**HOW THE SPIRIT SUPERSEDES THE LAW**

***13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*** ***14For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 15If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.***

**Galatians 5:13-15 (NIV)**

This passage has often been seen as reflecting a shift in Paul’s thinking from argument to a concluding exhortation. On this understanding chapters 5 and 6 are viewed as ‘ethical instruction’ following right thinking about the gospel. A better understanding is to see it bringing the argument of Galatians to its proper conclusion. It becomes Paul’s response to his own question in 3:3, ‘*After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*’ His answer is an emphatic ‘No! because we come to completion by the same Spirit with whom we began.’

In 2:15-21 Paul had set out both of his basic propositions of the argument that followed – that righteousness was ‘not by works of Torah’ but ‘by faith in Christ Jesus.’ He has now argued the case for these two propositions twice (3:1 – 4:7 and 4:21-31). But Paul had concluded by pointing to the indwelling Christ (by His Spirit is implied) as the effective agent for living out true righteousness (2:20). With the 5:13 - 6:10 passage Paul picks up this last point, expressed in terms of the sufficiency of the Spirit over and against both Torah and the flesh. The indwelling Spirit brings about the true righteousness Torah called for but couldn’t produce, and so stands effectively over against the flesh – that inherent human fallenness which had characterised their former lives as Gentiles and had made Torah ineffective for Jews.

At stake in the letter of Galatians is the inclusion of Gentiles as full and equal members of the people of God – whether having believed in Christ they must also accept the ‘identity markers’ of Jewishness to be genuine children (and so ‘heirs’) of Abraham. The issue raised by the agitators is not how one *enters* life in Christ but how such life is brought to *completion* (3:3) – especially for Gentiles.

The Christian experience of the Spirit sets off the believer in Christ from all other existences, which are seen as either ‘under law’ (5:18) or as ‘carrying out the desire of the flesh’ (5:16). The Gentiles had previously lived the latter; the agitators wanted them to now live under the former. Paul stands against both. The Spirit alone is the antidote to the ‘works of the flesh’ and Torah alone does not help; in fact it leads to further bondage. Set free from that bondage through Christ, the person who walks, lives, is led by the Spirit is not only not under Law, but by the Spirit produces the very fruit to which the Law pointed but could not produce.

But this is not automatic. On must sow to the Spirit (6:8) and be led by the Spirit (5:24). This means keeping in step with the Spirit (5:25). This final argument in the letter is central to Paul’s understanding of how to live a Spirit empowered Christ-like life, in Christian community and in loving servanthood – over against both the Law and the flesh – as God’s replacement of the former and antidote to the latter.

This concluding argument of the letter comes in three parts:

(1) 5:13-15 the basic issues of flesh and love are stated and their setting in a community experiencing inter-personal conflict

(2) 5:16-26 life in the Spirit supersedes the Law because this new life does what the Law could not – serve as an antidote for the flesh

(3) 6:1-10 here are practical examples of life in the Spirit (vs.1-10) with Paul’s conclusion (vs.7-10)

From beginning to end the concern is with Christian life in the community, not with the personal life of the individual believer. The material obviously has application to the individual but only as he or she is part of the community of faith.

While the relationship of the Spirit to Torah and the flesh is clear, what is more tenuous is the relationship between flesh and Torah, a relationship that is only hinted at here but spelt out in greater detail in Romans 6,7 and 8. It is clear in Galatians that the Law and the flesh are on the ‘same side.’ They both deal in death and not life (made clearer in Romans 7:4-6).

‘*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love’* (5:13). With a strong ‘not-but’ contrast, Paul defines freedom. First, freedom has nothing to do with selfishness. Freedom then is not the freedom to do whatever one wants regardless of consequence. Using a word used of a ‘base for operations’ for further activity, Paul says freedom is not to serve as a ‘base for operations’ for the flesh.

As one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith, true freedom means servanthood. It means following in the steps of Christ who not only ‘*gave himself’* for others (2:20) but who also insisted that discipleship means becoming a servant to others, ‘… *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* *and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all’* (Mark 10:43,44). Picking up on the love commandment that permeates his understanding of Christian discipleship, Paul urges that with love as the motivation, they ‘perform the duties of a slave’ for one another.

*‘For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself”’* (5:14)*.* Beginning with an explanatory ‘*for*,’ Paul now gives evidence from the Law itself as to his understanding of ‘freedom’ in Christ. In doing so he explains why the Law is no longer active for those who follow Christ. This is his second reason for it no longer having a role in Christian life. He had earlier written that God had sent His Son ‘*to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights as* *sons*’ (4:5). So, the first reason that the Law no longer functions for the believer relates to the redemption that brought us out of slavery into a family relationship with the Father and the Son. The second reason is that the whole Law is summed up, and so ‘fulfilled’ (in the sense of being brought to its full expression) in (literally) ‘one word,’ meaning ‘*keeping this one command.’*

This ‘*one command’* is found in Leviticus 19:18 (‘*love your neighbor as yourself’*). Jesus had Himself pointed to this command as the fulfilment of the whole Law (Matthew 19:19; 23:39; Mark 12:31-33; Luke 10:27-36). The command is not that one should first care for oneself and then one’s neighbor in the same way. This is a 21st century therapeutic understanding. The point is that in the same way that a person instinctively ‘looks out for themself,’ that same kind of instinct should be carried over to one’s neighbour, where ‘neighbour’ is now defined as anyone we come into personal contact with. Giving priority to a neighbour is not intended to demean oneself, but to fulfil the whole Law (whole having to do with that large part of the Torah that covers human relationships). To love our neighbour as ourself means not just refusing to do them harm but giving ourself for them, even at personal cost.

‘*If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be* *destroyed by each other’* (5:15). One would assume that people adamant about ‘doing the Law’ would be equally concerned about caring for their neighbour. The opposite seems to have been the case in Galatia. They were concerned about ‘doing (certain aspects of the) Law’ to secure their eternal relationship with God. But in doing so they were missing the point of the Law altogether. The Law was not about some external matters that gave people identity as belonging to Israel’s God, but ‘getting it right’ as God’s own people by bearing His image in their relationships with others. The Galatians were apparently willing to go to war over religious matters (circumcision, sabbath, food laws) while treating some fellow Christians as enemies to be defeated.

Community strife, shown by ‘biting and devouring’ each other was a clear manifestation of the life of the flesh that Torah observance couldn’t contain. Torah condemned such behaviour but those who followed Torah continued in it while embracing Jewish identity symbols. They were ‘religious’ but not ‘righteous.’ Christ brought an end to Torah observance in part for this very reason. The Spirit replaced Torah, so that God’s people, Jew and Gentile alike, would have a new identity – the indwelling Spirit of the living God Himself – who would at the same time accomplish what Torah could not: effectively stand in opposition to the flesh.

‘Biting and devouring’ one another was not hypothetical. This was happening in the Galatian church. The religious too often care about externals that God has ‘put aside’ through Christ and the Spirit, while the things God really cares about – relationships within and without the community of faith – are put aside in the interest of the externals. Here, circumcision, food laws and the sabbath carried primary importance while caring for one’s neighbour became more optional.

Paul’s warning is not in terms of their relationship with God but in terms of their capacity to self-destruct, to being ‘*destroyed by each other.’* Paul seems to have believed that self-destruction as a people of God was the way God would correct those who claimed to be His but who lived like they were not His. What was at stake in this argument was not the ‘interior life’ of the individual believer but the ‘behavioural life’ of believers in relationship with one another and the world.

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

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