

Understanding

the book of

Galatians

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My purpose in this paper is to examine the teaching and import of the New Testament book of *Galatians*. The book of *Galatians*—the earliest of Paul’s writings in the New Testament—provides a window into Paul’s understanding of the gospel. In particular, it offers valuable insight into what Paul understands to be the distinguishing mark that characterizes the person who will receive eternal Life. Secondly, it offers an important glimpse into what Paul understands to be the role of the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) in God’s purposes. And, while discussing the above, Paul presents helpful clues with regard to his perspective on (i) the roles of Jews and Gentiles in God’s purposes, respectively, (ii) the basis for the ultimate equality of Jew and Gentile in God’s purposes, and (iii) the rightful place of the Torah (Law) in the life of a Jesus-believer.

The book of *Galatians* has been widely misunderstood down through the centuries. The propensity to misunderstand Paul’s theology from *Galatians* stems mostly from the fact that there is a strong tendency to misapprehend the nature of the controversy into which he is writing. I will attempt to make clear exactly what Paul is and is not contending in *Galatians*. And I will do so by clarifying the exact nature of the controversy to which his letter is addressed. I will devote as much attention to explaining what is NOT at issue, as to explaining what IS at issue in the controversy, for a faulty understanding of what is at issue has misled many interpreters in their attempt to understand *Galatians*.

This paper is not a commentary on the text of *Galatians*. One can understand the purpose, the point, and the essential message of *Galatians* without mastering the meaning and contribution of each and every assertion it contains. In this paper, rather, I intend to explain its teaching, its message, and the most important elements of its underlying worldview. My exposition in this paper is based on a relatively thorough study and exegesis of the text of *Galatians*. But my purpose in this paper is not to discuss and defend my exegesis of the text itself; my purpose is to explain the substance and import of what I understand Paul to be teaching in that text.

My paper is divided into six parts.

- (1) In Part One, I locate this letter to the Galatians within the history and circumstances of Paul and his intended readers and within the history of the earliest communities of Jesus-believers.
- (2) In Part Two, I explore the nature of the controversy that provoked Paul to write this letter. I offer a careful and thorough examination of what is and is not at issue between Paul and his opponents. In the course of examining the nature of the controversy, I identify exactly what it is in his opponents’ perspective that provokes such a passionate and sharp objection by Paul.
- (3) In Part Three, I outline and explain the understanding of the gospel that underlies and shapes each and every one of Paul’s arguments and exhortations in *Galatians*.
- (4) In Part Four, I trace the primary points that Paul makes in *Galatians* as he defends his understanding of the gospel and his understanding of what it entails with respect to the issue at hand—whether Gentiles are required to live like Jews.

- (5) In Part Five, I make some brief comments about what Paul believes to be at stake in the controversy that he is addressing in the letter.
- (6) And, finally, in Part Six, I make some observations about the import of Paul’s teaching in *Galatians* for the modern Jesus-believer.

Part 1: Historical Background to *Galatians*

Jesus of Nazareth—in many respects a rather ordinary man—appeared among the villages of Galilee announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. More specifically, he asserted that he was the promised Messiah, the Son of God, whom God had appointed to reign over that kingdom. He did various things that had supernatural results (i.e., miracles). These deeds served as evidentiary signs that pointed to the legitimacy of his claim. “If you don’t believe that I am the Messiah on the basis of my words,” Jesus urged, “then believe on the basis of the works (the miracles) that I do.” Eventually, he was rejected by the Jewish authorities of his day and, in a miscarriage of justice, he was crucified by the Romans under the pretext that his claim to kingship was a threat to the Roman Caesar. After he lay dead in a tomb for 72 hours or more, God brought him back to life. Jesus appeared to hundreds of different people over the next few weeks, convincing them that he was alive, that God had not left him dead in the tomb. On the basis of his remarkable resurrection, many believed in him. A community formed in Jerusalem and its surrounds of people who, being convinced that Jesus truly was the Messiah sent from God, were committed to understanding reality and to living their lives in the light of that fact.

Saul of Tarsus had been a young man studying under the rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem at the time that this movement of Jesus-followers was gaining momentum in Jerusalem. Saul was vehemently opposed to this movement. He thought it was a dangerously false sect that threatened to undermine and destroy the Jewish way of life. He became an enthusiastic and proactive persecutor of Jesus-followers, wanting to stamp the movement out before it could take root.

On his way to Damascus to arrest and imprison Jesus-followers there, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Saul, proving himself to be alive. He announced to Saul—who would thereafter be known as Paul—that he purposed to send him among the Gentiles so that he might proclaim the good news regarding Jesus to them.

Because he had seen him with his own eyes, Paul could not deny that the crucified Jesus had been brought back to life. He was thereby convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah, just as his followers had claimed that he was. However, in view of everything that his rabbinical training had led him to expect from the Messiah, the idea that God would send his Messiah to Israel, only to have him crucified *was completely unthinkable*. But the unthinkable had turned out to be the case: the man who was rejected by Israel and crucified by the Romans was, in truth, God’s Messiah. As a consequence of this, Paul was forced to go back and reconsider his understanding of Torah. In particular, he was forced to reexamine what the Scriptures taught concerning God’s Messiah. As a student of the Scriptures, Paul had adopted a paradigm that gave coherence to all the various bits and pieces of information about God’s purposes that could be found in the various words of divine revelation in Scripture. But Jesus, the crucified Messiah, exploded that paradigm. Paul needed a new and different paradigm that could return coherence to his understanding of God’s purposes while embracing the idea of a messiah that was crucified.

Paul devoted himself to a fresh study of Torah. He sought a more accurate understanding of how all the pieces of revelation fit together—an understanding that could explain how God’s Messiah might be sent by God to die. For the next several years he studied the Torah—first in Arabia, then in Damascus, and finally in Tarsus—and developed a full and accurate understanding of the gospel of Jesus in the light of what the Torah teaches.

Eventually, a Jew named Barnabas came to Tarsus to ask Paul to return with him to Antioch. Barnabas believed that the believing community in Antioch needed what Paul could teach them. A significant time before Paul accompanied Barnabas back to Antioch, believing Jews from Cyprus had come to Antioch and had begun to share the truth of the gospel with Gentiles who lived there. Many of these Gentiles believed the good news concerning Jesus and joined the community of Jesus-believers there. As a result, the believing community in Antioch consisted of Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul settled in to live and to teach in the midst of this mixed Jew-Gentile community.

Eventually, the leadership of the Antioch community—inspired by God—decided to send Paul on a journey to spread the good news of Jesus to other parts of the world. Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy struck out together, supported and encouraged by the leadership in Antioch. They travelled first to Cyprus. Then they made their way across the sea to what today is the Mediterranean coast of south-central Turkey. Paul proclaimed the gospel to the residents of several cities in the highlands of that region, he persuaded a number of these residents to believe, and he formed the beginnings of believing communities in these cities. At the time, this region was part of the Roman district called Galatia. Paul eventually returned to Antioch, having done what he could to explicate the good news message about Jesus to the Galatians.

After Paul had travelled among the Galatians and founded the various believing communities in their midst, other Jesus-believers (presumably Jesus-believing Jews from Jerusalem)¹ had come along after him into these communities that he had founded. These other Jesus-believers had a significantly different viewpoint from Paul on what the gospel of Jesus implied with regard to how Gentile believers ought to conduct themselves. As a consequence, they sought to “correct” what the Galatian believers thought about this issue. Paul had instructed the Galatians that, as Gentiles, there was no need for them to perform the distinctive religious practices of the Jews in order for them to be genuine followers of Jesus. This other group, however, insisted on the

1. Because of how a particular phrase in the book of *Galatians* is often translated, this group of Paul’s opponents is often referred to as “the Circumcision Party.” Contrary to popular opinion, I do not believe this is Paul’s label for them. In all likelihood, there was no label attached to this group at the time *Galatians* was written—neither by themselves, nor by Paul, nor by anyone else. This group of individuals did not consider themselves a particular “faction” within the larger community of early Jesus-followers. Rather, in their own self-assessment, they were simply followers of Jesus. Paul was the renegade, the innovator, the maverick—the one whose teaching and message needed to be countered and corrected. I will generally refer to this group simply as “Paul’s opponents.”

opposite perspective. To be a *bona fide* follower of Jesus, they insisted, it was incumbent upon a Gentile to adopt the distinctive religious practices of the Jews.²

These men, who had come along and controverted what Paul had taught the Galatian believers, greatly disturbed them. Some of these Galatian believers, who had been evangelized by Paul, were persuaded of the different perspective advanced by Paul’s opponents and abandoned Paul’s perspective. They got circumcised, began to observe the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, began to keep the dietary regulations, and, generally, adopted the lifestyle and religion of the Jews. Word of this phenomenon (and of the teachers and teaching that created it) got back to Paul in Antioch. Paul was amazed and outraged by what he heard. He quickly responded in the form of a letter that he sent to be read among the believing communities that he had established in Galatia. The New Testament book of *Galatians* is this letter that Paul hastily sent off to these communities. His agenda was to set the record straight with respect to what the gospel did, in fact, imply with regard to Jewish religious practice on the part of Gentiles who are fellow Jesus-believers.³

The Gentile controversy tended to revolve around two poles—Jerusalem and Antioch. In Jerusalem, the believing community was almost entirely (if not entirely) Jewish. In all probability, every Jesus-believer in Jerusalem obeyed the whole Law. As a result, every Jesus-believer in Jerusalem was in community with other Jesus-believers who practiced the religious

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2. How exactly these teachers understood and articulated their perspective is debatable. Was it their perspective that only Jews could receive eternal Life and that, therefore, a Gentile had to proselytize to Judaism before he could gain eternal Life by believing in Jesus? Or was it, rather, their perspective that a Gentile Jesus-believer had to observe the same religious requirements of the Law that the Jews did? There is little practical difference between these two positions, so it is difficult to discern which way Paul’s opponents were thinking about it. It is helpful to remember, however, that since Paul’s opponents—no less than Paul—were marginalized by mainstream Judaism as members of the despised “sect of the Nazarene,” it is not likely that Paul’s opponents are expecting Gentiles to adopt and be absorbed into the “mainstream” Judaism of that day. If that were their position, then they would be requiring Gentiles to become more acceptably Jewish than even they themselves were. However, we do see from Galatians 5:2–4 that their expectations for Gentiles went so far as to expect them to become circumcised. It is a valid question, therefore, whether the right way to characterize their perspective is that “only Jews can be saved.” I think it is doubtful that this is the right way to characterize it. They surely must have accepted that Gentiles, as Gentiles, can be saved. It is just that anyone who will be saved, they thought, must necessarily practice and observe the distinctly Jewish religious requirements found in the Law.
 3. As we will see later, in order to judge what the gospel implies with respect to whether GENTILE Jesus-believers need to observe the religious requirements of the Law, Paul’s approach in *Galatians* is to answer a more general question: what role does the Mosaic Covenant play in the life of ANY Jesus-believer, whether Jew or Gentile? The position that he defends on this more general issue is that the Jesus-believer (Jew or Gentile) is ‘free’ from the Law. Then, in the light of that position, he argues that Gentile Jesus-believers, therefore, are under no obligation to keep the distinctively Jewish religious requirements of the Law, since no *bona fide* disciple of Jesus is under obligation to the Law. I will further explore and clarify Paul’s position here as the exposition of this paper progresses.

requirements of the Law. The reality of their situation in Jerusalem could not help but color their perception of the issue at hand. It would seem obvious, as a matter of course, that a follower of Jesus would live like a Jew. Every Jesus-follower they knew lived like a Jew. For every Jesus-follower they knew was a Jew! So, from the perspective of Jerusalem, it seemed obvious and natural that any Gentile who became a Jesus-follower would follow the same way of life that they did—that is, he would observe the religious practices of the Jews.

