

PAPER #2

Creedal Trinitarianism as the Propagation of a False Gospel

(This paper is an expanded and adapted version of a paper previously delivered at Rogue Bible Fellowship entitled. "The False Gospel of the Circumcision Party in Galatians")

In this paper, I will advance the notion that Creedal Trinitarianism, as I defined it in Paper #1, amounts to the propagation of a false gospel. My argument rests on understanding the teaching and insight of Paul as recorded in Galatians 1. Therefore, I begin by exploring the background, meaning, and implications of Galatians 1. I will then proceed to derive what I believe are valid implications of that teaching for the situation in which we find ourselves today. I will argue that Creedal Trinitarianism (if and when it is truly embraced today) possesses the same characteristics as the Circumcision Party (in Paul's day) that provoked Paul to warn the Galatians against them. More pointedly, it shares all those characteristics that induced Paul to conclude that the Circumcision Party was advancing a "false gospel."

PART ONE: The False Gospel of the Circumcision Party in Galatians

In Galatians 1:6–9, Paul warns his readers against being taken in by a "false gospel." The challenge the interpreter faces is this: how are we to understand what exactly Paul thinks is fallacious about the teaching of the Circumcision Party? To arrive at an answer to this question, we must begin by understanding what Paul considers to be the true gospel. By what standard of truth does Paul measure the lives and teaching of the Circumcision Party? By what understanding of the gospel does Paul conclude that this other teaching is false?

Galatians is a deceptively challenging book. Most interpretive attempts end up in some sort of muddle. Accordingly, any reconstruction of Paul's gospel (in contradistinction to the teaching of the Circumcision Party) that can actually make sense out of the arguments of Galatians is most likely an accurate reconstruction. It is highly unlikely that a person could make sense out of the text of Galatians if he begins from the standpoint of a faulty interpretation of their respective teachings—that is, the teachings of Paul vis à vis the teachings of the Circumcision Party. If the interpreter gets either position wrong, it is doubtful that he will ever be able to achieve any clarity in his grasp of the arguments of Galatians. Therefore, the defense for my reconstruction of the two different versions of Christian discipleship that I articulate in this paper—that of Paul and that of the

Circumcision Party—rests on how it clarifies, elucidates, and brings coherence to the meaning of Galatians.

This, then, is what I propose to be the essence of the gospel that Paul is defending as the truth in Galatians:

Every human being is morally deserving of condemnation by God. No one is worthy of the blessing of Life in the age to come. But the good news is this: God will grant this blessing of Life in the age to come to anyone who elects to be a disciple of Jesus—even though he does not deserve it. In other words, God will grant mercy to the disciples of Jesus.

To sharpen our understanding even further, we could outline Paul's understanding of what his gospel claims with respect to who will be saved this way:

P-1: A person is free of condemnation (and therefore destined to be a recipient of Life in the age to come) if he embraces the truth about the identity of Jesus (namely, that he is the Messiah sent from God) as well as the various truths that Jesus taught. It is the person who does not reject such truths that will be saved.

P-2: One of the central tenets of Jesus' teaching is that everyone, without exception, is worthy of condemnation and can only be freed from such a destiny by an act of divine mercy.

P-3: Therefore, a person who is free of condemnation (and therefore destined to be a recipient of Life in the age to come) will be one who embraces the truth that freedom from condemnation is granted on the basis of divine mercy—and only on the basis of divine mercy.

P-4: It is not *intellectual* assent to the truths about Jesus and what he taught that frees a person from condemnation; rather, it is a *personal, existential commitment* to these truths that saves a person.

P-5: Hence, the one who is free of condemnation is one who is *existentially* committed to all of the following truths: (1) Jesus, the one who was crucified, is the Son of God sent into the world by God to reveal God's purposes to mankind; (2) I deserve condemnation; I am utterly unworthy to be granted Life; and (3) as one who has embraced the truth about Jesus, I stand to be granted Life in the age to come, purely as an act of divine mercy.

Let us now turn to Paul's opponents. How are we to understand what the Circumcision Party taught? To answer this question, it is crucial that we give sufficient weight to an important clue in the letter. Specifically, we must note the significance of the fact that the men who show up in Antioch and pressure Peter to change his social habits (that is, to

stop dining with Gentiles) are identified as certain men "from James." This does not require—nor even suggest—that James is of the same mindset as these men. Neither does it mean that James would have agreed with the teaching and attitude of these men. But it does suggest that the Circumcision Party felt at home in the believing community in Jerusalem. More importantly, it suggests that the believing community in Jerusalem (where James was the leader) had not shunned nor excluded the Circumcision Party from their community. It only stands to reason, therefore, that the Circumcision Party was conspicuously "Christian" in its explicit beliefs. They did not position themselves as enemies of the Christian faith; they did not market themselves as an alternative. They were people who were attempting to follow the teaching of Jesus, their master, and his spokesmen, the apostles.

Accordingly, one could reasonably conclude that all of the following beliefs would have been explicitly embraced by the Circumcision Party:

C-1: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

C-2: Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world; Jesus was raised again from the dead.

C-3: We can never be worthy of the blessing of eternal Life (as Pharisaical Judaism may have presumed); we must know that we are damnable creatures, unworthy of anything from God.

C-4: We who are followers of Jesus are free of condemnation by the mercy of God that is granted to us because of Jesus' death on the cross; and by that alone.

It is difficult to believe that anyone who did not embrace all of the above could possibly find solidarity with James and the believing community in Jerusalem. (I would further argue that one cannot accurately understand the New Testament letter written by James without assuming that all of the above tenets are implicit in James' teaching and beliefs.) Hence, I think it is reasonable to conclude that all of the above were a part of the belief system of the Circumcision Party.

What was so wrong with the teaching of the Circumcision Party that prompted Paul to call it a false gospel? We know that the surface issues were circumcision and obedience to the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. Somehow, included in the perspective of the Circumcision Party was the belief that the follower of Jesus was under obligation to be circumcised and to keep the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. So, we must add the following tenet to our list of beliefs embraced by the Circumcision Party:

C-5: One who is a true follower of Jesus will understand the need to be circumcised and to keep the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant.

This is clearly the problematic element in what the Circumcision Party taught and practiced. However, it is not immediately obvious why this should lead Paul to accuse them of propagating a false gospel. Granted, Paul clearly does not agree with this tenet. His argument in Galatians goes on to explicitly rebut this tenet. But disagreeing with it is one thing; accusing those who embrace it of being false teachers is quite another.

In Romans 14, Paul counsels mercy, tolerance, respect, and understanding toward people who embrace this very belief. He certainly doesn't charge them with teaching a false gospel. In that context, the brother in Christ whose convictions ("faith") are faulty ("weak") is the one who has inadequate beliefs with respect to just such issues. The "weaker brother" believes that he can eat only vegetables (presumably, rather than risk eating meat offered to idols). He also believes that he must treat the Sabbath day differently than other days.

One sees in the background of Romans 14 a cultural conflict. On the one hand, there is a group of Gentile believers who never have been enculturated into the various scruples advanced by the Jews. On the other hand, there is a group of Jewish believers who have deeply engrained religious scruples stemming from their lifetime of training in the Mosaic Covenant. In this context, Paul is counseling his readers how to respond to and think about one another when these two very different visions of righteousness come into conflict.

From Paul's perspective, the Gentile believers who have not been enculturated into the distinctive Jewish practices and scruples have a deeper, more accurate, and more enlightened understanding of the nature of true righteousness than do Jewish believers who remain trapped in their cultural perspective as Jews. Paul is prepared to say to his fellow kinsmen—because of the light brought to the Jews by Christ—that their understanding of righteousness ought to change in the face of this new teaching by Jesus. Paul would say, "We Jews are no longer under the same obligations to the Mosaic Covenant that we thought we were under before Christ came and taught us what God's purposes are."

