Exegetical Study: Galatians 5:13-16

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SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Exegetical Study:
Galatians 5:13-16

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course

NTS 550: Exegesis of the English NT - Galatians

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February 19, 2016

CONTENTS

Introduction	**4**
Personal Reflection	**5**
General Historical Background	**9**
Political Context and Philosophy of Liberty	**11**
Called to True Liberty	**12**
Through Adventist Eyes	**16**

"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Galatian 5:13-16, NKJV.

INTRODUCTION

In theological circles, at least two general observations have been made about Paul's epistle to the churches of Galatia. Firstly, it has been posited that no other book in the Bible has been the subject of as much controversy as the letter to the Galatians. Whether concerning the identity of the original recipients of the epistle, or the nature of the "law" it discusses, or what truly constitutes "the works of the flesh," it would appear that even before the ink from Paul's pen had dried, his message in this short letter was destined to be a source of controversy for those who would thereafter read it. In retrospect, and indeed in reality, one is inclined to concur with this assessment, as candid as it might appear.

The second observation is that how one reads the book of Galatians is likely to have a significant bearing on how one reads the entire New Testament, meaning that a failure to properly grasp the meaning of Galatians will almost certainly lead to a similar failure in grasping the message of the gospel as it is communicated in the rest of the New Testament Scriptures, and in particular the writings of the esteemed apostle.

This paper brings into focus specific issues raised in the selected passage, where Paul zeros in on the call to liberty and what that liberty truly looks like in the church that is led by the Spirit, and has abandoned the unprofitable works of the flesh. It is my hope that it will become evident to the reader that Paul's argument and his exhortation are by no means contentious or contradictory to the message of Christ, but rather that they harmoniously blend with the general testimony of the New Testament, which is that the only authentic religious experience is that

which is borne out of faith and is demonstrated in the selfless love and disinterested service which the Spirit produces in the submissive human heart.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Galatians 5:13-16 is part of Paul's *exhortatio*[1] in his letter to the Galatian churches, in which he pleads with and encourages his readers to embrace the true essence of the gospel as he delineates it. Here the apostle refers to his readers as "brethren," as rendered in the NASB, the KJV and the NKJV. The TLB renders the salutation as "dear brothers," and the NIV, "my brothers and sisters." The original word, *adelphoi,* is intended to communicate not only the apostle's personal estimation of the members of the Galatian churches, but also their own relation to each other, a connection which, in the language of verse 13 is strengthened by loving service. This is confirmed by John Gill in the following assessment: "He calls them 'brethren', to testify his affection to them, and to put them in mind of their relation to one another, which required mutual love, a thing he is about to press them to; he asserts that they were 'called' not merely externally, but internally, by the effectual grace of God, out of bondage to sin, Satan, and the law, unto the liberty of the Gospel and of the grace of God; that liberty wherewith Christ had made them free. . ." [2] The choice of this designation, then, is reflective of Paul's deliberate intention to encourage *true* Christian harmony and unity among the Galatians, as well as to bring to mind the close kinship that they had previously enjoyed with him.

Paul indicates that they (the Galatians) have been "called to liberty" (NKJV), or, as the TLB puts it, "given freedom." I appreciate this particular rendition of the text as it bears out the

[1] Richard Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 235.
[2] John Gill, "Commentary on Galatians 5:13", *"The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible",* "http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/geb/view.cgi?bk=ga&ch=5", 1999.

message that this Christian freedom is not merely an abstract idea but a living reality that becomes a part of their experience as members of the body of Christ. The idea of a gift cannot be taken lightly, as it embodies the fundamental characteristic of the gospel, which is the fact that salvation (of which this freedom is a defining feature) comes to us, not through our personal merit, but entirely and exclusively from Christ, as a gift. A gift, in its truest sense, is not solicited, earned or even anticipated. It often comes the way of the receiver even when naturally and logically underserved, and this is most certainly the truth as it relates to the freedom that comes through Christ.

Paul is quick to clarify, quite possibly with the accusations of his opponents in mind, what are the parameters of this freedom. Contrary to certain erroneous ideas that would perhaps seem tempting to the liberal-minded, the freedom that comes through Christ is not license to succumb to the clamors of the carnal nature. Hence the warning: "*do* not *turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh" (NASB), "to do wrong" (TLB), but "serve one another" (KJV). Paul's linking of the concepts of freedom and service to others is critical to his efforts to share with his readers the essence of what it means to be a true believer.