Things were quite different in Antioch. The believing community in Antioch actually contained real, live Gentile Jesus-believers. The actual presence of Gentile believers in their midst forced Paul (and his companions) to face into the question: Did belief in Jesus require that Gentiles practice the religious obligations of the Jews? Paul, unlike Jerusalem, could not treat this question as if it were merely theoretical. Paul had to settle this issue in his own mind, in order to offer any specific, practical counsel to the Gentiles in his community.

The apostles and leaders in the Jerusalem community, on the other hand, were in a very different situation. Nothing was forcing them to reach a clear answer to the same question. They could afford to leave the question unresolved and only partially understood. As a consequence, they did. Whatever they understood the gospel to imply with regard to how Gentiles should relate to the Law, they allowed that understanding to remain tacit and inchoate. It was not something that they clearly and explicitly articulated—not to themselves any more than to others.

So, Paul, on the one hand, had been forced to confront the question of Gentile obligation to the Law head-on. As a result, he had reached a thoroughly and carefully reasoned position on the matter. His conclusion was that the Jesus-follower is *no longer* under obligation to keep the Mosaic Covenant in exactly that way, and in exactly that sense, in which the Jews had always been trained to keep it. The leaders in Jerusalem, on the other hand, had never been forced to seriously ponder the question of Gentile obligation to the Law at all. As a result, they tended to have a sort of hasty, automatic answer to the issue at hand. Their position tended to be that, as a matter of course, a Jesus-follower is obligated to keep the Mosaic Covenant in exactly that way, and in exactly that sense, in which the Jews had always been trained to keep it.

Now, perhaps this knee-jerk position on the part of the Jerusalem believers was essentially correct. Perhaps complete Law-obedience *does* need to be part of an individual’s lifestyle if he wants to be a *bona fide* follower of Jesus. But Paul thinks not. Jesus coming into the world and dying on the cross for the sins of the world changed things. Because of who Jesus is and what he did, the Jesus-follower is no longer obligated to keep the Mosaic Covenant in exactly the same way that Jews had understood their obligation for centuries. Because the truth about Jesus brought new information to bear on the matter, the truth about Jesus demanded a new understanding of the role that the Mosaic Covenant played in God’s purposes. And a new understanding of the role played by the Mosaic Covenant in God’s purposes required, in turn, a different understanding of the nature of one’s obligation to it.⁴

4. As I shall make clear later, Messiah Jesus did not change, alter, or transform God’s purpose for the Law in the life of the Jew. The Jew’s obligation to the Law was not changed by Jesus. It is exactly the same after Jesus as it was before. However, generally speaking, the Jews before Jesus did not understand the exact nature of their obligation to the Law as God had intended it. (A correct understanding was very difficult to achieve; few were

Part 2: The Controversy Being Addressed in Galatians

The controversy that raged among the first-generation Jesus-believing Jews was centered in whether Gentiles who had chosen to believe in Jesus should be expected to imitate the lifestyle and practices of Jews as they sought to follow him. In other words, the question was this: can a Gentile be a *bona fide* follower of Jesus if he does not, in conjunction with his decision to follow Jesus, adopt the lifestyle and religious practices of pious Jews?

The answer that understandably seemed “natural” to the Jews of Paul’s day was

“Yes, of course they do. Keeping the Law of Moses is part and parcel of what it means to be an individual who loves and obeys God. Any bona fide Jesus-follower, in obedience to his master and in imitation of his example, would certainly seek to love and obey God. Hence any bona fide Jesus-follower will naturally seek to fulfill each and every requirement of the Mosaic Covenant. The fact that a person is a Gentile, who was not raised in Jewish culture, cannot possibly exempt him from imitating Jewish piety. Jewish culture and practices, by their very nature, are designed to embody love for and obedience to God. Hence, a Gentile who wants to love and obey God will necessarily, as a matter of course, want to imitate the religious lifestyle and practices of the Jews. Therefore, a Gentile who claims to want Jesus for his master, but who is unwilling to imitate Jewish piety in his lifestyle and practices, is not an authentic follower of Jesus.”

Paul clearly and passionately took the opposite position on this issue. He took the position that Gentiles, as Gentiles, can be *bona fide* disciples of Jesus. They do not need to adopt the religious practices of Jews and live like Jews. They can remain thoroughly and distinctively Gentile in their lifestyle and culture and yet be *bona fide* disciples of Jesus. They will be granted Life in the eternal kingdom of God even though they do not imitate the life and practices of Jews. And the case that Paul makes for his position has an important corollary: neither are Jews under obligation to the Mosaic Covenant in the same way that they were before Jesus came into the world.⁵

But it is important to be clear on Paul’s position. It is not that Gentiles can be *bona fide* disciples of Jesus without living righteous lives in pursuit of true godliness. The fact that a disciple of Jesus will necessarily pursue a life of righteousness was a given for Paul. Every human being, by virtue of being a human being, is under obligation to pursue righteousness and goodness. So *that* is not in question. What *is* in question is whether a Gentile Jesus-believer needs to adopt the distinctive *religious* practices that obedience to the Mosaic Covenant requires

sufficiently enlightened to understand it.) But after Jesus an accurate understanding of the Law’s role is more readily attainable. And with a more accurate understanding of the Law’s true role comes a more accurate understanding of the nature of one’s obligation to it. To accurately understand God’s purposed role for the Law, see the sections below entitled “The Breakthrough in Paul’s Understanding of God’s Law” and “Paul’s Understanding of the Law: Old versus New” in Part 3.

5. See note 4 above. Before Messiah Jesus came, Jews had typically misunderstood the role God had purposed for his Law. Once Messiah Jesus had come, the Jesus-believer was found in a position to discern what was and what was not the role that God had purposed for his Law. Out of this new, right understanding of its role, the Jesus-believer becomes 'free' of the Law. Specifically, he becomes 'free' of that necessity to obey the Law that was rooted in the Jews’ previous misunderstanding of its role.

of Jews. That is, the question is whether Gentiles need to be circumcised, need to keep the Sabbath and the annual Jewish festivals, need to abide by the dietary regulations outlined in the Covenant, and need to abide by the various regulations concerning clothing and appearance. In other words, do Gentiles need to fulfill those particular instructions contained in the Mosaic Covenant that do not constitute essential components of universal human goodness?⁶

(A) Paul’s Position on the Controversy Clarified

Paul’s position in *Galatians* is frequently misconstrued to be that Paul is opposed to Jesus-believers being Law-keepers. In other words, many people read Paul to be saying that there are two possible ways to relate to God—by “faith” or by “works” (=obedience to God’s Law)—and that it is wrong to relate to God in any other way but by “faith.” Hence, it is simply *wrong* to seek to please God through Law-keeping. The Jews, therefore, are *wrong* when they seek to keep the Mosaic Covenant. They ought to repent of their arrogant Law-obedience and believe in Jesus instead.

This is a complete misunderstanding of what Paul is saying in *Galatians*. He believes no such thing. Paul would have nothing but praise and respect for the Jew who seeks to honor the Mosaic Covenant and keep it. His objection is not to Jewish Law-obedience. His objection is to those Jews who are insisting that Gentiles—who have no historical connection to the Mosaic Covenant—must keep and obey the Mosaic Covenant in all of its particulars. It is the imposition of distinctively Jewish obligations on Gentiles that Paul finds fallacious and it is to that that he puts himself in adamant and passionate opposition.

In the course of opposing the imposition of Jewish obligations upon Gentiles, Paul argues in *Galatians* that—*now that the Messiah has come*—we are ‘free’ from the Law.⁷ That is the

6. Ultimately, this is the view that Paul espouses: There are two distinctly different components to the people of God—the Jewish component and the Gentile component. Together, they constitute the full complement of God’s people. The Jewish Jesus-believers alone, without the Gentile Jesus-believers, do not constitute the people of God. Likewise, the Gentile Jesus-believers, without the Jewish Jesus-believers, do not constitute the people of God. God’s eternal purpose is to gather to himself a people that is constituted, in part, by Jewish believers in Jesus (who live distinctly Jewish lives), and, in part, by Gentile Jesus-believers (who live distinctly Gentile lives). Paul does not explicitly articulate this view of God’s purpose in the book of *Galatians*. He does later, in the book of *Ephesians*. Nonetheless, this view of God’s eternal purpose is clearly and unmistakably in the background of everything that Paul asserts and argues in *Galatians*. However, though Paul’s perspective is the same in both books, Paul’s emphasis in *Galatians* is different from his emphasis in *Ephesians*, for his purpose for writing *Galatians* is different from his purpose for writing *Ephesians*.

7. Throughout the remainder of the paper, I will typically use quotations marks around ‘free’ when I am speaking of Paul’s notion that the believer in Jesus is ‘free’ from the Law. I do this to remind the reader that the ‘freedom’ from the Law that Paul has in mind has a very specific and narrow meaning for Paul. (A meaning that hopefully will be made clear by the end of the paper.) Paul would clearly acknowledge that there are some senses in which Jew and Gentile, respectively, are clearly not free from the Law. So ‘freedom from the Law’ is not for Paul an absolute freedom from the Law. It is a very specific concept that holds true in only a limited sense. I seek to remind the reader of this fact by speaking of being ‘free’ from the Law, using

position that Paul defends in Galatians: the Jesus-believer is 'free' from the Law. However, once again, it is important not to misunderstand Paul at this point. Being 'free' from the Law does *not* mean that a person should take care *NOT* to keep the Law. It does *not* mean that he should avoid keeping the Law at all costs. Rather, to be 'free' from the Law means that one is not *obligated* to keep the Law. With respect to Jews in particular, *in no way* is Paul suggesting that it would be *wrong* for Jews to strive to keep the Law, including its religious requirements. Jews should feel perfectly free to keep each and every one of the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. But, at the same time—as circumstances might require—they should feel free *NOT* to keep them.

In the light of the gospel of Jesus, one comes to understand that receiving mercy from God is not based on his doing what the Law requires. In that sense, therefore, a person is 'free' to do what the Law requires or not. Transgression of the Law, in and of itself, will not necessarily eliminate the possibility of mercy. Therefore, whether one does what the Law requires or not, will be decided on some basis other than one's desire to gain God's mercy and acceptance into Life. If he does do what the Law requires, it will not be because he feels constrained to do so in order to find ultimate acceptance by God, it will be for some other reason. And if—for some good reason or another—he does not do what the Law requires, he will not be forfeiting his ultimate acceptance by God by not doing so. The Jew is free to do all that the Law requires and he is free not to do all that the Law requires. Because Jesus entered history and accomplished what he did, that is the situation in which the Jew finds himself.