Accordingly, the Gentiles have a better ("stronger") grasp of what it means to pursue righteousness than do the thoroughly enculturated Jews. For they can more readily get past the obsolete requirements imposed on Jews by the Mosaic Covenant; they never have been subject to them. Paul's clear and compassionate counsel to these more enlightened Gentiles is to *not* hold these Jews in contempt for their less enlightened understanding. However mistaken their ultimate understanding of what God wants, they are perfectly well intentioned, Paul argues. They keep the Sabbath, refrain from eating meat, and do every other Jewish thing they do, in order to manifest their gratitude to God. That is not something to hold them in contempt for; that is something to respect and applaud.

Why does Paul not take his own advice when it comes to the Circumcision Party in Galatians? Are they not simply “weaker brothers”? Either Paul is woefully inconsistent, taking a radically different stance in Galatians from the one he counsels in Romans 14, or there is some significant difference in the circumstances of Romans 14 and Galatians. It makes no sense to conclude that Paul is guilty of such a degree of obvious inconsistency. It must be the case that the situations are radically different. The key to understanding Galatians, therefore, is to understand the difference in circumstances.

One common understanding of the difference between Galatians and Romans is that the Circumcision Party—unlike the Jews in Romans 14—propagated the following tenet:

C-6*: Only Jews are eligible to be freed from condemnation by their belief in Jesus.

In other words, some interpreters suggest that the false teaching of the Circumcision Party was that only Jews could be saved. Salvation was not even available to Gentiles. What exactly would that mean? Would this mean that only individuals with Jewish parentage could be saved? Are they denying the possibility that a Gentile could proselytize and become a Jew? That seems unlikely. Judaism clearly made provisions for Gentiles to become Jews. More plausibly, perhaps they maintained that only those who were officially recognized to be Jews could be saved. One who was Gentile by birth could become officially recognized as a Jew; thereby becoming a member of the Jewish people. A Gentile could intentionally identify himself with the people of Israel, be officially recognized as such, and begin to live like a Jew. While a Gentile could be saved in this way; it may be that *only* in this way could a Gentile be saved. Only those officially recognized to be Jews were eligible for the blessing of eternal Life. This is possibly what these interpreters are intending to suggest is the distinctively false doctrine of the Circumcision Party.

To really understand this allegation—that is, to understand this proposed tenet of the Circumcision Party—we would need to answer this question: if the Circumcision Party believed such a thing, how did they arrive at such a belief? By what line of reasoning could they start from the truth that salvation is to be found in the crucified, but risen, Jesus and arrive at the conclusion that it is only those who, in effect, become Jews who can be saved? I suspect that the more typical interpretation chalks it up to Jewish chauvinism:

S1* [=STEP 1 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6*]: The Jews are God’s chosen people.

S2* [=STEP 2 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6*]: Because the Jews are God’s chosen people, God’s love and concern has always been only for them.

S3* [=STEP 3 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6*]: Therefore, God’s promise of salvation was only intended for his chosen people, the Jews.

S4* [=STEP 4 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6*]: Therefore, it is only Jews who can attain salvation through belief in Jesus.

I concede that this is possible; but I don't think it is likely. It is hard to believe that the dramatic triple impact of Jesus' teaching, Jesus' crucifixion, and Jesus' resurrection did not explode and evaporate any such chauvinism. It is entirely believable that mainstream Jewish culture retained just this sort of chauvinism; but those who confessed Jesus as their Lord? Would James have tolerated this sort of narrow, misguided chauvinism in the midst of the believing community?

Peter had recounted for James and the believing community at Jerusalem the vision that God had given him and the story of his encounter with the Gentile Cornelius. It was no secret to anyone in Jerusalem that God purposed to reach out to Gentiles and save them. Whether Gentiles could be the target of God's saving love was not controversial (Acts 11:18); what was controversial was how a Gentile needed to conduct his life once he had become a believer in Jesus (Acts 15:5). The Circumcision Party (those from the sect of the Pharisees) contended that the believer in Jesus—whether Jew or Gentile—needed to keep the Mosaic Covenant in order to practice the righteousness that a belief in Jesus necessarily entailed. The mission that they undertook with great zeal was to make sure that every believer—Jew or Gentile—took their obligation to keep the Mosaic Covenant seriously.

Hence, a more accurate way to describe the controversial tenet of the Circumcision Party's teaching is not that only Jews can be saved, but this:

C-6: Only those who practice obedience to the Mosaic Covenant in the way that Jews do are eligible to be freed from condemnation by their belief in Jesus.

Under this suggestion, the Circumcision Party holds that only those who live like Jews—specifically, those who live in obedience to the Mosaic Covenant—can be saved. This latter view is at least superficially plausible and is a more likely interpretation of their beliefs than the suggestion in C-6* above. Let's examine this possibility.

What line of reasoning could have led the Circumcision Party to this conclusion. I believe it likely that they reasoned something like this:

S1 [=STEP 1 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: Only followers of Jesus will be recipients of the divine mercy that frees a person from eternal condemnation.

S2 [=STEP 2 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: No "servant of unrighteousness" is an authentic follower of Jesus; authentic disciples of Jesus will necessarily be "servants of righteousness."

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S3 [=STEP 3 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: The righteousness that God wants his people to practice is revealed by God in the Covenant he made with Moses.

S4 [=STEP 4 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: Therefore, no one can be a "servant of righteousness" who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.

S5 [=STEP 5 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: Therefore, no one can be an authentic follower of Jesus who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.

S6 [=STEP 6 OF SUB-ARGUMENT FOR C-6]: Therefore, no one can be saved (freed from condemnation) who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.

This interpretation has one important point in its favor: it is perfectly plausible that a group of "Christians" would hold such a view in light of the fact that it is completely consistent with the teaching of the apostles. Paul would certainly agree with the first two premises (S1 and S2). (See Romans 6:14–23) Paul would also agree, in part, with the third premise (S3). The Mosaic Covenant did teach the nature of the righteousness that God wants his people to pursue. Furthermore, if Paul had agreed completely with the third premise (S3), then Paul would have arrived at exactly the same conclusion as the Circumcision Party: unless one keeps the Mosaic Covenant, he cannot be saved (S6).

Let's develop this further. Certainly Paul embraced the first premise: only followers of Jesus are destined to be saved (S1). Granted, Paul's view was ultimately more nuanced than this statement suggests. One does not need to explicitly believe in Jesus to be saved. Abraham was justified—or "saved"—and he didn't believe in Jesus explicitly. But, the controversy with the Circumcision Party concerned people who had no excuse for not believing in Jesus. At the time and under the circumstances in which this controversy was raging, everyone involved took it for granted that those who were going to be saved were those who believed in Jesus and did not reject him.

It is equally certain that Paul accepted the second premise: an authentic follower of Jesus will necessarily be one whose heart commitment is to strive to be righteous (S2). As Paul argues in Romans 6 (especially 6:14–23), eternal life only goes to those who have forsaken their status as servants of sin (unrighteousness) and have become servants of righteousness. The wages of being a servant of sin is death, Paul maintains in that chapter. Paul is in complete agreement with the Circumcision Party on this point.

Where did Paul and the Circumcision Party part company? Unlike the Circumcision Party, Paul believed that the truth that was revealed to mankind by and in Jesus put the Mosaic Covenant in a new and different light. Not everything in the Mosaic Covenant was there because it defined the righteousness that God wanted every righteous person to manifest. This explained some of the requirements in the Law; some of them defined universally good and godly behavior. However, some of the requirements in the Law were provisional; they foreshadowed larger, greater, more ultimate truths. Once those

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greater and more ultimate truths were understood, the things that foreshadowed them lost their significance and importance. Some of the things in the Law were intended to instruct God's people, the Jews, in foundational concepts that would equip them to later understand the more ultimate truths that would be actualized in the Christ. When Jesus—who was that Christ—had come, some of the requirements of the Law became obsolete and lost much of their meaning. As Paul (I think) would say: if you have the substance (which belongs to Christ) why would you focus on the shadows?