Rather than being obsessed with the exertion to improve one's personal spiritual profile by rigorous adherence to the letter of the law, true spirituality is reflected in selfless service, which is borne out of love. Paul is anxious to get his message across that the absence of selfless love is a vivid indication that true religion is missing. Where there is no spirit of service, there is a lack of true godliness. Here Paul echoes Christ's own teaching in the illustration of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22), who though conceitedly compliant with the letter of the law, fell woefully short of its true purpose and intent through his lack of love, and his consequential insouciance towards the notion of rendering humble service to his fellowmen.

Very fitting, therefore, is Paul's next thought, which conveys to his readers the apostle's understanding of what the fulfillment of the law looks like. This was sure to grab the attention of the Galatian churches, as this, more than anything else, seemed to be their all-consuming goal—the fulfillment of the law! He asserts, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (KJV), thus effectively conveying his message that even with complete outward compliance, the true essence of the law remains unfulfilled where there is an absence of genuine love. Not only is he content to give counsel, but to include in his counsel a warning as to what the results of a failure to follow this counsel will produce: "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (NIV). In fact, these words of Paul provided for the Galatians not only a warning of what was sure to result from an unbalanced emphasis on the works of the law, but the explanation for the division and the tension that were already being experienced in their churches. So his call to refocus and rejuvenate their spiritual experience constituted not only a picture of what the true message of the gospel entails, but also the only viable solution for the ills that were plaguing them in actuality.

The challenge faced by Paul (and, indeed, those charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in modern times) in communicating this important truth has not been lost on Bible scholars throughout the centuries. The acclaimed champion of justification by faith, Martin Luther, aptly observes that "it is a hard and dangerous matter to teach that we are made righteous by faith without works, and yet to require works withal. Here, except the ministers of Christ be faithful, and wise disposers of the mysteries of God, rightly dividing the word of truth, faith and works are by-and-by confounded. Both these doctrines, as well of faith as of works, must be diligently taught and urged; *and yet so that both may remain within their bounds*.

Otherwise, if they teach works only . . . then faith is lost. If faith only be taught, then carnal men by-and-by dream that works be not needful."[3]

Luther's interpretation of the role and the relevance of the law in the epistle seems to differ from that of J. B. Lightfoot, in that whereas Luther sees Paul's concern relating to an *incorrect understanding of the function of the law* on the part of the Galatians, Lightfoot seems to indicate the problem as being *the law itself*, as in the following comment: "If you adopt the rule of the Spirit, you thereby renounce your allegiance to the law." He continues: "In this passage the Spirit is doubly contrasted, first, with the *flesh*, and secondly, with the *law*. The flesh and the law are closely allied: they both move in the same element, in the sphere of outward and material things. The law is not only no safeguard against the flesh, but rather provokes it; and he who would renounce the flesh, must renounce the law also."[4] As cited above, Luther urges that the law (in its proper function) ought to be held in high esteem, rather than renounced, as Lightfoot here argues. Luther's understanding of the nature of Paul's concern would seem to synchronize more smoothly with an Adventist perspective, as far as the law in Galatians is concerned.

In our passage, we see a comparison that is evident throughout the epistle, in which Paul highlights the difference between the results of legalism and those of a life that is lived by faith. It becomes evident to the reader that this is a matter of great concern to the apostle. On several occasions, he juxtaposes the out-workings of the former life, that is, the life that is governed by

[3] Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,* https://books.google.com/books?id=zeCWncYgGOgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=bible+commentary+galatians+online&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjozbOMn4TLAhUS3WMKHbc3BZgQ6AEIPDAC#v=onepage&q&f=false, p. 565, (accessed 2/19/16). Emphasis added.

[4] Joseph B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,* https://books.google.com/books?id=xWUsAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false, p. 209, (accessed 2/19/16).

personal exertions without faith, and the life that is lived in the Spirit. Here the latter leads to service that comes from love, and the former to strife, and "devouring one another," or "the works of the flesh" as outlined later in the chapter.