The alternative view, the view that Paul vigorously opposed, went like this: Jews are under obligation to live like Jews; and Gentiles—if they want to be granted the blessing of Abraham—are similarly under obligation to live like Jews. Anyone who seeks to be rightly related to God—Jew or Gentile—must necessarily strive to obey every aspect of the Mosaic Covenant. If a Jew (like Paul) feels free *not* to live like a Jew and keep the Covenant, he is living unrighteously, he is a dangerous threat to the Jewish religion, and he manifests complete ignorance of God and the ways of God. And if a Gentile Jesus-believer has not been instructed that he must live like a Jew and do what the Law requires, then he has been terribly misled. In all likelihood, a purported Gentile Jesus-believer who feels no need to keep the Law is not a genuine disciple of Jesus at all. Paul was adamantly and passionately opposed to every element of this viewpoint.

Hopefully, this much is clear from what I have already said: while Paul insists that the follower of Jesus is 'free' from the Law, in no way does he mean to suggest that Law-keeping is necessarily wrong.⁸ But if Paul is not suggesting that Law-keeping is wrong, then what exactly does he mean by saying that the Jesus-follower is 'free' from the Law?

scare quotes.

8. Paul can be confusing on this point. Clearly he would suggest that anyone (Jew or Gentile) who *behaves as if his acceptance by God is based on his Law-keeping* has failed to understand and acknowledge the significance of Jesus and his death on the cross. Accordingly, such an individual is *wrong* to behave as he does. But he is not wrong because he is keeping the Law *per se*. He is wrong because he is failing to believe and to live in accord with the truth about Jesus and his death on the cross. These are not the same thing. But the subtlety of the difference between them can be very confusing and has led many to misunderstand what Paul is saying.

In brief, Paul’s concept of being ‘free’ from the Law can be defined like this: *now that the messiah, Jesus, has entered into history, all human beings—whether Jew or Gentile—are free of any obligation to keep the Law as a necessary prerequisite to being granted mercy and Life by God.* This, and only this, is what Paul means when he says that a person is ‘free’ from the Law. There are other senses in which individuals are not free from the Law.

There are a number of different practical ramifications of being ‘free’ from the Law in the sense in which Paul means it—that is, in the sense in which I have just defined it. At least two of them have a bearing on whether Gentile Jesus-believers are under obligation to perform Jewish religious obligations. Paul could have effectively used either one to defend his view that Gentiles are not under obligation to perform Jewish religious obligations. But to understand the book of *Galatians*, it is important to understand which of these two different ramifications Paul did use as the basis for his argument:⁹

- (1) *No human being, whether Jew or Gentile, is saved because he keeps the Mosaic Covenant. Law-keeping is not the BASIS of his salvation, and his eternal destiny does not hinge on an adequate level of obedience to its requirements—not on an adequate level of obedience to its MORAL requirements any more than on an adequate level of obedience to its RELIGIOUS requirements.*

One ramification of the believer’s ‘freedom’ from the Law is that every human being—whether Jew or Gentile—is freed of any necessity to keep the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant (the moral requirements no less than the religious ones) in order to find the approval in God’s eyes that will lead to eternal Life. In other words, no human being needs to live in fear that some transgression of the Covenant might lead to his forfeiting eternal Life. In Christ, an individual is ‘free’ of any necessity of that sort. Eternal life is a gift of divine mercy, and that gift is based entirely on Christ’s willingness to serve as one’s advocate. Therefore, failure to keep the Covenant (even moral failure) cannot, in and of itself, mean that one forfeits eternal Life.¹⁰ In the absence of any confidence that there is another basis upon which eternal Life is granted to him as a gift of divine mercy, it is perfectly understandable that a person will feel bound to keep the Law in its entirety in his effort to attain eternal Life. But when a person gains the confidence that eternal life is a gift of mercy that Jesus secures for us, then no longer is he bound to the Law *in the same way that he was before he had such confidence.*¹¹ Anyone—Jew or Gentile—who

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9. Unfortunately, due to the haste and explosive passion out of which Paul wrote his letter, Paul does not take care in *Galatians* to patiently separate and delineate these two different ramifications. He tends to keep them both in view at the same time and include both of them within the same discussion. Paul’s blurring the distinction between these two different ramifications has led to significant confusion among interpreters of *Galatians*.
10. That is, after all, the very nature of mercy. Mercy, by its very nature, is a *response to failure*.
11. For a fuller explanation of how one’s obligation to the Law is altered by the gospel of God’s mercy through Jesus, see the sections below entitled “The Breakthrough in Paul’s Understanding of God’s Law” and “Paul’s Understanding of the Law: Old versus New” in Part Three.

behaves as if his acceptance by God is BASED on his Law-keeping has failed to understand and acknowledge the significance of Jesus and his death on the cross.

- (2) *Since, because of Jesus, it is now clear that his eternal destiny does not hinge on an adequate level of obedience to the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, and since the Mosaic Covenant was a covenant that God made exclusively with his chosen people the Jews, the Gentile is under NO obligation whatsoever to keep any of the religious requirements of the Covenant.*

A second ramification of the Jesus-believer’s ‘freedom’ from the Law is that *Gentile Jesus-believers* are under *absolutely no* obligation to keep the religious requirements of the Covenant. Hence they are ‘free’ from the distinctively Jewish obligations within the Law (e.g., Sabbath-keeping, dietary regulations).

Now it would make sense to insist that Gentile Jesus-believers keep the Mosaic Covenant in its entirety (including the religious requirements) if Covenant-keeping were the ultimate condition that was placed on divine mercy. But it is not! According to the gospel that Paul proclaims, authentic belief in Jesus fulfills the ultimate condition placed on mercy. Therefore, the gospel of Jesus removes any possible reason why a Gentile would be required to keep the religious requirements of the Covenant (and therefore to live like the Jews). While the Covenant does spell out distinctive religious practices, it does so for God’s people the Jews, not for Gentiles. And since performing those religious practices is not a prerequisite for the blessing of eternal Life, then there is no reason whatsoever that a Gentile would have any obligation to perform them. According to the gospel, therefore, performing the distinctive religious practices of the Jews is *not* a prerequisite for the Gentile’s obtaining the blessing of eternal Life.

Of the above two ramifications of the believer’s ‘freedom’ from the Law, the second is the one that Paul stresses in the book of *Galatians*. (This is the ramification that most directly pertains to the controversy that is the primary focus of the letter.) Paul is more intent on explaining why Gentiles do not have to keep Jewish RELIGIOUS obligations than on explaining (i) why Jews too can be ‘free’ of Jewish RELIGIOUS obligations, and (ii) why both Jew and Gentile are ‘free’ of the MORAL requirements of the Law. While Paul’s arguments do, in fact, establish that everyone—Jew and Gentile—is ‘free’ (in the narrow sense that Paul means it) of the MORAL requirements of the Law, Paul puts absolutely no stress on this point.

However, the first ramification is also in view in *Galatians*. It may not be the one Paul stresses. But it is clearly in view nonetheless. The ‘freedom’ from the Law that Paul espouses is an across-the-board ‘freedom’ from the Law that results from truly understanding and appreciating the value and significance of Jesus’ death on the cross. If one understands the value and significance of Jesus and his death, then he understands that he is ‘free’ (in the sense in which we have defined this) from each and every one of the Law’s demands. This ramification of having ‘freedom’ from the Law also has a bearing on the controversy being addressed in *Galatians*—albeit a less direct one: Gentiles are under no obligation to perform the Jewish religious practices. Therefore, if a Gentile **does** feel obligated to perform the Jewish religious obligations—in view of the first ramification of a believer’s ‘freedom’ from the Law—it may very well suggest that he has an inadequate understanding and appreciation of Jesus and his death. Indeed, it ultimately could suggest that he does not believe in Jesus *in the right sort of*

way—that is, in the way that will secure the gift of eternal Life. And the same could be said for a Jew who experiences no ‘freedom’ whatsoever with respect to his religious obligations.

Considering what is entailed by both of the above ramifications taken together¹², Paul is led to the following conclusion with regard to the point at issue: **every human being—whether Jew or Gentile—is 'free' from any obligation to keep the RELIGIOUS requirements of the Law.**¹³ If anyone—Jew or Gentile—does not recognize his ‘freedom’ from the religious requirements of the Law, then it calls into question whether he really understands and believes in who Messiah Jesus is and what he has done and can do on his behalf.

(B) How *Galatians* Has Been Misunderstood

One of the most important ways in which *Galatians* has been misunderstood results from having misunderstood the circumstances into which it was written. It will be important to offer yet one more important clarification with respect to the nature of the mistake which Paul is addressing.

One of the biggest obstacles to understanding the book of *Galatians* is the fact that this letter is a passionate—and, therefore, somewhat hasty—response by Paul. Because of the hasty character of his response, his presentation can tend to be cryptic and somewhat short on explanation. It would have been more readily understood by the original readers, of course. Having sat directly under his teaching, they had been given a more fully-developed presentation of Paul’s perspective. He had undoubtedly defended his position to them with more extensive arguments in his personal instruction of them. We, however, are not privy to these direct, person-to-person presentations. We are in a position where we need to reconstruct his actual arguments from the brief hints and incomplete explanations that he offers in the letter. As a result, both the points that Paul is making and the contrary position that he is seeking to refute are easy to misunderstand. My goal in this paper is to adequately clarify both. In a later section, I will attempt to articulate clearly the points that Paul is actually making in his argument to the Galatians. In this present section, however, I want to clarify the nature of Paul’s opponents’ position. To do this, I hope to make it clear what are *not* points of contention between Paul and his opponents.

Interpreters of *Galatians* frequently assume that there existed (and that we can identify) a set of contrary doctrinal positions that were being propagated by Paul’s opponents.¹⁴ Such an

12. As I suggested above, Paul’s discussion in *Galatians* tends to blend these two ramifications into one.

13. As we saw above, every human being is under moral obligation to keep the *moral* requirements of the Law. No human being can ever be free of the obligation to pursue moral goodness. But no one—Jew or Gentile—has an absolute, inviolable, moral obligation to perform the *religious* requirements of the Law. Because *religious* requirements are not moral obligations, the obligation to obey them will be relative to other considerations. The fundamental nature of Jewish obligation to keep the *religious* requirements of the Law arises out of the Jewish obligation to keep the Mosaic Covenant, a covenant that God made with Israel at a particular point in history. Their obligation to the Law, therefore, is a *covenantal* obligation, not an intrinsically *moral* obligation.

14. Specifically, some interpreters are inclined to see Paul as advocating the doctrine that we are justified in God’s eyes by faith and faith alone while Paul’s opponents are advocating the doctrine that we earn our

assumption is to significantly misunderstand the controversy. The controversy was not obviously and primarily rooted in a difference of doctrine. It was rooted in something more subtle.

Misunderstanding the nature of the controversy in this way probably stems from Paul’s claim early in the letter:

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Gal. 1:6–8, NASV)¹⁵

Quite understandably, we tend to equate “the gospel” with a set of beliefs that we embrace. Therefore, when Paul contrasts his “gospel” with the “different gospel” being advocated by the false teachers who are influencing the Galatians, we naturally assume that these false teachers are advocating a set of beliefs that contradicts some of the beliefs contained in Paul’s set of beliefs. Clearly, at some level, this has to be true. But we need to clarify the exact nature of this lack of concord between their respective belief systems. For without understanding the exact nature of the disagreement, we cannot possibly understand what Paul is saying in response to it.

In order to achieve the requisite clarity, we need to understand two important points: (1) *two belief systems cannot be considered identical if they have different practical implications*, and (2) *there is an important and meaningful distinction to be made between an “ostensible belief” and a “working belief.”* I will explore each of these points below, examining each of them in connection with how we should understand the controversy being addressed in *Galatians*.