The bottom line is this: Paul believed that the righteousness—of which the disciple of Jesus must necessarily be a servant—was not defined by everything in the Law; rather, it was defined only by the explicitly moral elements in the Law. The Gentile disciple of Jesus must necessarily strive to do all that the Law required in its moral teaching. If he did not, then how was he an authentic follower of Jesus? (This is Paul's point in Romans 6.) However, the Gentile disciple of Jesus did not need to keep all the ritualistic, symbolic, and strictly religious aspects of the Law. They did not ultimately constitute righteousness. They served a completely different purpose. They served a purpose that was meaningful to Jews, but not to Gentiles.

Therefore, to require Gentiles to live like Jews made no sense to Paul. It might be valid to say that no one can be a faithful and obedient *Jew* who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant. Perhaps Paul would concede that much. But to make the blanket statement—applicable to both Jew and Gentile alike—that no one can be an authentic follower of Jesus who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant is just false. Paul would vigorously oppose such a claim. Paul believed that Gentile followers of Jesus were not under obligation to the Mosaic Covenant. They were not Jews; why did the Mosaic Covenant obligate them? They could be saved by their belief in Jesus without any obligation to keep the requirements of the Law of Moses.

Indeed, Paul would further maintain that, strictly speaking, no follower of Jesus—whether Jew or Gentile—was under obligation to all the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. So far as it was a matter of being "servants of righteousness," only the moral teachings of the Law were relevant. There was a place for a Jew to keep the Law; but it was not in order to be righteous with the righteousness that God required of a man. Just as David had seen that the righteousness that God wanted did not entail strict and unflinching obedience to the Law with respect to burnt offerings and the showbread, Paul—like any follower of Jesus—was in a position to understand the same thing. One pursued righteousness by striving to obey the moral elements of the Law of Moses; not by strict and unflinching obedience to the ritualistic requirements. In the right time and place, obedience to the ritualistic requirements would be a good and appropriate expression of one's regard for God and one's desire to obey him. But, in and of themselves, they were not a part of the righteousness that God wanted of every man. The ritualistic requirements were not inherently expressive of godliness itself.

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On this point Paul disagreed decidedly with the Circumcision Party; but not only with the Circumcision Party, he also had this very same disagreement with the "weaker" brother described in Romans 14. Why did the weaker brother refrain from eating meat? Why did he keep the Sabbath? Undoubtedly, because he believed it was his Lord's desire that he pursue holiness; because it was incumbent upon him to practice righteousness. And—according to the reasoning of the weaker (Jewish) brother—righteousness consists of all the things that Moses taught us. So, Paul has exactly the same disagreement with the weaker brother as he does with the member of the Circumcision Party. Yet, he looks at the weaker brother with understanding, tolerance, respect, love, and acceptance. The member of the Circumcision Party he rejects as being the proponent of a false gospel. We still need to understand what provoked Paul to respond differently to these two sets of people.

If we pay attention to the clues in the relevant texts, there is really only one possible difference between these two groups. We know that the Circumcision Party was proactively seeking to promote their perspective. They rebuked Peter for entering Cornelius' home. (Acts 11:3) They intimidated Peter into changing his eating habits in Antioch. (Gal. 2:12) They followed behind Paul on his evangelistic forays to counteract his teaching—coming behind him to make sure that the Gentiles who believed in Jesus began to obey the Mosaic Covenant. The Circumcision Party actively made it their mission to "burden" the Gentiles with the obligation to keep the whole Law.

In contrast, we have no reason to think that the weaker brother of Romans 14 is engaged in such a mission. Indeed, only this can explain Paul's different attitude toward the weaker brother. The weaker brother has a conscience that instructs him that in order to pursue righteousness he must be diligent to keep the requirements of the Law. In his conscience, he undoubtedly "feels" like his Gentile brothers are being unrighteous to the extent that they do not keep all the requirements of the Law. It may very well disturb him that these Gentiles can be so lax with respect to righteousness. But, at the same time, he does not presume to condemn these Gentiles for this reason. (Indeed, that is Paul's counsel to this "weaker brother" in Romans 14: Don't succumb to the temptation you will feel to "condemn" the Gentile who does not practice the same righteousness that you feel conscience-bound to practice.) This weaker brother has not made it a mission to correct the Gentiles and coerce them into living like Jews.

Why not? Why does the Romans 14 Jew not feel compelled to correct his Gentile brother while the member of the Circumcision Party does? I think the answer to this question is the key to understanding Paul's whole approach to the situation in the Galatian churches.

To understand the difference, we need to return to the beliefs that likely constituted the beliefs of the Circumcision Party and examine them more carefully:

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1. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.
2. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world; Jesus was raised again from the dead.
3. We can never be worthy of the blessing of eternal Life (as perhaps Pharisaical Judaism presumes); we must know that we are damnable creatures, unworthy of anything from God.
4. We who are followers of Jesus are free of condemnation because of the mercy of God that is granted to us because of Jesus' death on the cross.
5. Only followers of Jesus will be recipients of the divine mercy that frees a person from eternal condemnation.
6. No "servant of unrighteousness" is an authentic follower of Jesus; authentic disciples of Jesus will necessarily be "servants of righteousness".
7. The righteousness that God wants his people to practice is revealed by God in the Covenant he made with Moses.
8. Therefore, no one can be a "servant of righteousness" who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.
9. Therefore, no one can be an authentic follower of Jesus who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.
10. Therefore, no one can be saved (freed from condemnation) who does not keep the Mosaic Covenant.

Paul, and any apostolic believer, would agree with #1–6. The distinctive beliefs that characterize the Circumcision Party (but are also shared by any "weaker" brother) are #7–10. But #6 needs closer scrutiny—no "servant of unrighteousness" is an authentic follower of Jesus; authentic disciples of Jesus will necessarily be "servants of righteousness."

What exactly does it mean to be a "servant of righteousness"? What exactly is the relationship of an authentic follower of Jesus to righteousness? If one takes this assertion at face value, it would appear that, in order to be an authentic disciple of Jesus, one has to transcend evil and unrighteousness and conform his behavior to the demands of righteousness. But this is not how Paul would understand it. Neither is this how Jesus would understand it. Indeed, in light of the fact that the follower of Jesus also believes #4, how could this possibly be what assertion #6 would mean? If a person were capable of transcending evil and unrighteousness and conforming his behavior to the demands of

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righteousness, then he would be a good person, not a sinner. And if he were a good person, then why would he need mercy? And yet, fundamental to what makes a person an authentic disciple of Jesus is his existential embrace of the reality of his own sinfulness and moral unworthiness. Neither Paul nor Jesus would ever expect the true disciple of Jesus to be able to transcend his own sinfulness and actually be a good person. Being a servant of righteousness in this sense (that is, to successfully be a good person) is *not* a condition of true discipleship. That would contradict the very foundation of what makes the gospel the "good news." In Paul's and Jesus' teaching, therefore, to be a "servant of righteousness" is to be one who acknowledges the value of righteousness, who actively strives to emulate righteousness as best he can, and who, accordingly, has had his life and behavior transformed by such a commitment. It is not that he has become good. He is not necessarily successful in all his striving toward righteousness. He most certainly has not transcended the reality of his own inherent sinfulness. But, he does manifest the fact that his existential commitment is to be righteous rather than unrighteous. He wants his life defined by his commitment to righteousness. His life is decidedly not defined by a willful pursuit of what is evil.