Lightfoot's insight on these two divergent paradigms is very helpful, notwithstanding the present writer's preceding observations with respect to his view of the law (at least in the cited portion of his commentary). He correctly observes: "Between the *Spirit* and the *flesh* there is not only no alliance; there is an interminable, deadly feud."[5] The same thought is communicated in quite similar language by J. R. Dummelow: "For between the pure aspirations of the Spirit and the sinful impulses of the flesh there is a sharp, irrepressible conflict."[6] Again, this conflict is evident in the evils which are the product of the carnal impulses, as listed in 5:19-21, and the virtues which are the result of the leading of the Spirit (vss. 22, 23). It is easy to see how the Galatians would be put off by the idea that something which was so important to them--the law (or their estimation of it), could actually lead to such unfavorable and ungodly "works of the flesh", but that is precisely what Paul sought to communicate to them as the end product of an incorrect estimation of the law and its function. Hence, his repeated emphasis on these two contrasting patterns throughout his epistle.

GENERAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The letter to the Galatians came about after Paul became aware that the believers had fallen under the influence of certain Jewish Christians (later described as Judaisers) who were

[5] Ibid.
[6] J. R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible,* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company., Inc., 1973), 956.

forcefully asserting that the keeping of the Jewish law was necessary for salvation.[7] The question as to whether or not Gentiles who had accepted Jesus Christ were required to observe the Jewish law was being generally debated. For the most part, this debate surrounded the subject of circumcision, this being the external sign of acceptance of the Jewish faith. The Galatian churches were largely at the center of this controversy from the outset, and here Paul had labored arduously to bring them to a proper understanding of the authentic gospel.

The Judaisers, perhaps because of their standing among the people, being "men of importance,"[8] were able to exert considerable influence over the Galatians, to the point where these had literally begun to abandon the simplicity and veracity of the message as originally given to them by Paul and return to the rites of the ceremonial law. The means by which these teachers were able to accomplish this was, as one might imagine, rather unsavory. They sought to bring Paul's work into disrepute by asserting that his teaching was not inspired as he claimed and that he was dependent upon other men for his authority and knowledge.[9] Of course, Paul's subsequent discovery of this unfortunate rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith filled him with consternation, leading to his famous "outburst": "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?" Galatians 3:1 KJV. By means of his letter Paul sought to reestablish in the minds of the Galatian believers not only the truth of the gospel as he had imparted it to them, but, more importantly, the Source from which it came, that is, "not after man," but "by the revelation of Jesus Christ" Galatians 1:11, 12 KJV.

[7] Dummelow, 945.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

POLITICAL CONTEXT AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERTY

The political context in which Paul wrote his letter provides significant clues about the way in which the concept of *eleuthería* (liberty) was understood. By definition, liberty conveys the idea of independence from other individuals or entities. Unlike a slave, the one who is free has no owner. Slavery being rooted in the culture of the time pretty much as an institution, liberty was seen as the end goal in breaking away from the clutches of the *politeía*.[10] Liberty was seen as something that was "essential to a state,"[11] especially for philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. The regime that could guarantee the greatest amount of liberty was the one most highly regarded. In this understanding, those who are experiencing true liberty are afforded the opportunity both to govern and to be governed. There is equality of voice, dignity, power and honor. Freedom of speech, perhaps, is the best expression of this liberty in a political context. The challenge that this philosophy of liberty often produced, however, came about when "the law of self" threatened to replace "the law of the *politeía*," and the emphasis on personal liberty began to undermine the underlying principles that brought it about in the first place.

Those with Hellenistic thinking took the concept of liberty further than simply political freedom. They felt that a certain level of self-discipline and self-determination was necessary in order to truly experience liberty. The false reality created by external things which we naturally desire inhibit our ability to be truly free, and thus they must be rejected. Persons who held to this view of liberty often withdrew from society in order to focus on discovering their true inner selves, often concluding their "free" status as parts of God, or children of God, or God Himself.[12]

[10] Geoffrey, W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdsmans Publishing Company, 1985), 224.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 225.