(a) First Point: Identical Belief Systems Will Have Identical Implications

When we compare the belief systems of two different people, it might very well appear that they are identical. That is, it might appear that both people embrace exactly the same set of beliefs. However, if the two people derive radically different conclusions from their respective belief systems, then it follows that their belief systems are not, in fact, identical—no matter how much they might have appeared so.

salvation through our obedience to God’s Law. My contention in this paper is that it is highly unlikely that any such explicitly discernible difference in doctrine existed between Paul and his opponents. Indeed, my contention is that, to an outside observer, it would appear that Paul and his opponents believed in essentially the same gospel. On what basis do I say this? Careful attention to the data in the New Testament suggests that Paul’s opponents were centered in Jerusalem, in the Jesus-believing community led by James (cf. *Gal. 2:12*.) It is unthinkable that they could have existed comfortably within the Jerusalem community of Jesus-belief if they espoused doctrines that were explicitly and overtly different from the core doctrines espoused by Paul and the other apostles.

15. I would translate *Galatians* 1:6–8 somewhat differently: “I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from that which invited you into the gift of the *messiah* to a different gospel (which is not so very different)—except that there are some who are confusing you, by choosing, in fact, to alter the gospel of the *messiah*. But even if we, or a messenger from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”

To clarify this, let’s consider Paul’s belief system (as an apostle) as over against the belief system of the false teachers who Paul believes are misleading the Galatians and are advocating a “different gospel.” Because of Paul’s characterization of their belief system as a “different gospel,” many interpreters of *Galatians* conclude that Paul’s opponents were advocating a *discernibly* different belief system from the one that Paul advocates. The table below (Table A) displays a representative analysis of how some of these interpreters might characterize the most important differences between the two belief systems.¹⁶ My contention is that this representation reflects a faulty understanding of the system of explicit¹⁷ beliefs advocated by Paul’s opponents:

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16. We have no independent sources for what the false teachers among the Galatians did or did not believe and did or did not proclaim. We can only reconstruct what they must have believed and proclaimed from clues that we find within the book of *Galatians* itself. Any reconstruction cannot purport to know precisely what they believed and taught, nor exactly how they would have expressed and articulated what they believed and taught. So, in all of the subsequent tables in this paper that attempt to depict the belief systems of Paul and his opponents, it must be understood that none of them is put forth as a historically accurate description of the belief-system of Paul’s opponents. They are intended as approximate representations of the sorts of beliefs that likely made up their belief system. Paul’s belief system can be presumed to be accurate. But the representation of Paul’s opponents’ beliefs must be taken to be only approximate and likely.
 17. By an “explicit belief” in the following discussion, I mean a belief that the person would explicitly articulate and assert that he believes. This is in contradistinction to an “implicit belief,” a belief that a person does, in fact, hold but which he may not explicitly acknowledge that he holds. In the case of an *implicit belief*, a person may not even know that he holds it. On the other hand, an *explicit belief* is of such a nature that a person will always know that he holds it.

TABLE A

A Common Understanding of the Explicit Beliefs of Paul’s Opponents in Galatia as compared to the Explicit Beliefs of Paul

	AN EXAMPLE OF A COMMON, BUT FAULTY UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL’S OPPONENTS</u> IN GALATIA	THE CONTRASTING BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL</u>
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 1	Belief #1A (Opponents) > <i>The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.</i>	Belief #1 (Paul) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 2	Belief #2A (Opponents) > <i>The one who keeps the Law earns (deserves) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).</i>	Belief #2 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 3	Belief #3A (Opponents) > <i>The one who keeps the Law is NOT in need of the mercy of God.</i>	Belief #3 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 4	Belief #4B (Opponents) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a <i>justly deserved reward</i> .	Belief #4 (Paul) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.

As already suggested, the above describes a *faulty* analysis of the differences between Paul and his opponents. When we rightly understand what is at issue in *Galatians*, we can see that Paul’s opponents did not explicitly advocate the system of beliefs represented in Table A above.¹⁸ Rather, we see that the table below (Table B) more accurately characterizes and compares these two systems of explicit beliefs.¹⁹ What is noteworthy is that all six explicit beliefs listed in the

18. The critical point of difference between Paul’s belief system and that of his opponents as it is proposed in Table A is this: Paul clearly and explicitly believes that the reward of eternal Life is a gift of God’s mercy while his opponents believe that the reward of eternal Life is something that is earned and deserved by the one who keeps God’s Law.

19. In reading Table B, note that the label given to a belief identifies its unique content. Hence, Belief #1 in the column under Paul’s opponents’ belief system is the same belief as Belief #1 in the column under Paul’s belief system. As a result, one can readily see whether two belief are the same or different by simply looking at the belief labels, without having to reference the description of the belief itself. Furthermore, the labels remain the same through all the tables, Tables A-D. So, for example, Belief #1 in Table B is identical to Belief #1 in Table A. The number in the belief label corresponds to the “step” that it occupies in the argument or belief system. If at the same “step” Paul and his opponents have different beliefs, I will indicate the difference with

table below are identical in both belief systems. Paul and his opponents hold the same set of explicit beliefs.

TABLE B

A More Accurate Understanding of the Explicit Beliefs of Paul’s Opponents in Galatia as compared to the Explicit Beliefs of Paul

	A MORE ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL’S OPPONENTS</u> IN GALATIA	THE VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL</u>
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 1	Belief #1 (Opponents) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.	Belief #1 (Paul) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 2	Belief #2 (Opponents) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).	Belief #2 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 3	Belief #3 (Opponents) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.	Belief #3 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 4	Belief #4 (Opponents) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.	Belief #4 (Paul) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 5	Belief #5 (Opponents) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bona fide</i> followers.	Belief #5 (Paul) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bona fide</i> followers.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 6	Belief #6 (Opponents) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.	Belief #6 (Paul) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.

the addition of a capital letter. Hence, in Table A, Belief #1 is a different belief from Belief #1A (but they occupy corresponding “steps” in their respective belief systems.) Also, we shall find that Belief #4B is a different belief from Belief #4A and from Belief #4 (but all of them occupy corresponding “steps” in their respective belief systems.)

As we can see from Table B, there is no *clearly discernible* difference between the belief system (“the gospel”) of Paul and the belief system (“the gospel”) of Paul’s opponents.²⁰ Why then does Paul accuse his opponents of advocating a “different” gospel? Since no difference can be seen in the major core beliefs that they explicitly espouse, the difference between them can only be discerned in what each of them considers to be implied by those core beliefs. From the core beliefs of the gospel, Paul infers that a Gentile does *not* need to perform the Jewish religious practices in order to inherit eternal Life. From *what is ostensibly the same set of core beliefs*, Paul’s opponents infer that a Gentile *does* need to perform the Jewish religious practices in order to inherit eternal Life. Clearly something is amiss. Two identical sets of beliefs ought to have exactly the same implications. If Paul draws an inference from his core beliefs that is incompatible with the inference that his opponents draw from their core beliefs, then Paul and his opponents *do not have the same set of core beliefs*. There has to be a difference between them. While that difference may not be immediately discernible, it must be there nonetheless.

As a matter of fact, there is—in all probability—an *implicit* belief contained in the belief system of Paul’s detractors that is at odds with a corresponding *implicit* belief²¹ contained in Paul’s belief system. In the table below (Table C),²² I sketch a very likely representation of their respective belief systems and how those different belief systems lead logically to the conclusions that they each draw, respectively, with regard to whether Gentiles need to keep the Law:

20. Notice, therefore, that both Paul and his opponents—so far as they would articulate the gospel, at least—clearly and explicitly teach that the reward of eternal Life is a gift of God’s mercy. Neither Paul nor his Galatian opponents would teach (as perhaps some individuals within Judaism might do) that the reward of eternal Life is something that is earned and deserved by the one who keeps God’s Law. This understanding of the beliefs of Paul’s opponents is sharply different from how they are commonly understood by interpreters of *Galatians*.

21. By an “implicit belief,” I mean a belief that the person clearly holds but which he does not explicitly acknowledge that he does. In the case of an implicit belief, a person may not even know that he holds the belief. An “implicit belief” is in contradistinction to an “explicit belief.” A person will know that he holds an explicit belief.

22. The comments in the note above with respect to Table B (note 19) are relevant to reading Table C here.

TABLE C

A Likely Understanding of the Belief System of Paul’s Opponents in Galatia as compared to the Belief System of Paul insofar as They Entail Different Conclusions Regarding Gentiles Keeping the Law

	A LIKELY UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL’S OPPONENTS</u> IN GALATIA AND HOW IT ENTAILS THEIR CONCLUSION THAT GENTILES MUST LIVE LIKE JEWS	A LIKELY UNDERSTANDING OF THE CORRESPONDING BELIEF SYSTEM ADVOCATED BY <u>PAUL</u> AND HOW IT ENTAILS HIS CONCLUSION THAT GENTILES NEED NOT LIVE LIKE JEWS
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 1	Belief #1 (Opponents) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.	Belief #1 (Paul) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 2	Belief #2 (Opponents) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).	Belief #2 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 3	Belief #3 (Opponents) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.	Belief #3 (Paul) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 4	Belief #4 (Opponents) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.	Belief #4 (Paul) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 5	Belief #5 (Opponents) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bona fide</i> followers.	Belief #5 (Paul) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bona fide</i> followers.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 6	Belief #6 (Opponents) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.	Belief #6 (Paul) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.
IMPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 7	Belief #7A (Opponents) > <i>Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant ARE an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements ARE virtually the equivalent of moral requirements.</i>	Belief #7 (Paul) > Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant ARE NOT an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements ARE NOT the equivalent of moral requirements.

<p>CONCLUSION A (FROM BELIEFS IN STEPS 1-7 ABOVE)</p>	<p>Conclusion #1A (Opponents) > One <i>CANNOT earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant — Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #1 (Paul) > One CAN earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant — Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>
<p>CONCLUSION B (FROM CONCLUSION A AND STEPS 1-7 ABOVE)</p>	<p>Conclusion #2A (Opponents) > One <i>CAN NOT be a bona fide follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant — Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #2 (Paul) > One CAN be a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant — Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>

If Table C is right, then Paul’s inference from his core beliefs (to the effect that Gentiles do not need to perform the distinctively Jewish religious practices to be saved from condemnation to death) must clearly be based on a distinction he makes between the *moral* requirements of the Mosaic Covenant and the *religious* requirements found there. The religious requirements do not have the same universal and timeless scope that the moral requirements do. As a consequence, Gentiles—who have no particular obligation to keep the Mosaic Covenant *per se*—are under no obligation to keep the *religious* requirements (while they do, of course, have an obligation to keep the *moral* requirements). Jews, however, *do* have a particular obligation to keep the religious requirements, because they *do* have a particular obligation to the Mosaic Covenant *per se*. The Mosaic Covenant was a special and unique covenant that God made with the Jews as his chosen people. Hence, Gentiles are not included in this particular obligation. So, while it is understandable—and to some extent accurate—for a Jew to consider his performing the religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant as part and parcel of his pursuit of righteousness, it is not the case that a Gentile must think so. A Gentile need not consider the religious requirements found in the Mosaic Covenant as a necessary part of his pursuit of righteousness.

