as the elemental spirits of the universe. These were often associated in the ancient world with either the physical elements (earth, fire, air and water) or with the heavenly bodies (the sun, moon and stars) which controlled the seasonal festivals on earth. Whether Paul thought the first or the second, there can be little question that he was equating Jewish ‘bondage’ to the law with pagan bondage to the ‘powers,’ whatever the nature of that enslaving might actually be. Jew and Gentile were enslaved together, like a minor who is an heir but still under tutelage by a slave. All alike await the freedom that only Christ and the Spirit can bring.

‘*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son,**born of a woman, born under law, 5to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons’* (4:4,5). In contrast to a former time when God’s people were no better off than a ‘minor,’ still under the tutelage of a slave-pedagogue, ‘*the time had fully come’* for them to reach their maturity. God’s time came with Christ, especially through His redemptive work on the cross. And as he argued at the beginning (3:2-5), this has been evidenced experientially through the gift of the Spirit (3:6).

The emphasis is on God’s activity: what God Himself has done for the Galatians to stop them listening to those who would bring them under Torah. God the Father is the subject, but His saving activity has been carried out through the redemptive activity of the Son, who has inaugurated God’s eschatological salvation with its inclusion of Jew and Gentile alike as His own children. That saving activity has been made effective by the Spirit of the Son whom the Father sent ‘*into our hearts’* (4:6).

In 4:4,5 Paul makes four points about Christ and His saving activity. First, ‘*God sent his Son.’* This is an assertion of Christ’s pre-existence. Though the verb does not necessarily imply pre-existence, in the parallel sentence in 4:6 Paul uses the same verb to refer to the sending of the Spirit. The inference is clearly that the Spirit pre-existed His sending. God sent His already existing Son and then His already existing Spirit. Neither was created at that moment.

Second, Paul’s emphasis with the phrase ‘*born of a woman,’* is on Christ’s incarnation. If the clause ‘*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son’* implies the Son’s pre-existence, then ‘*born of a woman’* implies His genuine humanity. The Son of God shared fully in our humanity. At a given point in time he was ‘*born of a woman.’*

Third, the middle clauses ‘*born under law, 5to redeem those under law’* (4:4b,5a) reiterate the primary point of Paul’s argument. The Galatians must not be circumcised because that means to come under Torah. Christ Himself came under Torah that no others would need to. Gentiles by the Spirit have become God’s people through faith in Jesus Christ and are therefore not obligated to observe Torah. In becoming God’s children through Christ and the Spirit, they are thereby also Abraham’s children and heirs to the promise made to Abraham. Here is the reason for emphasising the incarnation. Because Christ entered history within the context of Israel’s story, He eliminated for historical Israel the ‘curse’ of having to live by the Law (which in itself would have eliminated living by faith [3:12-14]). God’s Son was both truly human and born within the context of Israel.

Fourth, Christ did all that He did ‘*that we might receive the full rights of sons’* (4:5) or more literally: ‘adoption as sons.’ This is a technical term, used especially in the Roman culture that refers to the full legal standing of an adopted male heir. In its immediate context this word refers to the time when the son enters ‘maturity.’ The promised blessing of inheritance, which included Gentiles, has been effected by Christ through the same act of redemption that also set people free forever from Torah observance. Abraham’s true sons, including Gentiles who through Christ share in the promised blessing, are God’s ‘sons,’ having become so through the adoption that God’s own Son effected for them. It is this relationship, ‘sonship’ with God Himself, that is the point of Paul’s argument. Through Christ Gentiles are not just freed from their own form of slavery to beings who are not gods; they are also freed from that form of slavery to which Jews had been enslaved, under which the agitators would now bring them. Through Christ believers are not slaves. They are free children with all the rights and privileges of free children.

‘*Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father”’ (*4:6). For Paul the work of Christ is a historical and objective reality. At one point in human history, when God’s appointed time had arrived, Christ entered our human history (born of a woman) within the context of God’s own people (born under Law), so as to free them from Torah observance by giving them ‘adoption as sons.’ But this historical and objective reality becomes realised (a subjective reality) by the work of the Spirit. It is this two-fold reality, both its historical objectivity and its experienced realisation, that makes Paul’s present argument ‘work.’ It is their actualising the ‘sonship’ Christ provided through the experienced life of the Spirit that serves for Paul as the certain evidence that he is right and the agitators are wrong.

Paul deliberately ties together the work of the Son and the Spirit in two ways. First, by means of the identical ‘sending formula.’ In a historically particular moment for the Galatians themselves, ‘*God sent the Spirit of his Son’* (4:6) exactly as previously ‘*God sent his Son’* (4:4) at the right historical moment. This symmetry is deliberate. Second, by use of the rare term ‘*the Spirit of his Son.’* This is the only time this term is used in Paul’s writings, although it is similar to ‘*the Spirit of* *Christ’* in Romans 8:9 and ‘*the Spirit of Jesus Christ’* in Philippians 1:19. These three passages make the significant point that the indwelling Spirit, whom believers know experientially, is the way both the Father and the Son are currently present in the believer’s life.