CALLED TO TRUE LIBERTY

"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty." After a brief *narratio* in which he provides the simple facts establishing the source of his message and calling, Paul transitions to his *propositio* where he presents his thesis, setting forth the main aspects of his case. Then in his *probatio* he supplies the evidence for his arguments with a view to reestablishing the truth in the hearts of his readers. As previously mentioned, our passage is part of the *exhortatio* of the epistle, which, as Richard N. Longenecker explains,[13] comprises a number of imperatives in the letter, beginning with the injunction to "become like me" in 4:12.

"Only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh." The discussion on liberty in chapter five is important, not only as a response to the heresies of the Judaisers, but also as a warning to some with what could be classified as libertine tendencies in Galatia which had existed in the church from the very beginning.[14] Thus, in reality, Paul had a dual problem on his hands that required his urgent response. Longenecker reveals that the failure of the Galatians to maintain "the truth of the gospel" by accepting Jewish nomism was accompanied by their failure to enter fully into the ethical quality of life that was consistent with the essence of the gospel.[15] Having responded to the legalistic propositions of the Judaisers earlier in the epistle, Paul now focuses his attention from verse 13 onwards on exhorting his readers against the "supposedly 'Christian' self-centered libertinism" among the Galatians. That there is a shift of emphasis from one to the other is evident for several reasons.

[13] Richard Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 186.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. 238.

First of all, in 5:13 there is repeated the affirmation of liberty ("ye have been called unto liberty") that Paul had previously given in verse 1 of the same chapter. This affirmation is introduced for the second time using the postpositive conjunction *gar* (for), which brings the subject back into focus after briefly dwelling on other points. Secondly, the expression *legō de* (I say, moreover) seems to be a bridge that connects two pieces of the same block of material, as is observable in 3:17 and 4:1. Paul's use of the vocative *adelphoi* at the beginning of the segment seems to communicate that a transition is being made, as well as his use of the combination *ara oun* (so then) when concluding the discussion in 6:10.[16]

Throughout chapter 5, Paul's emphasis is placed squarely on the danger of abusing the freedom that the Galatians have been privileged to receive from Christ. In the previous portion of his letter he has assured them of their liberation from any obligation to subscribe to the requirements of the Mosaic Law, but there were among them some who were of the opinion that, the law being removed, nothing stood in the way of the unchecked indulgence of their natural impulses. Paul recognized in this mindset a danger as grave as that presented by the legalism of the Judaisers, and therefore dedicated much effort to addressing this aspect of the Galatian problem. Burton observes that there is a change here in Paul's usage of the word *sarki* (flesh), moving from the mere physical term to a more ethical definition of the word, or what he (Burton) describes as "that element of man's nature which is opposed to goodness, and makes for evil."[17]

"Rather through love serve one another." The balance in Paul's message is seen in the fact that he not only protests against that which he deems to be negative and dangerous, but also

[16] Ibid., 235.
[17] Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 292.

provides the Christ-like and Spirit-inspired alternative. Here again we see the former-life-versus-the-new-life dynamic at work, the one being contrasted against the other by the use of the conjunction *alla* (rather). Paul's alternative to the bondage of legalism and the wantonness of libertinism is service that comes from *agape.* Context leads us to conclude that *agape* here denotes benevolence, concern for and interest in the well-being of one's neighbor, as well as works of compassion; hence the imperative, *douleuete allēlois* (serve one another). Burton observes that *douleuete* (present tense) suggests that what Paul is advocating is not a one-off act of service but rather a spirit of service that characterizes the life.[18]

"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is something somewhat ironic in this statement of Paul's, because he has spent a significant portion of his letter presenting his arguments against falling under the bondage of legalism, but now declares that his readers will bring themselves into harmony with the requirements of the law through their loving service to one another! However, this apparent contradiction disappears when other statements from Paul concerning the law are taken into consideration. In his discussion of the incarnation of the Christ, for instance, he presents as the divine rationale the following: "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" Romans 8:4 ESV. There is a sense then, in Paul's view, in which the law *is* expected to be fulfilled in the life of the believer. Our passage in Galatians clarifies in no uncertain terms that this *dikaiōma nomou* (requirement of the law) is not a merely servile check-off of legalistic compliance, but rather a complete surrender to the dictates of the Holy Spirit, which bears in us the fruit of benevolence

[18] Burton, 293.

and loving service. In other words, the ethical principle rather than the legalistic element of the law is what "fulfillment" entails.