It seems highly likely that Table C reflects the actual beliefs (explicit and implicit) embraced by Paul and his opponents. It is highly likely that it captures the actual difference between their belief systems. If so, then Table C shows the difference in reasoning that led Paul and his opponents to reach opposite conclusions with respect to the Gentile question. However, this difference represented in Table C is not sufficient to explain why Paul would accuse his opponents (in *Galatians*) of advocating a “different” gospel. To explore why this is so, we must consider Paul’s discussion in *Romans* 14 alongside his discussion in *Galatians*.

(b) Romans 14 versus Galatians

In *Romans* 14, Paul identifies individuals who are “weak in belief (*pistis*).” By implication, if one individual is “weak in belief,” there are other individuals who are “strong in belief.” When we rightly grasp what Paul is saying, it becomes evident that the individual he identifies as “weak in belief” is an individual who has a weak, inaccurate, and incomplete grasp of the implications of the gospel of Jesus. And the one he would identify as “strong in belief” is the individual who has a strong, accurate, and complete grasp of the implications of the gospel of

Jesus. More specifically, the individual he identifies as “weak in belief” is the *Jewish* Jesus-believer who—due to his weak, inaccurate, and incomplete grasp of the truth—believes that every Jesus-believer is under obligation to keep the religious requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. Correspondingly, the one Paul would identify as “strong in belief” is the individual who—due to a strong, accurate, and complete grasp of the truth—believes that the Jesus-believer is not necessarily under obligation to keep the religious requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. In other words, the belief system of the one who is “weak in belief” in *Romans* 14 would appear to correspond exactly to the belief system of Paul’s opponents in *Galatians* (described in Table C above). Similarly, the belief system of the one who is “strong in belief” in *Romans* 14 would appear to correspond exactly to the belief system of Paul in Table C above.

Now what was Paul’s counsel to his readers in chapter 14 of *Romans*? The one who is “strong in belief” is not to hold the one who is “weak in belief” in contempt. Instead, he is to accept him as his brother. And the one who is “weak in belief” is not to judge or condemn the one who is “strong in belief.” Instead he is to accept him as his brother. The nature of Paul’s counsel in *Romans* 14 raises a very important question: why does Paul not follow his own counsel here in responding to his opponents in *Galatians*?

In *Galatians*, Paul accuses his opponents (who appear to have exactly the same worldview as the “weaker” brother in *Romans* 14) of being false teachers who proclaim a different gospel and who may indeed be “cut off from Christ.” That does not appear to be a matter of “accepting him as his brother,” as Paul counseled the Romans. In *Galatians*, to those who want to live like Jews, Paul is passionately, urgently, and energetically opposed. In *Romans*, with respect to those who want to live like Jews, Paul counsels tolerance, tenderness, acceptance, and respect. Discovering the reason for the very different tone between *Galatians* and *Romans* is a key to understanding why, in *Galatians*, he accuses his opponents of proclaiming a different gospel.

But to find the reason for the difference in tone between *Romans* and *Galatians*, we must now explore the second of the two important points mentioned above. Namely, we need to explore the distinction between an “ostensible belief” and a “working belief.”

(c) **Second Point: Ostensible Belief versus Working Belief**

The distinction between an “ostensible belief” and a “working belief” is an important and meaningful distinction:

- (1) An “ostensible belief” is a belief that one ostensibly holds insofar as it is a belief that one explicitly purports to hold. If I say, “I am a sinner,” then the belief that I am a sinner is an ostensible belief. I have explicitly articulated my assent to it, so—ostensibly—it is a belief that I embrace.
- (2) A “working belief” is a belief that one actually holds as evidenced by the fact that his actions, attitudes, desires, etc. are informed by it. When a belief actually governs the way I conduct myself and the way I understand my experience, then it is a “working belief” for me. So, if I say, “I am a sinner,” but I act, talk, and think like a person who believes he is good and acceptable to God, then, while the belief that I am a sinner is an “ostensible belief” for me, it is not a “working belief” for me. The “working belief” is that I am good and acceptable to God, for that is the belief that actually governs how I think, talk, and behave.

Now this difference between a “working belief” and an “ostensible belief” is at the very heart of James’ famous discussion concerning “faith” and “works”:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has belief [ostensible belief] but he has no works? Can that ostensible belief save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so belief, if it has no works [is merely ostensible belief], is dead, being by itself [is ostensible belief alone, and not working belief]. But someone may well say, “You have ostensible belief, but I have works to give evidence of my belief. Show me your ostensible belief to be a real working belief without any works! I will show you my working belief in and through my works.” You ostensibly believe that God is one. You do well; the demons indeed believe with a working belief, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that ostensible belief without works is useless? [James 2:14–20, adapted from NASV]

As we know from James’ discussion, it is very possible for a person to say that he believes X when he does not *really* believe X at all. For from James’s perspective, what a person *really and actually* believes should be defined by his “working beliefs,” not by his “ostensible beliefs.” Hence, it should be defined by how he acts, not by what he says he believes.

This distinction between ostensible and working beliefs becomes vital for understanding how Paul responds to his opponents in Galatia. Above (Table C), we outlined a set of likely beliefs espoused by Paul’s opponents. However, Table C outlined what—in all likelihood—are the *ostensible* beliefs of Paul’s opponents. It outlined what they likely would have *said* they believe. But did those beliefs also function as their *working* beliefs? If not, then perhaps Paul’s reaction to his opponents in Galatia is not to their *ostensible* beliefs, but to their *working* beliefs. In other words, when Paul accuses them of propagating a “different gospel,” perhaps the different gospel he has in mind is the system of their actual, *working* beliefs, not the system of their *ostensible* beliefs. In Table D below I add what could, in all likelihood, be the system of *working* beliefs that governed the speech, behavior, and attitudes of Paul’s opponents.²³

Note that at each of the Steps 1–5, two things are true: (i) the actual working belief of Paul’s opponents is different from their corresponding ostensible belief, and (ii) the working belief of Paul is different from the working belief of Paul’s opponents (indeed, sometimes it is directly opposite their belief). Note further that, in Step 7, the opponents’ implicit belief (their working belief as well as what would be their ostensible belief in the event that they explicitly articulated it) is different from Paul’s implicit belief (his working belief as well as what would be his ostensible belief in the event that he explicitly articulated it). As a consequence of the above, Paul and his opponents reach very different conclusions at both Conclusion A and Conclusion B.

23. In reading this Table, note that the label given to a belief or conclusion identifies its unique content. Hence, Belief #1 is a different belief from Belief #1A. As a result, one can quickly see whether the working belief is the same as the ostensible belief by simply looking at the belief labels, without having to reference the description of the belief itself. Also remember that the labels are the same through Tables A-D. So, for example, Belief #1 in Table D is identical to Belief #1 in Table A, B, and C.

TABLE D

A Likely Understanding of the Actual Working Belief Systems of Paul and of his Opponents in Galatia as compared to the Ostensible Belief System of Each, Respectively

	THE OSTENSIBLE BELIEF SYSTEM OF PAUL’S OPPONENTS	THE ACTUAL WORKING BELIEF SYSTEM OF PAUL’S OPPONENTS	THE OSTENSIBLE BELIEF SYSTEM OF PAUL	THE ACTUAL WORKING BELIEF SYSTEM OF PAUL
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 1	Belief #1 (Opponents/ostensible) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.	Belief #1A (Opponents/working) > <i>The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) IS deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.</i>	Belief #1 (Paul/ostensible) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.	Belief #1 (Paul/working) > The blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is NOT deserved (earned) by the recipient of that blessing.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 2	Belief #2 (Opponents/ostensible) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).	Belief #2A (Opponents/working) > <i>The one who keeps the Law DOES earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).</i>	Belief #2 (Paul/ostensible) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).	Belief #2 (Paul/working) > The one who keeps the Law does NOT earn (deserve) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life).
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 3	Belief #3 (Opponents/ostensible) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.	Belief #3A (Opponents/working) > <i>The one who keeps the Law is NOT in need of the mercy of God.</i>	Belief #3 (Paul/ostensible) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.	Belief #3 (Paul/working) > The one who keeps the Law is still in need of the mercy of God.
EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 4	Belief #4 (Opponents/ostensible) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.	Belief #4A (Opponents/working) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God, <i>to the extent that mercy is even relevant or necessary.</i>	Belief #4 (Paul/ostensible) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.	Belief #4 (Paul/working) > Pursuing righteousness is a necessary condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) as a gift of mercy from God.

<p>EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 5</p>	<p>Belief #5 (Opponents/ostensible) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bone fide</i> followers.</p>	<p>Belief #5A (Opponents/working) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bone fide and particularly worthy</i> followers.</p>	<p>Belief #5 (Paul/ostensible) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bone fide</i> followers.</p>	<p>Belief #5 (Paul/working) > Being granted mercy (and Life) from God results from Jesus advocating for a person because that person belongs to Jesus as one of his <i>bone fide</i> followers.</p>
<p>EXPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 6</p>	<p>Belief #6 (Opponents/ostensible) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.</p>	<p>Belief #6 (Opponents/working) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.</p>	<p>Belief #6 (Paul/ostensible) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.</p>	<p>Belief #6 (Paul/working) > A necessary condition for being a <i>bona fide</i> follower of Jesus is that the person must earnestly pursue righteousness in the way he conducts his life.</p>
<p>IMPLICIT BELIEF - STEP 7</p>	<p>Belief #7A (Opponents/ostensible) > <i>Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant ARE an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements ARE virtually the equivalent of moral requirements.</i></p>	<p>Belief #7A (Opponents/working) > <i>Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant ARE an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements ARE virtually the equivalent of moral requirements.</i></p>	<p>Belief #7 (Paul/ostensible) > Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant are NOT an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements are NOT the equivalent of moral requirements.</p>	<p>Belief #7 (Paul/working) > Meeting the religious requirements in the Mosaic Covenant are NOT an intrinsic part of the pursuit of righteousness—that is, the religious requirements are NOT the equivalent of moral requirements.</p>

<p>CONCLUSION A (FROM BELIEFS IN STEPS 1-7 ABOVE)</p>	<p>Conclusion #1A (Opponents/ostensible) > <i>One CANNOT earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #1A (Opponents/working) > <i>One CANNOT earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #1 (Paul/ostensible) > One CAN earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>	<p>Conclusion #1 (Paul/working) > One CAN earnestly pursue righteousness in the conduct of his life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>
<p>CONCLUSION B (FROM CONCLUSION A AND STEPS 1-7 ABOVE)</p>	<p>Conclusion #2A (Opponents/ostensible) > <i>One CAN NOT be a bona fide follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #2A (Opponents/working) > <i>One CAN NOT be a bona fide follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion #2 (Paul/ostensible) > One CAN be a bona fide follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>	<p>Conclusion #2 (Paul/working) > One CAN be a bona fide follower of Jesus who will be granted eternal Life without performing the distinctively Jewish religious practices required by the Mosaic Covenant —Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.</p>

Assuming it is a reasonably accurate representation of their beliefs, we can see from Table D that Paul’s working beliefs are importantly different from his opponents’ working beliefs at several points. Notably, working beliefs #1A, #2A, and #3A are the *inverse* of Paul’s working beliefs #1, #2, and #3.²⁴ Furthermore, implicit working belief #7A is the inverse of Paul’s implicit working belief #7. Those differences, in turn, result in working Conclusions #1A and #2A being the inverse of Paul’s working Conclusions #1 and #2. As a result, if Table D is correct, then—when we consider what each believes *at the level of his “working beliefs”*—Paul and his opponents clearly do not believe the same gospel. Paul’s opponents are unquestionably advocating a “different” gospel from Paul.