Herein lies the difference between the weaker brother of Romans 14 and the member of the Circumcision Party. Believing what Jesus and Paul teach, the weaker brother of Romans 14 knows that he is a sinner. He knows that he is evil. He knows that he will never transcend his innate propensity to be evil. He knows that he can never conquer the evil that is so endemic to who he is—the evil that he exudes simply by being who he is. He knows that his destiny is completely dependent upon the mercy of God. He stands to have Life only because God promises to be merciful; he will not get Life because of his striving to be righteous. Accordingly, this weaker brother is prepared to have a merciful attitude toward other believers as well. He is in no position to wag his finger at the sin of his brother. Of course his brother sins; we all sin. He neither expects nor requires God to condemn his brother because his brother has failed with respect to righteousness. We all fail with respect to righteousness. We all "stand" because of God and his mercy.

The weaker brother is of a mindset that he could understand and would heed Paul's warning: "Who are you to judge the servant of another (that is, of Jesus)? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." (Romans 14:4)

To elaborate, here is the gist of Paul's counsel to the "weaker" Jewish brother in Romans 14: Sure, your Gentile brother is failing to keep the Sabbath. You are convinced that is unrighteous of him. But what if it is? Does that condemn him? The Lord has reached out to us in our unrighteousness to show us mercy and to teach us to love that righteousness toward which we are not naturally inclined. Do you not think that the Lord can grant your Gentile brother mercy and can teach him to pursue righteousness? Do you think his failing to keep the Sabbath is an obstacle to God? Your failing to love your neighbor, your failing to be good in all that you do, is that an obstacle to God showing *you* mercy? Are these obstacles to God's teaching you to love him and to pursue

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righteousness? Then why should failing to keep the Sabbath be an obstacle to God showing your Gentile brother mercy and teaching him righteousness? Don't condemn him. Even if you are right, even if God does not want the Gentile brother to work on the Sabbath, his standing before God is not contingent on him being flawless in his performance of righteousness. He stands because of God's mercy; not because of his moral perfection. Give the Gentile brother freedom to be a moral failure; give him the freedom to grow and learn. So long as he is trusting in the mercy of God for his salvation and seeking to hear and obey his Lord Jesus, he is your brother. Accept him; don't condemn him.

But this is decidedly NOT the mindset of the Circumcision Party. They would not accept this counsel from Paul in Romans 14. From their perspective, the matter is quite straightforward. Followers of Jesus do not fail to perform in accordance with the requirements of the Law. One can claim to be a disciple of Jesus and not keep the Law; but, if so, he is a phony. No authentic disciple of Jesus would fail to keep the Law. And since only true disciples of Jesus will be saved, the stakes are very high. If one fails to keep the Law, he will not be saved; he stands condemned.

One can almost hear Paul's incredulous reaction to such a mindset: An authentic follower of Jesus does not fail to perform according to the requirements of the Law? Do you not fail in this every time you fail to love your neighbor? Every time you have hatred in your heart toward another person? Every time you lust after a woman in your heart? Every time you find yourself attracted by any evil inclination? Who, then, could count himself an authentic disciple of Jesus?

The Circumcision Party believes in the tenets of the gospel in theory, but not in practice. Their mindset betrays what they really believe; and it is not the most important tenets of the faith—at least, not in the way that Jesus taught them. While the member of the Circumcision Party embraces the explicit doctrine that eternal life is granted to the follower of Jesus as a gift of divine mercy, he does not really—in practice, in mindset, in inner attitude—believe it. His working belief is that, in order to receive God's mercy, one must show himself (or make himself) deserving of that mercy. How does one do that? By being a "servant of righteousness" as Jesus taught. What does it mean to be a servant of righteousness? It means to overcome any tendencies toward unrighteousness and perform righteously instead. One only becomes deserving of the mercy of God by living a godly life, by transcending his own unrighteousness.

Inherent in this mindset is a terrible contradiction. How can one be "deserving" or "worthy" of mercy? Mercy, by definition, is a blessing granted to someone who is not deserving of it. To become deserving of mercy, therefore, is to become deserving of something he is not deserving of. This is a blatant contradiction. If one became deserving of eternal Life, then it wouldn't come to him because of mercy. Alternately, if one gets eternal Life because of mercy, then necessarily he is not deserving of it. Therefore, the

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mindset of the Circumcision Party was rooted in a fundamentally contradictory set of premises.

How can that be? Because that mindset did not really involve an existential embrace of divine mercy. It gave lip service to mercy. How could it not? That is what Jesus and the apostles clearly and unmistakably taught. So, it believed in mercy in theory and in explicit confession, but the actual inner hope within this mindset was not really based on an embrace of divine mercy. In the final analysis, the member of the Circumcision Party placed his hope on his performance before the Law. He would be granted Life because he was successful at strict obedience to the demands of the Mosaic Covenant.

Why was this the true basis of his hope? Because he also failed to believe something else fundamental to the gospel. He did not actually believe that he was hopelessly and incurably unrighteous. Again, as a follower of Jesus and a student of the apostolic teaching, he undoubtedly said that he was an unworthy sinner, in theory. He believed it as a matter of explicit confession; but not in reality. A sense of his sinfulness was not his actual self-understanding. In the depths of his self-perception, he did not know himself to be wicked. In truth, he believed he was quite capable of transcending any unrighteousness that was within him. He expected to show himself worthy of divine mercy by bucking up and doing what righteousness demanded!

The irony is that the mindset of the Christian disciple who belonged to the Circumcision Party was virtually identical to the mindset of the Pharisee: (1) eternal Life will come to me because I am deserving; and (2) I am not so sinful that I cannot transcend my sinfulness and make myself to be fundamentally good (or, at least, deserving). The only difference was that the Party of the Circumcision was Christian. They took the mindset of Phariseeism and mapped it onto an explicit belief system that, on the surface, was virtually identical to the belief system contained in the gospel. They were Pharisees on the inside; but they ostensibly believed what was taught by Jesus and the apostles on the outside.

Granted, they held an explicitly different viewpoint on whether the Mosaic Covenant defined righteousness. But, as we saw, that wasn't where Paul saw the problem. The difference of opinion about the role of the Mosaic Covenant was an innocent mistake—a matter of simply being ill-informed and lacking true understanding. What made the Party of the Circumcision a dangerous alternative to the true gospel was their *de facto* rejection of two essential components of the gospel message: (1) the truth that I am inherently and inescapably sinful; and (2) the truth that I stand to be granted Life only by an act of undeserved, divine mercy. True, they appeared to believe these two things; for they explicitly confessed to believing both of them. But, in truth and in practice, they denied both of them. That is what ultimately leads Paul to denounce their influence as a "false gospel." It was a false gospel because it denied the essential core of what the gospel of Jesus affirmed. To be clear, it was not the *teaching* of the Circumcision Party that denied the essential core of the gospel. Rather, it was their mindset, their attitudes, and the

tangible expression of these in relation to other people. The Circumcision Party did not undermine the gospel by teaching something explicitly contrary to that gospel. The Circumcision Party undermined the gospel by modeling, and therefore influencing people toward, a mindset that was the embodiment of beliefs and attitudes that were contrary to everything that the gospel taught.

One last comment is in order. When we have rightly understood the nature of the Circumcision Party's error—specifically, when we have understood that the error of the Circumcision Party is fundamentally the same as the error of Phariseeism—then it becomes clear why Paul's arguments against the Circumcision Party parallel in certain key respects his arguments against Phariseeism. Accordingly, it becomes clear why some key elements of Paul's argument in Galatians parallel those of Paul's argument in Romans. Romans was written to counter the teachings and mindset of Phariseeism. Galatians was written to counter the teachings and mindset of the Circumcision Party. To the extent that the mindset of Phariseeism is the same as that of the Circumcision Party, the arguments of Romans will resemble the arguments of Galatians. But to the extent that the explicit teachings of the Pharisees (who claimed to *reject* the gospel of Jesus) differed from the explicit teachings of the Circumcision Party (who claimed to *embrace* the gospel of Jesus), the arguments of Romans and Galatians will be markedly different.