"But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" Paul's choice of words here seems to indicate not merely a caution against potential danger, but a present problem, bearing thus a tinge of sarcasm, being worded as a warning. The conditional particle *ei* (but if) intimates that what was being described was real, and not hypothetical. Also, *daknete* (literally, 'you are biting') and *katesthiete* (literally, 'you are tearing') are both written in the present tense; and *analōthēte* (you are consumed) is in the aorist. The verbal imagery employed depicts untamed animals tearing into each other to the point of annihilation. This seems to be the situation that prevailed in the churches of Galatia, both as a consequence of the divergent reactions to the errant teachings of the Judaisers as well as an outgrowth of the Galatians' own unrestrained carnal dispositions.[19]

"Walk by the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

In this injunction the apostle presents to the ailing church the one sure remedy for the spiritual maladies heretofore described—walking by the Spirit. *Pneumati* (by the Spirit) denotes, not 'the spiritual part of man', or 'after a spiritual manner', or even 'the force of the spirit' (alternate scholarly interpretations), but rather the Holy Spirit of God.[20] What is obviously being taught here is that the Holy Spirit must be the agent to perform all our works in us, we being incapable of effecting this *peripateite* (walk) without His impetus and infilling. The result of this "walk", as well as that of its flesh-inspired opposite, are aptly summarized in the following

[19] Longenecker, 244.
[20] George J. Gwynne, *A Commentary, Critical, Exegetical and Doctrinal on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,* (Dublin: University Press, 1863), 278.

statement by Gwynne: “While the effect of brotherly love is mutually to support and to build up; strife and contention contrariwise lead to disruption and ruin.”[21]

THROUGH ADVENTIST EYES

The issues raised in the book of Galatians are of utmost importance to the understanding of both the message and the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Within Adventism, much study has been given to the letter, going as far back as the late 19th century and continuing to the present time. It would be dishonest to attempt to conceal the fact that the findings of various students of the epistle within the denomination has produced a fair amount of controversy; a reality that does not in any way diminish the truth that the message of the epistle is a core element of the Seventh-day Adventist witness in the context of the 21st century.

Against the background of the apocalyptic description of the church given in the book of Revelation 12:17, where two defining characteristics of God’s “remnant” are given, Adventists understand that there is an obligation on their part to uphold and rightly proclaim the validity of “the commandments of God.” However, they also understand that the only proper way to do this is to view and to pursue this calling within the context of “the faith of Jesus” Revelation 14:12. Thus, they can successfully move forward in the proclamation of the “everlasting gospel” which calls men and women back to true worship. An undue and imbalanced emphasis on the claims of the Decalogue has created a situation in which certain factions of Adventism run the risk of repeating the unfortunate mistake of the Judaisers, not only in their teaching, but in the very nature of their interaction with those they seek to persuade. An equally undue and imbalanced

[21] Gwynne, 277.

emphasis on “liberty”, on the other hand, has led others to the brink of repeating the unfortunate error of the Galatian libertines.

Seventh-day Adventist pioneer Ellen G. White offers the following comment in her discussion of the Galatian situation and its present implications: “It is Satan's studied effort to divert minds from the hope of salvation through faith in Christ and obedience to the law of God. In every age the archenemy adapts his temptations to the prejudices or inclinations of those whom he is seeking to deceive. In apostolic times he led the Jews to exalt the ceremonial law and reject Christ; at the present time he induces many professing Christians, under pretense of honoring Christ, to cast contempt on the moral law and to teach that its precepts may be transgressed with impunity.”[22] She also states, “Paul pleaded with those who had once known in their lives the power of God, to return to their first love of gospel truth. With unanswerable arguments he set before them their privilege of becoming free men and women in Christ, through whose atoning grace all who make full surrender are clothed with the robe of His righteousness. He took the position that every soul who would be saved must have a genuine, personal experience in the things of God.”[23]

As these comments reveal, an Adventist understanding of the book of Galatians avoids the dangers of cold formalism while regarding with solemnity the divinely issued mandate to fulfill “the righteousness of the law” (Romans 8:4) through complete surrender to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

[22] Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 387.
[23] Ibid., 388.