24. By “inverse” I mean that if Paul says that X is true, his opponents say that not-X (the inverse) is true. So, for example, where Paul says that the blessing of Abraham is NOT-deserved {BELIEF #1}, his opponents say that the blessing of Abraham is NOT-NOT-deserved, which is to say, it IS deserved {BELIEF #1A}. Similarly, for Belief #2 vis à vis Belief #2A and Belief #3 vis à vis Belief #3A.

But is Table D correct? And how would we know? As James clearly implied in the New Testament book of *James*, you know a “working belief” by the “works” that result from it. To be specific, what a person does, says, thinks, and values will reveal what a person actually embraces as his working belief. It is here that that we find the difference between the opponents of Paul in Galatia and the “weaker brother” that Paul envisions in *Romans* 14.

There are several lines of evidence that Paul’s opponents in Galatia were fundamentally self-righteous (that is, there are several indicators that they did not perceive themselves as in need of God’s mercy). Specifically, there are indications that—in their attitude toward others who did not keep the Law and perform Jewish religious practices—they were scolding, censorious, merciless, and unaccepting. But the sort of relentless finger-wagging that seemed to characterize Paul’s opponents in Galatia is a hallmark of self-righteousness—because it is the hallmark of a person who feels no need for mercy. It is the hallmark of a person who sees himself as worthy and deserving, and not a person who sees himself as unworthy. All-in-all, it seems clear that Paul’s opponents in Galatia can aptly be characterized as individuals who held the belief, as part of their *working* beliefs, that their Law-obedience made them worthy and deserving of God’s blessing (eternal Life). Now, in all likelihood, they probably repudiated this very perspective in their ostensible beliefs. The set of ostensible beliefs they embraced may very well have included a belief in their desperate need for mercy. But their working beliefs did not! Their attitudes and actions toward others were not governed and informed by a personal belief that they were unrighteous sinners desperately in need of mercy. Rather, their attitudes and actions toward others were informed by a belief that their Law-keeping made them morally superior and eminently deserving of any blessing that God had to offer. All of this is to say that, from their lives and “works,” we can discern that Paul’s opponents in Galatia were individuals whose *true and real* beliefs involved believing that (i) the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) must be earned or deserved by the recipient of that blessing, that (ii) the one who keeps the Law does earn or deserve the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life), and that (iii) the one who keeps the Law is not in need of the mercy of God. Or, to put it another way, Paul’s opponents in Galatia may very well have explicitly confessed, “I am not worthy; I can stand before God only by the mercy made possible by Jesus.” But at the same time, the real confession of their heart was this: “My Law-keeping makes me worthy; I stand before God precisely because of my obedience to the Law.”

This is in stark contrast to the “weaker brother” that Paul envisions in *Romans* 14. The “weaker brother” envisioned in *Romans* 14 is not someone who manifests the same set of attitudes. He does sincerely believe that it is wrong for a person not to keep the Law in all of its particulars. But, at the same time, he authentically believes that no one has any standing before God except by God’s mercy. No person whosoever deserves God’s blessing. Therefore, the weaker brother envisioned in *Romans* 14 is able to accept the “sinning” and undeserving Gentile as his brother. Even though the Gentile’s lifestyle may be sinful—he knows that God can and will show such a sinner mercy if he authentically believes in Jesus and places his trust in him as his intercessor. Undoubtedly, this “weaker brother” will feel disturbed and unsettled by his Gentile brother’s transgression of the Mosaic Covenant. Yet he knows that God—on the basis of Jesus’s intercession—will grant the Gentile “sinner” mercy just as surely as he will grant it to himself (a Jewish Law-keeper who desperately needs mercy). Paul assumes that there is no self-righteousness in the attitudes and outlook of the “weaker brother” that he envisions in *Romans* 14. In fact, understanding the temptation that he faces, Paul counsels this “weaker brother” not to

“judge” (that is, “condemn”) the Gentile brother who is not keeping the Law in its entirety. In other words, he counsels him *NOT to succumb to the temptation to self-righteousness*.

I ask above whether we can know that Table D is correct, whether it is an accurate characterization of the working beliefs of Paul’s opponents in Galatia. As we can see, the answer is “yes.” There are various clues in the letter that the conduct of these men was rooted in a deep and profound belief in their own righteousness and worthiness. This supports my contention that they have a working understanding along the lines of what we outlined in Table D above. Furthermore, the only way we can adequately account for the difference in perspective that Paul takes in *Romans 14 vis à vis* the perspective he takes in *Galatians* is on the assumption that Paul has judged them to be fundamentally self-righteous in their outlook. In other words, only on the assumption that his opponents in Galatia have a working understanding along the lines of what we outlined in Table D above can we account for why Paul reacts to them the way he does in *Galatians* (in contrast to his counsel in *Romans 14*).

Taking all the evidence into account, therefore, we are led to the conclusion that the opponents of Paul’s gospel in Galatia do not differ from Paul at the level of their ostensible beliefs. They differ only at the level of their working beliefs. Ostensibly, his opponents believe, proclaim, and advocate exactly the same gospel that Paul does—the gospel of the apostles. But, in truth—as seen by the very different outlook that they have toward Law-obedience—these opponents of Paul actually, at the level of their working beliefs, believe, promote, and enforce a set of beliefs that is directly contrary to the gospel. That is what prompts Paul to label it “a different gospel.”²⁵

It is very important to avoid interpreting *Galatians* as if Paul were responding to a group of false teachers who were directly contradicting the doctrines and beliefs of the apostolic gospel. They were not. Ostensibly, they were in complete agreement with the apostolic gospel. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They believed that Jesus died for the sins of the world. They believed that God raised Jesus from the grave to newness of Life. They maintained that it was through believing in and following Jesus that one would receive eternal Life. Paul’s antagonists were not challenging any of these core beliefs of Paul’s gospel. What they challenged was Paul’s understanding of the practical implications of that gospel. The fact that they challenged Paul’s understanding of the practical implications of the gospel reveals, as we have seen, that they were motivated by a very different working understanding of the gospel from Paul’s. The difference they had with Paul, therefore, was subterranean. It was not obvious on the surface. It is important

25. Paul expresses amazement that they are departing from the gospel that he taught to them “to a different gospel (which is not so very different).” (*Galatians 1:6*) The reason he includes the comment, “which is not so very different,” becomes evident once we have understood the working beliefs of Paul’s antagonists. Beliefs #1A, #2A, #3A, and #4A are not unlike the working beliefs of many contemporary Pharisaical Jews who are NOT Jesus-believers at all—Jews who have explicitly rejected the gospel of Jesus. At the level of their working beliefs, therefore, the opponents of Paul in Galatia are advocating attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives that are widespread among the unbelieving Jews of the first century. While his opponents are, in truth, advocating a different take on the gospel of Jesus, the perspectives and attitudes that they are advocating are “not so very different” from the attitudes of thousands of unbelieving Jews.

to understand this. Otherwise, one is likely to misinterpret Paul’s response to it in his letter to the Galatians.

(C) Final Clarification of the Nature of the Controversy

From a careful study of Table D above, there emerges a very clear idea of what we might expect from Paul’s response to his opponents. With regard to their contention that Gentile Jesus-believers are under obligation to keep the Mosaic Covenant, we would expect Paul to rebut their position with the following line of reasoning:

*You have falsely assumed that the religious requirements of the Mosaic Covenant are “moral” in nature. Or, at least, you have assumed that they are universally binding on all of mankind in the same way that the moral requirements are. (See Belief #7A in Table D above.) But this is false. While the Mosaic Covenant does contain universally binding moral commandments among its many instructions, that is not the nature of each and every one of its commandments. Some of its commandments are non-moral, non-universal obligations intended only for God’s chosen people, the Jews. Those particular commandments are not binding on any Gentile, for Gentiles are not party to the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was a covenant between God and the Jews. Gentiles are not under that covenant. Therefore, a Jesus-believing Gentile is not subject to any of the non-moral, religious obligations to which a Jew is subject. We Jews, as Jews, are still under obligation to honor our covenant with God. But no Gentile is under such obligation. No Gentile is in such a covenant relationship with God. {I will refer to this line of reasoning here as **Argument A**.}*

But herein lies a problem. Nowhere in the book of *Galatians* does Paul spell out anything like this argument. In fact, nowhere in the book of *Galatians* does Paul even acknowledge the distinction between moral requirements and religious requirements. Why not? Since this is the clear difference in perspective between Paul and his detractors, and since this is where their reasoning fails with regard to Gentiles being required to keep the Law, why would Paul not construct his response to his opponents around this? In other words, why does Paul not lay out Argument A, the very argument we would fully expect him to make?

To answer this, we must note that Paul’s understanding of the ramifications of the gospel are being challenged by his opponents in two distinct ways:

CHALLENGE #1 > Paul’s opponents disagree with the *instruction* he is giving to the Gentile Jesus-believers. Paul tells Gentile believers that they are under no obligation to follow the religious practices enjoined by the Jewish religion in its effort to keep the Mosaic Covenant. His opponents strongly disagree with Paul and object to his propagating this perspective through his teaching.

CHALLENGE #2 > Paul’s opponents disagree with Paul’s personal *practice*. Paul—even though he is a Jew—feels perfectly free, in certain circumstances, not to perform the religious practices enjoined by the Jewish religion. As circumstances require, he feels perfectly free not to eat kosher, not to keep the Sabbath, etc. This “abandonment” of his obligations as a Jew outrages his opponents. They do not believe that there are any circumstances that can justify his not keeping the religious requirements enjoined by the Law.

The key to understanding why Paul makes the argument that he does in *Galatians* is to understand that *Paul is answering both of the above challenges*, not just the first one. Not only is he defending the legitimacy of his instructing the Gentiles that they are not required to keep the

Law as Jews do, he is also defending *his own* freedom (and that of any Jew) to forego performing the religious practices of the Jewish religion if the circumstances so require.

Herein lies the explanation for why Paul did not utilize *Argument A* (described above) in his letter to the Galatians. *Argument A* would certainly be the obvious argument for Paul to use if he wanted to reveal the fallacy in his opponents’ position on Gentile Law-obedience and to answer **Challenge #1**. But *Argument A* would do nothing to establish the “freedom” of a Jew to forego Law-obedience and thereby answer **Challenge #2**. So, since Paul wants to defend his teaching and practice with respect to both **Challenge #1** and **Challenge #2** above, *Argument A* will not do.