That, of course, is exactly what we find. On the one hand, Romans and Galatians appear to be remarkably similar. On the other hand, they clearly are addressed to different issues and different concerns. This fact, I think, tends to confirm my analysis of the nature of the error of the Circumcision Party in this paper.

Most typical approaches to Galatians fail to see the difference between Galatians and Romans. They conclude that Romans and Galatians both teach that justification is by faith and not by works of the Law. Hopefully my paper has made it clear why this way of reading Galatians is a mistake. The Circumcision Party did not teach that justification was by the works of the Law. They did not even teach that it was by the works of the Law in addition to faith. Indeed, the destructive impact of the Circumcision Party had nothing to do with their teaching something contrary to the teaching of Paul and Jesus. It had to do with the deleterious effects of their mindset, their attitudes, and their real core beliefs; not with their explicit teachings and doctrinal commitments.

As I will explore in part two, this is significant. Paul did not limit his concerns to false doctrine. Indeed, arguably, Paul was least concerned with false doctrine. Paul's primary concern—just like the apostle John in his letters—was with falsity of "spirit." John tells his readers to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1) False prophets teach untrue and false things. John encourages his readers to test the "spirit" underlying their teaching. He does not instruct them to focus primarily on the outward form of their teaching. In part, this is because the outward form that the teaching of a false prophet takes can appear to embody the truth, even while the inner "spirit" that informs it is evil. This is exactly how Paul

sees the impact of the Circumcision Party in his letter to the Galatians. In outward form, their teaching is consistent with what Jesus and the apostles taught, but in inner "spirit" it is hostile to the gospel. Indeed, it is "another gospel" that is, in fact, not a "gospel" at all. (Gal. 1:6-7)

PART TWO: Discerning the False Mindset of the Circumcision Party

In Part One of this paper, I argued that Paul's concern with the Circumcision Party (in Galatians, for example) was not with their theology. It was with a destructive and infectious mindset that they were propagating. Paul did not altogether agree with the tenets of their teaching; but the difficulty he had with their explicit teaching and doctrine was not critically important. What was of critical concern was their mindset.

That raises another question that I would like to address briefly here in Part Two of this paper. If the problem with the Circumcision Party was a mindset, then how did Paul discern its presence? How did Paul know that they had such a mindset? Without X-ray vision that would allow him to peer into the very core of their being to know what mindset they had?

To answer this question, it will be helpful to outline some of the distinctive characteristics of the Circumcision Party. Considering the evidence we have in the New Testament (mostly Acts and Galatians), the following descriptions would seem to accurately capture who they were:

- (1) They were very proactive in promoting strict conformity to the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. Not only did they strongly believe that the pursuit of righteousness necessarily entailed keeping the requirements of the Law, they aggressively tried to promote such obedience among those who claimed to be believers. It was a cause—a movement—centered in the believing community in Jerusalem. A member of the Circumcision Party was not content merely to have his personal convictions and to hold them strongly. He was insistent that every other believer come to agree with him and to conform to his standards with respect to how one must live. His life, choices, and practices were the standard for everyone claiming to be a godly man.
- (2) They were not open to the possibility of being wrong in their interpretation of the Mosaic Law and righteousness. They were dogmatic about being right. They were not interested in further reflection on the issue. They did not want discussion. They were not open to thinking about why other believers did not share their views. If another believer did not share their views, then he was obviously a false believer.

- (3) Their attitude toward people who disagreed with their beliefs and/or did not conform to their convictions in practice was one of scorn, disapproval, and condemnation. There was no understanding, no tenderness, no mercy. Their opponents were enemies of God.
- (4) The overall impact of the Circumcision Party on a community of believers was to promote fear of condemnation and disapproval. Hence, they tended to coerce and intimidate people into conforming to their prescribed practices.

It is my contention that these characteristics were all Paul needed to observe in order to reach his assessment of their inner mindset. The outward actions and manifest attitudes listed above can only arise out of an inner belief system that (1) fails to truly acknowledge one's own incurable sinfulness and moral unworthiness, and (2) fails to base one's hope solely on the fact of divine mercy. I will explain.

- (a) The person who has been chastened by his realization that he is not a good person does not go on a crusade to promote strict and flawless obedience among others. Why would one be enthusiastic about promoting strict and flawless obedience among others if he understands himself to be utterly incapable of such obedience? [cf. (1)]
- (b) The person who has been chastened by the realization of his own fallibility is not arrogantly confident about his most fundamental beliefs. Rather, the man who understands that he is morally unworthy will be humble. His humility will extend to his beliefs. Even if the humbled sinner is confident that he understands what is true; he won't be close-minded in his beliefs. He will simply be unshaken in his confidence. Dogmatic inflexibility and the unwillingness to even listen to others' points of view are not rooted in confidence. It is rooted in the sinful pride of someone who does not know that they are sinful and fallible. [cf. (2)]
- (c) The person who understands that the only hope he has for eternal Life is the result of divine mercy is not, in turn, damning and merciless in his attitude toward others. Jesus taught explicitly that, to him who shows no mercy, no mercy will be given. The one who receives and accepts mercy from God will turn to others and extend mercy to them. So, to the extent that the Circumcision Party was merciless and condemning, they betrayed the mindset of people who did not believe that they stood only by the grace of God. Rather, their attitude betrayed the belief of people who believed that they would inherit a blessing because they had made themselves deserving. People who believe they deserve God's blessing are censorious toward those they believe fall short. [cf. (3)]
- (d) The person who has been duly humbled and chastened by the realization that he is not a good person does not make it a practice to make known his disapproval of

others. Hence, his impact on others is not to coerce, shame, and intimidate them into conforming to those practices he prescribes. [cf. (4)]

Accordingly, to the extent that the manifestation of this mindset intimidated people into practicing what the Circumcision Party prescribed—even worse, to the extent that it intimidated them into adopting the same mindset—it was a dangerous and spiritually destructive movement. The mindset that spurns divine mercy in favor of self-deceived confidence in one's own worthiness before God is an evil mindset of rebellious self-denial. It is contrary to the faith that saves. Blindness to the realities of one's own sin and depravity is evidence of underlying sin and unbelief. When Paul writes Galatians, he is outraged by the fact that so many Galatian believers are being attracted to this very mindset; so he sternly warns them against it. It is ultimately a matter of life and death.

A Contemporary Application

The mindset that is evident in the members of the Circumcision Party, which is of such concern to Paul, is independent of this particular group. This same mindset is alive and well in Christian churches all across our land today—even though the Party of the Circumcision is long gone. It is no longer obedience to the specific requirements of the Mosaic Covenant that these dangerous false teachers among us promote today. Rather, it is obedience to the requirements of some specific version of cultural Christianity. You can't be a real Christian and be saved if you...smoke, drink, dance, get divorced, don't attend church regularly, don't pray regularly, don't read your Bible everyday, etc. Although the specific contents of the demands have changed, the mindset that promotes them is identical. I would argue that the mindset of the Circumcision Party that Paul confronts in Galatians is exactly the same mindset that underlies much that passes for Christianity in Christian culture today.

This claim, in turn, leads to one final question: Does, this same mindset underlie our modern insistence upon certain doctrinal requirements? It has been true for centuries that doctrinal orthodoxy has been promoted as a requirement for salvation. Not only are there practices that determine who is saved; doctrinal orthodoxy has become just as determinative, if not more determinative. One might readily hear it said, "You can't be a real Christian and be saved if you...reject the inerrancy of the Bible, reject the virgin birth, reject substitutionary atonement, reject the doctrine of the Trinity, etc. These are not requirements of practice; these are requirements of theological confession. The name for this perspective is *creedalism*.