Paul could have said ‘God sent forth his Spirit.’ But his present interest is not simply in the Spirit as such. His interest now is to make sure the Galatians understand who the Spirit is: the Spirit of Christ – the same Christ who loved them and gave Himself for them (2:20), who now by His Spirit indwells them. The Spirit is not called ‘the Spirit of Christ’ but ‘*the Spirit of his Son.’*This is crucial. The same Son whose death effected redemption and secured ‘sonship’ for them (4:5), now indwells them by His Spirit, ‘*the Spirit of his Son’*whom God sent forth as He had the Son Himself. The ultimate evidence of this sonship is their use of the Son’s own address to the Father in prayer: ‘Abba.’

Paul’s concern right along has had to do with Gentile believers as true ‘sons’ of Abraham. That was made possible because of the redemptive work of Abraham’s one ‘seed,’ Christ, who thereby made it possible for all who trust in Him to share in His inheritance as fellow ‘sons.’ These ‘sons of Abraham’ are in fact ‘sons of God,’ made so through Christ (4:5). The certain evidence of such shared ‘sonship’ is the presence of the Spirit of the Son, who by crying out “Abba” from within the believer, bears witness to the presence of the Son who made us ‘sons,’ because this is the Son’s distinctive term of address to God the Father. Paul is saying: because you have received ‘sonship’ through Christ’s redemption, God’s own confirmation of that for you experientially stems from God’s also having sent forth the Spirit of His Son Himself into your hearts, evidenced by the fact that the Spirit of the Son cries out to God in the Son’s own word of intimacy, ‘Abba,’ which means ‘Father.’

The term ‘*calls out’* in ‘*the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father”’* has created a certain awkwardness for evangelicals who shy away from more ecstatic Christian worship. To some it carries the connotation that the Spirit ‘takes over’ the believer and by-passes his or her will. This gives the term a meaning beyond what Paul had in mind. A less-loaded term might be ‘Spirit-inspired’ prayer. In 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 Paul expected the Corinthian church to express God’s order and peace in their worship. We need to take seriously that believers ‘called out’ to God within the assembly and did so with full awareness that the Spirit was moving them to do so, and that they were using Jesus’ own word of intimate relationship with the Father.

‘*Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,**the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father”’* (4:6). The landmark study of the term ‘Abba’ was done by Joachim Jeremias. He concluded (a) that this was the address of intimacy, originating with small children in an Aramaic home (b) that Jesus’ use of the term to address God was unique to Him in all of known Jewish literature (c) that the prayer in which He used the term revealed the uniqueness of His own self-understanding as Son of the Father, and (d) that He invited the disciples to use this term as His own extension of grace to them.

Paul’s use of the term ‘Abba’ both here in Galatians and in Romans (a church Paul had not visited when he wrote to them) presupposes the widespread use of this prayer language in the Gentile churches. This is most naturally accounted for historically on the grounds that it was Jesus’ own term and that He invited His disciples to use the term after Him. In the case of the argument in Galatians, everything hinges on the fact that believers now, by the Spirit of the Son, are using the language of the Son.

‘Abba’ was most likely an expression of intimacy, used by children first as infants and later as adults, where the terms of endearment for one’s parents are used lifelong (generally not true in English-speaking homes). It was the language of intimacy and endearment regardless of the age of the one using it. ‘Daddy’ is not an equivalent though it captures something of the meaning. Jesus used the term to denote His own sense of unique Sonship, which is all the more surprising when we realise this was the language of the home and certainly not the language of the Temple.

Both the meaning of the term itself, and the fact that such a cry comes from the heart, suggest that for Paul a form of intimacy is involved. Here is the ultimate evidence that we are God’s children, addressing God with the same term of intimate relationship Jesus Himself used. The Spirit has taken us far beyond a conformity to a religious obligation. God Himself, in the person of the Spirit, has come to indwell us, and He has sealed that relationship by giving us the language of His Son, the language of personal, intimate relationship. For Paul this is the ultimate expression of grace. No wonder Paul resisted Torah observance because it breaks this relationship of child to parent in favour of one that that can only be expressed in terms of slavery – performance on the basis of duty and obligation, in which one ‘slaves’ for God, rather than being recreated in God’s likeness (4:19), resulting in loving servanthood toward all others (5:13). Christ has effected such a relationship and the Spirit makes it work. All attempts to destroy it by Torah observance should be seen for what they are – a return to a relationship with God on the basis of religious obligation.

‘*So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir’* (4:7). The key words of the sentence are ‘*slave*,’ ‘*son’* and ‘*heir*.’ Through the work of Christ and the Spirit, the Galatian believers are no longer ‘slaves’; first of all to the ‘elemental spiritual forces of the world’ but also now especially to Torah. Second, that slavery has ended because through Christ and the Spirit they have become God’s own children (‘sons’). That means, third, that they are not just Abraham’s ‘heir,’ but heirs of God Himself through His Son.

Paul will frequently return to his monotheistic roots – all of this, the work of the Son and the Spirit which effect and make effective our salvation, are ultimately attributed to God the Father. God is now seen as the agent, language that is usually reserved by Paul for Christ.

The long argument that began back in 3:1 is now brought to its conclusion. All that remains is for Paul to apply it directly to the Galatian’s situation which he will do in 4:8-11.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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