Therefore, what Paul does instead is demonstrate that, because the *messiah* has come and has accomplished what he has accomplished, we are no longer under obligation to the Law in the same way that we were before Jesus came.²⁶ (I will refer to the actual argument that Paul makes in *Galatians* as *Argument G*.²⁷) *Argument G* is what forms the heart of Paul’s letter. It applies equally to Jews and Gentiles. If Jesus transformed the Jew’s relationship to the Law—such that that Jew is now ‘free’ of his former obligation to the Law—then certainly Jesus affects the relationship that a Gentile has to the Law. It makes no sense to require a Gentile to be subject to the Law if, subsequent to Jesus, Jews are not required to be subject to the Law. Hence, while *Argument A* would certainly have been an adequate defense of Paul’s position *vis à vis* **Challenge #1**, it would have done nothing to defend Paul’s practice *vis à vis* **Challenge #2**. *Argument G*, on the other hand—the argument that Paul actually makes in *Galatians*—does BOTH. It successfully defends Paul’s teaching *vis à vis* **Challenge #1** and it successfully defends his practice *vis à vis* **Challenge #2**. Because he can mount a successful defense of his perspective *vis à vis* **Challenge #1** without relying on *Argument A*, Paul foregoes using *Argument A* and uses *Argument G* instead. Since *Argument G* successfully defends Paul’s teaching and practice *vis à vis* both **Challenge #1** and **Challenge #2**, *Argument A* is made superfluous.²⁸

Part 3: The Gospel According to *Galatians*

In this section, I describe—point by point—the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is embodied in the teaching and arguments of *Galatians*. Not everything listed below is fully developed and

26. For a fuller explanation of how the coming of the Messiah changes the Jews’ relationship to the Law, see the section below entitled, “The Breakthrough in Paul’s Understanding of God’s Law.”

27. See the section below entitled “Paul’s Defense of His Position in the Controversy” for an understanding of the various points that make up Paul’s *Argument G*.

28. It is precisely because it is superfluous, and *only* because it is superfluous, that Paul does not utilize *Argument A* in *Galatians*. It is illegitimate to argue that, because Paul does not use *Argument A*, it follows that he considers it either false or unconvincing. The fact of the matter is this: while *Argument A* is both true and convincing, Paul does not need it. He employs a different argument (*Argument G*), which is not only true and convincing, but it also refutes his opponents’ position on BOTH of the points on which they are challenging Paul.

explained in *Galatians* itself. For a fuller explanation of some of the points, we would have to go to Paul’s other writings. Nevertheless, everything outlined below—in the terms that I expound it here—is an integral part of that understanding of the gospel that underlies Paul’s argument in *Galatians*, even if it is not explicitly spelled out there. I begin with a preliminary exploration of the crucial breakthrough that Paul had in his coming to understand the purpose and role of God’s Law. Next I offer a detailed examination of how his new understanding of the role of the Law compares to his old understanding of the Law. Part 3 concludes with a point-by-point description of Paul’s gospel insofar as it underlies the arguments of *Galatians*.

(A) The Breakthrough in Paul’s Understanding of God’s Law

When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and revealed to him that he was very much alive, everything changed for Paul. He went from persecuting Jesus-believers to being a Jesus-believer himself. However, Paul did not immediately possess a coherent understanding of God’s purposes. More specifically, he did not immediately understand how a crucified Messiah fit with those divine purposes. It required time before Paul could completely grasp God’s purposes.

As we see from the autobiographical data in *Galatians*, Paul had a significant amount of time within which to devote himself to a study of Scripture and to reevaluate what it actually said. In light of the now undeniable fact that God had sent his Messiah into the world to die, Paul reexamined what the Scriptures had taught with regard to the Messiah. His study led to a very important breakthrough: Messiah Jesus’ crucifixion was a coherent part of God’s purposes; it was neither a surprise nor a failure of God’s plans. It was exactly what God had purposed as the way he would “save” his people from condemnation. As Paul characterizes it in a number of places, the Messiah’s being sent to die was “the mystery” within God’s purposes that past generations (prior to Jesus entering history) had not known nor understood.²⁹ When Jesus appeared alive to Paul on his way to Damascus, Paul was forced to begin an intellectual journey that led him to this important breakthrough: God’s purpose for the Messiah was that he serve as the true high priest for God’s people, offering himself up as the propitiatory offering through which he appealed to God for mercy on their behalf; hence, Jesus’ death was fully compatible with God’s designated role for his Messiah.

But as we see in *Galatians*, a breakthrough in his understanding of the purposed role of the Messiah led naturally to a breakthrough in his understanding of the purposed role of the Law (the Mosaic Covenant). From before the beginning of creation, God had purposed that it would be Jesus’ death (as a propitiatory offering) and his intercession (as our high priest) that would serve as the *basis* upon which God would grant mercy to those who received his mercy. But, if so, then the animal sacrifices prescribed by the Mosaic Covenant were *not* the *basis* upon which God

29. See Rom. 16:25; Ephesians 1:9, 3:1–12, 6:19; Colossians 1:25–27, 2:1–3, 4:3. Due to a mistranslation of the relevant texts, the “mystery” of which Paul speaks is often taken to be the fact that Jews and Gentiles are incorporated by God into one “body.” But that is not what Paul means in those passages. Rather, the “mystery” of which Paul speaks is that the Messiah would come and die. It is as a consequence of that “mystery” (the significance of the Messiah’s death) that Gentiles as well as Jews can be incorporated into the one body of God’s people. That is Paul’s point and the logic of his argument in those passages.

would grant mercy. They only anticipated and foreshadowed the *true basis* found in the Messiah. They were never intended to supply a *basis* for divine mercy in and of themselves.

In connection with the above breakthrough, Paul had a further breakthrough in his understanding. He came to see that the one distinctive thing that marked every true child of Abraham, who was destined to receive the blessing of everlasting Life, was “belief.” Throughout all time—from the beginning of humanity itself—those individuals whom God had chosen to receive his mercy were individuals who had hearts that were open and receptive to the truth about God, his purposes, and his promises.³⁰ Under the Mosaic Covenant, therefore, it was not Law-obedience *per se* that met with God’s approval. The blessing of Abraham did not come to an individual because he unflinchingly and meticulously conformed every inch of his life to the Law’s demands. Rather, the blessing of Abraham came to the individual who had a heart that desired to honor God by honoring his covenant and who sought to honor God’s covenant by “keeping” it. In other words, it was not the Law-keeper’s **obedience** *per se* that saved him; it was the Law-keeper’s **belief**—which is to say, it was the Law-keeper’s heart that was positively inclined toward God and the things of God.

This insight, in turn, led to another breakthrough in Paul’s understanding. Under the Mosaic Covenant, Law-keeping was the typical and expected expression of a person’s heart of belief with regard to God.³¹ But had God intended that Law-keeping would be the final and ultimate expression of one’s heart of belief? No, Paul realized that it was not. Keeping the Mosaic Covenant was the expected expression of belief for a certain period of human history. But once the Messiah had come into existence, there now existed a new test of the state of one’s heart. No longer was the heart of belief revealed by one’s acceptance of God’s Law, now it was revealed by one’s acceptance of God’s Messiah. From the very beginning of time, God had intended that the *ultimate* expression of one’s heart of belief toward God would be one’s belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Hence, once the Messiah had come and made himself known, belief in the Messiah superseded Law-obedience as the requisite expression of that heart of belief to which God grants mercy and Life.

So, through his study of Torah, Paul came to realize two important facts about the Law (the Mosaic Covenant) relative to God’s purposes: (i) neither Law-obedience nor the animal sacrifices included in that Law-obedience provide the *basis* upon which God grants mercy, and (ii) Law-obedience is not the ultimate, absolute *condition* upon which God grants mercy. To

30. See Hebrews 11:1-12:2.

31. See Gal. 3:11-12. My translation would run: “Now, that no one is decreed *dikaïos* in the presence of God on the basis of the Covenant is evident, because ‘The one who is *dikaïos* by virtue of his belief shall attain Life.’ Yet, the Covenant is not beyond the domain of belief; rather, ‘The man who does these things shall attain Life by them.’” Paul’s point is that Law-keeping cannot be the basis of forgiveness (*dikaïosune*) because Habakkuk speaks of an individual being *dikaïos* simply by virtue of his belief. However, he argues, neither is Law-keeping as the condition for being deemed *dikaïos* in conflict with belief being the condition for being deemed *dikaïos*. For the scriptures also speak of an individual attaining Life (and hence being deemed *dikaïos*) by virtue of his obedience to the Law.

better understand these two important facts, we need to understand the difference between the *BASIS* for mercy and the *CONDITION* for mercy:

- When one speaks of the “BASIS” for divine mercy, one is speaking of that which provides *the reason why God would grant mercy* to a person. If the reason why God grants mercy to a person is because he has been obedient to God’s Law and because his Law-obedience is so pleasing to God that it induces God to extend mercy to him, then Law-obedience is the *basis* for divine mercy. Or, if the reason why God grants mercy to a person is because he has offered up animals to God as an offering and because those animal offerings are so pleasing to God that it induces God to extend mercy to him, then animal sacrifices are the *basis* for divine mercy. But, if the reason why God grants mercy to a person is because Messiah Jesus has asked God to extend mercy to that person and because Jesus is so pleasing to God that Jesus’ request induces God to extend mercy to the person, then Jesus’ intercession is the *basis* for divine mercy.
- When one speaks of the “CONDITION” for divine mercy, one is speaking of the condition which an individual must meet in order to be granted mercy by God. If only those people who meet a certain requisite condition will be granted mercy, then the “condition” for divine mercy is whatever fulfilled condition it is that *determines to whom God will grant mercy*. If God will grant mercy to a person if and only if he keeps the Law, then it is Law-keeping that is the *condition* for divine mercy. If God will grant mercy to a person if and only if he believes that Jesus is the Messiah, then it is belief in Jesus as the Messiah that is the *condition* for divine mercy.

So, in light of the above definitions, we can restate the two important facts about the Law that Paul, through his study of Torah, came to realize: (i) neither Law-obedience nor the animal sacrifices included in that Law-obedience provide the *reason why* God grants mercy to any individual, and (ii) Law-obedience is not the ultimate, absolute fulfilled condition that determines *to whom* God will grant mercy. The reason why God grants mercy will need to be found elsewhere other than in Law-obedience; and the set of individuals to whom God will grant mercy needs to be found elsewhere other than in that set of people who obey the Law.

(B) Paul’s Understanding of the Law: Old versus New

Before he learned that the man Jesus, whom the Romans had crucified, was indeed the Messiah, Paul had been inclined to think that the *basis* upon which divine mercy would be granted to an individual was the person’s Law-obedience. More particularly, it would be granted on the basis of the animal sacrifices that the Law-obedient person was required to bring. Furthermore, Paul had been inclined to think that the Law-obedience that God established as the *condition* for receiving his mercy under the Mosaic Covenant was the **final** and **ultimate condition** for receiving his mercy. As Paul tended to see it, it would always be the case for anyone and everyone (including Gentiles) that the person who obeyed the demands of the Law is the one who would be granted mercy by God.

This understanding of the Law that Paul had had (prior to his recognition that Jesus was the Messiah) was typical of each and every Jew prior to the coming of the Messiah. I will refer to this understanding as the “Typical Old Understanding” of the role of the Mosaic Covenant. Once he realized that Jesus was the Messiah, Paul was led to an entirely different understanding of the

role of the Mosaic Covenant (described in section (A) above). I will refer to this new understanding as the “New Understanding.”

Not every Jew from Moses until Jesus held the “Typical Old Understanding” of the Law. Individual Jews—like David exemplifies in some of his psalms—had a more enlightened understanding of what God had purposed when he gave his Law. However, even these Jews did not have a full and complete understanding of the role of God’s Law. Since the Messiah had not yet come and revealed the role that he had, they were missing some important pieces to the puzzle. They were unable to put together the whole picture of God’s plan for saving mankind. Hence, while their understanding was closer to God’s plan than what was reflected in the “Typical Old Understanding,” it was still not a full and complete understanding like that found in the “New Understanding.” I will refer to this better, but still not complete, understanding as the “Enlightened Old Understanding” of the role of the Mosaic Covenant. In the table below (Table E), I outline the major differences and similarities of these three different ways the Law can be understood. Note that with regard to the five points of comparison, the three perspectives all differ from one another except on one point. All three perspectives agree that God intended Law-obedience to be a condition placed on being a member in good standing of the people of Israel. The coming of the Messiah did not change the role of the Law in that particular respect.