(Note: a credalist insists that salvation hinges on doctrinal conformity. If one does not make salvation contingent on one's doctrinal orthodoxy, then he is not a credalist in the sense that I am using that label in this paper.)

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Does creedalism arise from the same mindset as evidenced in the Circumcision Party; or does it arise from an altogether different mindset? It is my contention that a true creedalist has all the same attributes that the Circumcision Party evidenced:

- (5) The creedalist is very proactive in promoting strict conformity to his particular brand of orthodoxy. It is not merely that he feels constrained by conscience to believe what he believes himself. He also tries to promote such orthodox confession among all who claim to be believers. He is not content to have his personal convictions about what is true and to hold them firmly; he is not sanguine about them. He will insist that every other believer come to agree with his doctrinal commitment and to conform to his orthodoxy. [cf. (1)]
- (6) He is not open to the possibility of being wrong in his understanding of the truth. He is utterly dogmatic about being right. He is not interested in further reflection on the issue. He does not want discussion. He is not open to thinking about why other believers do not share his views. If another believer does not share his views, then he is simply a false believer. [cf. (2)]
- (7) His attitude toward people who disagree with his cherished doctrinal beliefs is one of scorn, disapproval, and condemnation. There is no understanding, no tenderness, no mercy. His opponents are enemies of God. [cf. (3)]
- (8) The overall impact of the creedalist's promotion of his orthodoxy on a community of believers is to promote fear of condemnation and disapproval. Hence, the creedalist tends to coerce, intimidate, and bully people into conforming their theological beliefs to the orthodoxy that he prescribes. [cf. (4)]

As we saw above, Paul believed that he could discern an evil, unbelieving mindset underlying the attitudes and practices of the Circumcision Party from just those characteristics described immediately above. I think it follows that, from these very same characteristics, we can discern the same evil, unbelieving mindset underlying the attitudes and behaviors of the creedalist. Creedalism is evil because it betrays a fundamental failure to recognize the reality of incurable sinfulness and the profound need for divine mercy.

Again, I will explain how this failure is evident in the creedalist mindset:

- (e) The person who has been chastened by his realization that he is not a good person does not go on a crusade to promote among other people strict belief in particular theological doctrines. Why would one be enthusiastic about promoting pure theological understanding among others, if one understands himself to be utterly impure, fallible, and prone to deception in all that he believes? [cf. (a), cf. (5)]

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- (f) The person who has been chastened by the realization of his own fallibility and who understands that he is morally unworthy will be humble. His humility will extend to his beliefs. Even if the humbled sinner is confident that his doctrinal understanding is true; he won't be close-minded in his beliefs. He might very well be confident in his conviction, but dogmatic inflexibility and an unwillingness to even listen are not rooted in confidence. They are rooted in the sinful pride of someone who does not know that he is sinful and fallible. [cf. (b), cf. (6)]

- (g) The person who understands that he stands only because of the mercy of God will know that he must extend that mercy to others. He will know that God intends to be merciful to others. God will not damn a human being because they get an intricate point of doctrine wrong. That is incompatible with everything that the true believer has come to understand about the profound reality of how merciful God is. So, to the extent that the creedalist is merciless and condemning, to that extent he betrays the mindset of a person who does not believe that he stands only by the mercy of God. He stands to inherit a blessing because his theological orthodoxy has made him deserving. People who believe they deserve God's blessing are censorious toward those they believe fall short. [cf. (c), cf. (7)]

- (h) The person who has been duly chastened by the realization that he is not a good person does not make it a practice to condemn those who disagree with him. Hence, his impact on others is not to bully, coerce, shame, and intimidate them into conforming their beliefs to his expectations; it is not to force others to believe exactly what he advocates and believes. [cf. (d), cf. (8)]

Whenever the creedalist mindset is present, people are intimidated into believing (or at least, pretending to believe) exactly as the creedalist prescribes. Even further, many are bullied or intimidated into adopting the creedalist mindset itself. For that reason, it is a dangerous and spiritually destructive movement. To propagate the creedalist mindset is evil. It is evil because the creedalist mindset betrays a fundamental failure to recognize the reality of one's incurable sinfulness and one's profound need for divine mercy—and that is unbelief.

Creedalism, therefore, can be said to be a "false gospel" for exactly the same reason that Paul called the teaching and influence of the Circumcision Party a false gospel. Not because it explicitly and outwardly denies the tenets of the gospel, but because the inner attitude and actual working beliefs of the creedalist are contrary to everything the gospel teaches.

PART THREE: Understanding Peter's Hypocrisy

There is yet one vexing issue with respect to the account in Galatians 2 that we have been examining. How are we to understand Paul's assessment of Peter (Cephas) and his actions? This is a very important question if we want to fully understand the social dynamics to which Paul was responding.

As we have already seen, in Galatians 2 Paul is describing a situation in Antioch where Paul felt compelled to publicly rebuke Peter. Peter, a visitor in Antioch, had been freely accepting invitations to dine in the homes of Gentiles. But then, with the arrival in Antioch of certain members of the Circumcision Party, he had abruptly stopped accepting such invitations. Paul, responding to Peter's abrupt change of behavior, rebukes Peter publicly.

Four things are clear in how Paul describes his response to Peter's change of behavior:

- (1) Paul believed that Peter was acting out of fear [Gal 2:12];
- (2) Paul believed that Peter was being hypocritical [Gal 2:13];
- (3) he believed that Peter's hypocrisy was exceedingly contagious [Gal 2:13]; and
- (4) he was provoked to publicly rebuke Peter because Peter was not being "straightforward" about the truth of the gospel [Gal 2:14].

Hopefully it is clear from the arguments in the preceding parts of this paper what Paul meant about Peter's not being "straightforward" about the truth of the gospel (cf. #4 above). As we saw earlier, to be straightforward in advancing the truth of the gospel, one would have to advocate both of these two truths: (a) I am inherently and inescapably sinful; and (b) I stand to be granted Life only by an act of undeserved, divine mercy. What exactly is Paul accusing Peter of? Is he suggesting that Peter does not believe these two things? Is he suggesting that Peter is denying these two things?

That is highly unlikely. Paul never intimates that Peter is a "false teacher." He does not accuse him of departing from the faith. Indeed, in his response to Peter, he rehearses what he knows Peter does know and believe: "...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus..." [2:16] Paul knows that Peter knows what the truth is. Paul knows that Peter understands the gospel and all of its implications. What Paul is upset about is that Peter is *acting* as if he does not understand the implications of the gospel.

The gospel includes these implications: We are justified by the mercy of God in the light of our commitment to Jesus. God does not require some sort of successful performance in order for me to be "fit" or "worthy" of such mercy. God is not a demanding perfectionist waiting to condemn me for failing to do what is impossible; rather, he is a merciful, understanding Father eager to bless me if I will simply take him seriously. The person who understands these things will know that God will not condemn

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the Gentile who fails at keeping ceremonially clean as prescribed by the Law. Even if, strictly speaking, it were unrighteous to fail to keep clean (and Paul knows that Peter knows better than this), yet would not God forbear the Gentile's ritual uncleanness and respond in mercy just as surely as he will forbear the graver forms of his unrighteousness; and just as he will forgive the graver forms of unrighteousness that mark Peter's life? A person's standing with God is not contingent on his flawless obedience. It is contingent on his earnest and authentic efforts to be what God would want him to be, whether he fully and rightly understands God's expectations or not.

All these things Peter understands. (This is evident from the fact that, previously, he had dined freely with his Gentile brothers.) Paul knows that Peter understands and believes them. What provokes Paul is Peter's quiet capitulation to the expectations of a group of men who do not understand these things, the Circumcision Party. As we have already seen, Paul does not believe that this group of men does understand the gospel and its implications. Not really. They embrace the tenets of the gospel in theory—they give intellectual assent to them and make public profession of them—but in actual practice, they neither believe nor genuinely understand them.

If it is genuine, working belief in the tenets of the gospel is a necessary condition of salvation, if it is strictly required that one understand it to be a matter of divine *mercy* that those who embrace Jesus as his Son will be saved, then Paul is vitally concerned about the contagious mindset and outlook of these members of the Circumcision Party who do not really, in practice, meet these conditions themselves. Accordingly, Peter's apparent acquiescence to their attitudes, his apparent conformity to their expectations, appears to be a vote of approval for their mindset and outlook. This is what provokes Paul to say, "Peter, how can you pretend to agree with these men? Don't you see the devastating impact that your pretense has on others? It encourages them to think and be like the Circumcision Party. But they are enemies of the true gospel. They neither understand it nor believe it."

Here, then, we have an explanation of Paul's use of the word "hypocrisy" to describe Peter's actions (cf. #2 above). Hypocrisy is play-acting; it is following a script in order to act in accordance with the role that another has defined for you. As such, hypocrisy is usually a form of pretence. The hypocrite acts out a role that does not truly reflect the reality of who he actually is. Peter is being hypocritical, Paul maintains, because Peter is acting like he has the mindset and outlook of the Circumcision Party when, in truth, he does not. Peter actually has the mindset and outlook of a disciple of Jesus, who has embraced and placed his hope in the good news of God's mercy. But when he withdrew from dining with the Gentiles, he began to act like he had the mindset and outlook of the Circumcision Party. An outside observer would not be able to tell the difference between the scrupulous attention to staying kosher of Peter and that of a member of the Circumcision Party. To the outside observer, both would appear to be acting out of the same perspective and motivations.

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What's more, the Circumcision Party has made a public controversy out of it. It is widely known that there is a raging disagreement between Peter and "those from the Pharisees." Peter was rebuked by them in Jerusalem. The Circumcision Party is deliberately seeking to oppose Paul's teaching on the role of the Law in the life of a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, when Peter quietly conforms to the behaviors and expectations of the Circumcision Party in the context of this public controversy, how are his actions to be understood? How will they not be interpreted as a vote in favor of the Circumcision Party and against Paul's perspective and teaching? The reason Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy is simple. Paul knows that Peter, in fact, agrees with him on the issues; but Paul knows that Peter's actions can only be construed as a vote against Paul's position on the issues. Peter is acting like an opponent of Paul when he is, in fact, an ally of Paul. This was Peter's hypocrisy.

What motivated this hypocrisy by Peter? Paul says it was motivated by fear (cf. #1 above). It is not difficult to understand how Paul could know that this is Peter's inner motivation. Peter had been eating freely with Gentiles, and then suddenly and abruptly he stopped. His abrupt stop coincided with the arrival of certain members of the Circumcision Party, outspoken opponents of the apostles and their understanding of what the faith entails with regard to Law-keeping. Understanding human nature, it is quite evident what Peter is doing. Peter does not want to endure the scorn and censure of these self-righteous, aggressive men. He fears it. It is easier just to give them what they want. That is particularly easy for Peter, because what they want from Peter is simply to behave the way he has behaved his whole life anyway. They just want him to be a good Jew. So, Peter obliges. It's easier than fighting them.

Peter's fear—born of cowardice and moral weakness—may have been a sinful character flaw under any circumstances. But under the circumstances in Antioch, it was positively harmful evil. For, out of fear, Peter had chosen personal comfort over the faith and eternal well-being of the believers in Antioch. Peter had, in fact, sent a misleading and false message to the Gentile and Jewish believers in the church at Antioch. ("He had not been straightforward about the truth of the gospel.") He had done this out of a selfish desire to escape discomfort at the hands of the Circumcision Party. Choosing personal comfort and safety at the cost of misleading others with respect to the life and death issue of eternal salvation is wrong; it is evil! This is why Paul felt compelled to rebuke Peter.

It is important to note that Paul is not accusing Peter of being an unbeliever. He does not damn him (as he implicitly does the Circumcision Party). Peter is in a different class. He is not an unbeliever. Like the rest of us, he is just wicked and sinful. As it happens, Peter's sin in this situation has very grave consequences. Accordingly, Paul must speak out in order to correct the situation and set the record straight. Potentially, Peter has done great damage to the truth. Paul must engage in damage control.

There is a fourth and final point that Paul makes in response to Peter: Peter's hypocrisy was contagious (cf. #3 above). This is crucial to understanding Paul's rebuke. If Peter's

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action was nothing more than an act of personal failing, if it reflected poorly on Peter’s character, but nothing more, then it would not have deserved a public rebuke. But it was more than that. It was a capitulation to a fundamentally unbelieving mindset that, given human nature, always proves seductive, infectious, and destructive. Peter’s behavior was having the effect of leading others to adopt the same hypocritical behavior that he had adopted. The net effect of that was to produce an overwhelming show of support for the frame of mind of the Circumcision Party—at least, that’s what it would appear to be.

That might not create any problems for one who truly and authentically believes the gospel. But what about all those “believers” in Antioch who are not yet clear on whose version of Christian discipleship is right? How about all those new, fragile believers who don’t know whether to listen to Paul or to listen to his outspoken critics from the Circumcision Party? What impact will the mass defection of Peter and all who joined him have on the uncertainty of such new, not-yet-grounded believers. If Peter and the other believing Jews—who positively reject the viewpoint and attitudes of the Circumcision Party—can be intimidated into pretending to go along with the Circumcision Party, what effect will the intimidation of the Circumcision Party have on less stable believers? Will it not intimidate them into actually imitating the *unbelief* of the Circumcision Party? That would be fatal!

Jesus warned his disciples to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” Jesus understood how compelling was the play-acting of a self-righteous religious person. It could have the power to keep others from understanding their need for mercy and embracing the gospel. For so long as others are out there pretending that it is possible for a human being to be good and worthy; I will tend to accept their proposition and either join them in play-acting or fall into despair. But I am not encouraged to accept a different proposition: life will come because of God’s mercy. This is what Jesus was warning against. Don’t join the Pharisees in hypocrisy! Hypocrisy is the enemy of truth. Hypocrisy is the enemy of the gospel. Hypocrisy is the enemy of the message of mercy. Hence, hypocrisy is the enemy of everything Jesus came to teach us. This is what Paul understood about the impact of Peter’s actions. It had to be stopped. Paul had to do damage control.

We are finally in a position to understand and summarize how Paul understood and responded to Peter’s abrupt reversal at Antioch. Peter, out of a personal weakness—his proclivity to act out of fear—fell into a grave moral failure. He chose personal protection over love for others. Peter opted to protect himself from the scorn and condemnation of the pseudo-believers of the Circumcision Party, by conforming his behavior to their false and misleading standards, rather than opting to maintain the clarity of the gospel message and endure their judgment and rebuke. One by one, all the other Jewish believers capitulated to the expectations of the Circumcision Party along with Peter, until no Jew except Paul was left behaving in a manner that clearly upheld the truth of the gospel. Knowing the potentially destructive impact of such hypocrisy, Paul knew he had to

correct the situation. So he spoke out, publicly rebuking Peter for his moral failure and reminding everyone of the truth embodied in the gospel.

In Romans 14 we saw two classes of people: those who were “weak” in their beliefs and those who were not—that is, those who had a faulty understanding of the righteousness that is required of a disciple of Jesus; and those who had a true and enlightened understanding of what is required. In Galatians we added another class of people: those who are not only “weak” in their beliefs, but who are, at heart, unbelieving. As betrayed by various inner attitudes and various elements of their evaluation of others, the real, working beliefs of such people are contrary to belief in the gospel. They do not understand their own sinfulness and need for mercy, no matter how much they might explicitly confess it. And now we have another class of people: a class of people exemplified by Peter.

Peter is not a “weaker” brother; for he does in fact know and understand the freedom from Law-keeping that is entailed by belief in the gospel. Peter is not a member of the Circumcision Party, a pseudo-believer; for Peter truly and authentically believes in and hopes in the gospel of Jesus. But neither is Peter a courageous upholder of the truth of the gospel, as Paul believes he ought to be. Rather, in this particular instance, Peter is a cowardly hypocrite who, through his behavior, is pretending that he does not believe the truth of the gospel when, in reality, he does.

PART FOUR: Conclusion

My ultimate interest in this paper is to determine what my attitude toward Orthodox Trinitarians and Creedal Trinitarians ought to be in the light of my conviction that Orthodox Trinitarianism has misinterpreted the Bible. If I am right in concluding that Trinitarianism is false, then am I to view Trinitarians as “weaker” brothers? Or, am I to view them as pseudo-believers like the Circumcision Party? What perspective should I take?

Furthermore, what strategy should an organization or institution adopt if it is interested in being “straightforward” about the truth of the gospel with respect to this issue? Should it explicitly and publicly denounce Trinitarian doctrine? Or, is there wisdom in not making an issue of it at all? Could it even be unloving to make an issue of it?

These are the issues I shall address in this conclusion. On the surface, it may appear that the issue of the Trinity has little in common with the necessity of Law-keeping. The former involves what one ought to believe; the latter what one ought to do. Underlying this superficial difference is a deeper likeness. The Creedal Trinitarian, by definition, insists that one’s salvation—one’s eternal well-being—is strictly and inflexibly conditioned on whether one confesses Orthodox Trinitarian dogma. The member of the Circumcision Party, in Paul’s day, insisted that one’s salvation—one’s eternal well-

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being—was strictly and inflexibly conditioned on whether one keeps the particulars of the Law of Moses. Accordingly, there is a shared attitudinal component in Creedal Trinitarianism and the teachings of the Circumcision Party: both are strict and inflexible, both are censorious and judgmental, both emphasize formal conformity to strictly outward requirements, and both are fundamentally merciless toward anyone who deigns not to conform. My contention, therefore, is that we have in the Circumcision Party a very important and instructive analogy to modern Creedal Trinitarians. (As the accompanying papers will show, Trinitarianism is not a clearly straightforward reading of the Bible. Even committed Trinitarians acknowledge that it is not taught explicitly by the Bible but consider it a “necessary deduction” from the biblical evidence. The Circumcision Party, on the other hand, were able to make a very compelling argument from the Scriptures and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Accordingly, though neither teaches the truth—if I am right—the Circumcision Party is less obviously mistaken than Trinitarianism.)

Assuming an analogy between the attitudes of the Circumcision Party and Creedal Trinitarians, therefore, we can draw the following conclusions:

(1) Creedal Trinitarians, like the Circumcision Party, are people who propagate a “false gospel.” Their insistence that one simply cannot be saved unless he fully embraces Orthodox Trinitarianism reflects an underlying rejection of that which makes the gospel of Jesus “good news”—namely, the mercy of God. No one is saved because he gets it right. This is no less true of his theology, than it is of his behaviors. We are saved because God will not hold our wrongs against us. Any group that, attitudinally, has not understood and embraced this is a group that stands opposed to everything the gospel affirms.

(2) As proponents of a “false gospel,” Creedal Trinitarians need to be opposed in just the same way that Paul opposed the Circumcision Party. We need to make it clear to ourselves and others that we do not and cannot tolerate their insistence that every disciple of Jesus fully embrace Orthodox Trinitarianism. Just as Paul insisted that Gentiles do not need to keep the Law of Moses to be saved, we must insist just as strongly that disciples of Jesus need not embrace the creedal formulations of the triune godhead in order to be saved.

(3) There are Orthodox Trinitarians who are analogous to the class of believers Paul calls “weak” in their convictions in Romans 14. These believe and are convinced that it dishonors God and truth when one does not acknowledge his triune nature. But, believing fundamentally in the mercy of God, they would never dismiss those who fail to believe in the Trinity as damned. They would be grieved and concerned over the non-Trinitarians’ false belief. But they would never confidently consign him to eternal damnation. Such an Orthodox Trinitarian is not a Creedal Trinitarian, by definition. Paul would clearly counsel us today to have regard for the well-being of Orthodox Trinitarians who are not Creedal Trinitarians. We should, out of love, be more eager to have a positive impact on their lives than we are eager to practice our freedom to speak openly of what we believe.

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This last point needs to be qualified, however. There is a crucial difference between eating meat offered to an idol (in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10) and articulating one's beliefs about the nature of God. In Romans 14, the reason for Paul's caution that we not permit our freedom of action to be a "stumbling stone" to our weaker brother arises from the fact that actions are not self-interpreting. The brother eating the meat offered to an idol is not fully in control of how the "weaker" brother will interpret his action. Accordingly, the brother who is free to eat needs to take care that he not exercise his rightful freedom to eat meat when there is a reasonable likelihood that his action will be misinterpreted to the detriment of his weaker brother.

This same thing is not true of belief in and teaching about the Trinity. Teaching is self-interpreting in a way and to a degree that actions are not. As the teacher, the one advocating a set of beliefs, I have a significant amount of control over what message I am sending to the "weaker" brother who listens to me. I am not simply acting, and then putting it in the hands of the "weaker" brother to understand my action. I am seeking to communicate exactly what I believe, why I believe it, and what the implications of those beliefs are. Hence, so long as I do everything I can to lovingly communicate my non-Trinitarian beliefs in such a way that they do no harm to a disciple of Jesus, there is little need to be further warned. In other words, the non-Trinitarian's act of articulating his unorthodox theology will not come into conflict with love for his brother as clearly and as meaningfully as might the more enlightened brother's act of eating meat offered to idols. Granted, one could be "unloving" in the very way in which he articulates his unorthodox theology. But, taking for granted that it must be done lovingly, it is more difficult to imagine a scenario where one's articulation of what he honestly deems to be true will be morally and spiritually detrimental to some "weaker" brother. It could very well unsettle and emotionally disturb that "weaker" brother. But that is not the same as destroying him morally and spiritually. While I think the teaching of Romans 14 can be legitimately applied to the issue of the Trinity, one cannot make a direct application. Theological beliefs and religious scruples are not exactly analogous.

(4) We must not be bullied, intimidated, or shamed into acting as if Creedal Trinitarianism were right. We must not play the coward, like Peter, and conform our beliefs to the Creedalists' standards in order to avoid their disapproval and scorn. As it was in Peter's case, to act in fear in this way would be to fail in our obligation to uphold the truth of the gospel. For just the same reasons—namely, that it could only appear to be a capitulation to the "false gospel" of Creedal Trinitarianism—we are committing a grievous error if we allow ourselves to be frightened into silence in the face of Creedal Trinitarianism's false assertions. The doctrine of the Trinity is today (as it has been for thousands of years) a public controversy, just as surely as was the disagreement between Paul and the Circumcision Party. When Peter failed to positively act in solidarity with Paul's position, he was in fact throwing his support to the false gospel of the Circumcision Party. If we would fail to positively defend the Christian disciple's freedom to not embrace Trinitarian doctrine, then we would in fact be implying our support for the false position of Creedal Trinitarianism—a false gospel.

In the light of these things, I propose the following: in order to be utterly clear and straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I believe that our college must denounce Creedal Trinitarianism and must act consistently with such a denunciation by positively accepting disciples of Jesus who do not embrace the Orthodox Trinitarian formulas as *bona fide* believers and by defending their status as *bona fide* believers to others. I believe that anything short of this is a betrayal of the truth of the gospel akin to Peter's betrayal at Antioch. On this issue, we must listen to Paul rather than emulate Peter.