TABLE E

A Comparison of Three Different Understandings of the Role of the Mosaic Covenant in God’s Purposes

	TYPICAL OLD UNDERSTANDING The understanding by the typical Jew of the role of the Mosaic Covenant before Messiah Jesus had come	ENLIGHTENED OLD UNDERSTANDING The understanding by a very enlightened Jew of the role of the Mosaic Covenant before Messiah Jesus had come	NEW UNDERSTANDING The understanding by an insightful Jesus-believing Jew of the role of the Mosaic Covenant after Messiah Jesus had come
THE CONDITION FOR RECEIVING DIVINE MERCY AND THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM	[1-A] Law-obedience is the ultimate condition for receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham.	[1-B] A heart that is open and receptive to God and his purposes (typically expressed through one form of belief or another) is the ultimate condition for receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham.	[1-C] A heart that is open and receptive to God and his purposes (typically expressed through one form of belief or another) is the ultimate condition for receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham.
		[1-B-a] Law-obedience is the historical manifestation of belief that was put in place at Mt. Sinai to serve as the expression of belief that would be typically required.	[1-C-a] Law-obedience is a historical manifestation of belief; it is the historical manifestation that was put in place at Mt. Sinai to serve as the expression of belief that would be typically required—a requirement that stayed in force until the coming of the Messiah.
			[1-C-b] Belief-in-Jesus is a different historical manifestation of belief; it is the particular historical manifestation that, once Messiah Jesus entered history, was put in place to serve as the expression of belief that would be typically required—a requirement that remains in place today.

<p>THE BASIS FOR RECEIVING DIVINE MERCY AND THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM</p>	<p>[2-A] Law-obedience is the basis for receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham.</p>	<p>[2-B] The basis of receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham is a mysterious unknown. Law-obedience cannot be the ultimate basis; but what the true basis actually is is hidden in the purposes of God.</p>	<p>[2-C] Jesus’ intercession on our behalf, in and through the propitiatory offering of his death on the cross, is the true basis for receiving divine mercy and the blessing of Abraham.</p>
<p>NATURAL EXPERIENCE OF A PERSON SEEKING TO OBEY THE LAW</p>	<p>[3-A] Fear of God’s wrath (that results from my doubting whether I have been sufficiently obedient) is the natural and logical result of these perspectives. Hence, fear is the typical experience of a Jew under this old understanding of the Law.</p>	<p>[3-B] Uncertainty and a lack of complete confidence in one’s status before God is the natural result of these perspectives. Hence, while a confident hope (based on a firm belief in God’s mercy) can be the experience of an enlightened Jew under this old, enlightened understanding, such a confident hope rests on uncertain grounds and an unclear basis.</p>	<p>[3-C] Freedom from the fear of God’s wrath (a fear that would result from my doubting whether I have been sufficiently obedient) is the natural and logical result of these perspectives. Hence, freedom from the fear of condemnation is the typical experience of a Jew under this new understanding of the Law.</p>
<p>CONDITION FOR BEING A MEMBER OF ISRAEL IN GOOD-STANDING</p>	<p>[4-A] Law-obedience as an expression of authentic respect for the Covenant and for the God who made the Covenant is a necessary condition for being a member in good standing of the people of Israel.</p>	<p>[4-B] Authentic respect for the Covenant and the God who made the Covenant (typically, but not necessarily, expressed through Law-obedience) is a necessary condition for being a member in good standing of the people of Israel.</p>	<p>[4-C] Authentic respect for the Covenant and the God who made the Covenant (typically, but not necessarily, expressed through Law-obedience) is a necessary condition for being a member in good standing of the people of Israel.</p>

As we can see, then, an important part of Paul’s breakthrough was to recognize the falseness of the “Typical Old Understanding” and to embrace the “New Understanding” of the Law. There are four important things to know about Paul’s “New Understanding” of the Law and the insights that followed from it:

- (1) Paul’s “new understanding” of the role of the Law did not result from the Law being given a new and different role after the Messiah came. The Law had exactly the same role in God’s purposes after the Messiah came as it had before he came. Its role did not change; Paul’s understanding of its role changed. Paul’s understanding of the role that God had always intended for his Law was transformed because, with Jesus, Paul (and other believers like

him) were now in possession of further information about God’s purposes that previously they had not had. In light of this further information that Jesus brought, their understanding of the role of the Law of Moses was completely transformed.

- (2) It is perfectly understandable that the typical Jew held the “Typical Old Understanding” of the role of the Mosaic Covenant. Only a particularly insightful Israelite (like David) had the wisdom, perspective, and sanctification to achieve a more enlightened understanding. And even for such a rare Israelite as he, it would be virtually impossible to have a complete understanding of the true role of the Law. Without the information that Jesus brought, an Israelite before Jesus simply had too little information to be able to put together the complete picture of what God had planned.
- (3) Part of God’s plan was to allow the people of Israel to remain confined within the “Typical Old Understanding” of the Law. He purposed for Israel to persist in their false understanding of the role of the Law until his Messiah should enter history. This inaccurate and incomplete understanding of the Law served a purpose. God intended that the Law—in their inevitably inadequate view of it—would serve as a sort of guardian, caregiver, and tutor over the Jews. Like a child who is kept, protected, trained up, and readied for adulthood by his caregivers, Israel was kept, protected, trained up, and readied for the coming of the Messiah by the Law—albeit, by their incomplete and inadequate understanding of it. God’s intention was that, with the coming of the Messiah and the new understanding of God’s purposes that his coming would bring, Israel would leave the period of her childhood behind her and enter her adulthood, leaving the tutelage and guardianship of the Law behind.
- (4) Any individual Jew who, in the face of the truth about Messiah Jesus, persists in the Typical Old Understanding of the Law (that is, any Jew who looks to Law-obedience to obtain God’s mercy) is not a true child of promise who will inherit the blessing of Abraham. A Jew who is truly a child of promise will look to his belief in Messiah Jesus as the thing that will gain him mercy from God. He will no longer look to his Law-obedience as the thing that will get him mercy. In terms of an allegory that Paul constructs in *Galatians*, the true child of promise will be “free” from the Law just as Isaac—the child of promise—was born of a *free* woman. A Jew who remains in bondage to the Law is not a true child of promise, he is merely a child of Israel by physical descent. Just as Ismael, the child of physical descent who was not the child of promise, was born into *bondage*, having a slave woman for his mother, the Jew who will not inherit the blessing of Life (being one who is not a true child of promise) is the one who is in *bondage* under the Law.

(C) Outline of Paul’s Understanding of the Gospel

We are now in a possession where we can sketch an outline of Paul’s understanding of the “gospel” itself. Paul’s gospel—insofar as it relates to the issues being discussed in *Galatians*—can be captured in nine essential points:

- (1) The promise of Life in the eternal age to come is the substance of what God promised Abraham thousands of years ago. It was a promise made to Abraham and his offspring. The offspring in view were metaphorical offspring, not literal biological offspring; for the promise was made to “all the people-groups of the world” insofar as they were “in Abraham.” In other words, it was a promise that—if he qualified as an “offspring” of

Abraham—any individual (from any people-group anywhere in the world, throughout all time) would be granted the same blessing that Abraham had been promised—Life in the eternal age to come. Clearly, then, this promise was not made with only Jews in view. It was made with Gentiles in view as well.

- (2) The fact that Abraham had a heart to believe God and to embrace as true and reliable the promises that God had made to him—that one fact was the determinative “indication” that God found Abraham to be an acceptable recipient of his mercy and blessing (i.e., *dikaios*). The Scriptures themselves identify Abraham’s heart of belief as the mark that he was *dikaios*. This same heart marks any and every metaphorical offspring of Abraham. If an individual has a heart like Abraham—if he believes God and embraces as true and reliable that which God has promised him—then he is, metaphorically speaking, a “child of Abraham.” It is each and every child of Abraham who will be granted the blessing of Life in the eternal age to come. To receive eternal Life, then, one needs to evidence the heart of belief that Abraham had.
- (3) God made a Covenant with his chosen people, Israel, in the time of Moses. His intention was *not* to give an individual the means whereby he could prove himself worthy and deserving of eternal Life. His Covenant was not intended to be an avenue whereby an individual Jew could show himself good enough to receive the blessing. That was not possible, for each and every human individual is, by his very nature, morally depraved and, hence, fundamentally unworthy and undeserving. No amount of Covenant-keeping could render a human being worthy and deserving. Rather, his purpose in making the Covenant was to define a condition on which God would grant mercy. If an Israelite “kept” the Law of Moses (that is, if he honored God by honoring the Covenant that he had made with Israel), then God would grant him mercy. He would grant him the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life), which he did not deserve, and not the wrath and destruction that he did deserve.
- (4) Whereas God established the doing of the Covenant as the CONDITION for one’s receiving his mercy, God never intended the doing of the Covenant to be the BASIS upon which he would grant mercy. In other words, while Law-keeping identified WHO among the people of Israel would receive God’s mercy, it did not explain or account for WHY those individuals would receive God’s mercy. A person’s Law-keeping did not somehow compel God to show mercy to him. That individual was a morally depraved and unworthy individual. His Law-keeping did not erase nor eclipse the fact of his moral depravity and unworthiness in the eyes of God. The one who kept God’s Law remained, nonetheless, a fundamentally undeserving individual. The BASIS upon which God chose to extend mercy to him was provided by an entirely different reality. Something else accounted for WHY God would grant mercy to the one who kept his Law. The reality that provided the BASIS for God’s mercy was the intercession and advocacy of God’s beloved Son—the Messiah. The Messiah made an appeal to God for mercy on behalf of the Law-keeper when he willingly obeyed God and went to his death on the cross. If Jesus, the Messiah, willingly asks for mercy on a person’s behalf, then—on that BASIS—God will grant it, for he is God’s beloved Son. If Jesus does not willingly ask for mercy on a person’s behalf, then there will be no mercy for that person.
- (5) The fact that Messiah Jesus plays such an indispensable role in a person’s being granted divine mercy did not become known to history until Jesus came into history, taught what he taught, and did what he did. Understandably, therefore, the people of Israel—before Jesus

entered into history—were inclined to think that their Law-keeping was not only the CONDITION God had placed on his mercy, but it was also the BASIS for that mercy. In other words, in answer to the question, “WHY will God grant you mercy?” they tended to answer falsely, “Because I am a Law-keeper.” This is radically and fundamentally mistaken.³² The BASIS for my receiving mercy from God does not, and cannot, rest in me or in anything that I do or accomplish (e.g., in my Law-keeping). Rather, the BASIS for my receiving mercy from God lies completely outside of me—in Jesus, who is undiminished by my evil and depravity and who, in and of himself, is intrinsically pleasing to God. My Law-keeping, by way of contrast, is altogether diminished by who I am. I am a morally depraved and wicked human being who is doing his best to keep the Law. The fact that I am a depraved and wicked being has already destroyed the possibility of my giving God something that would *compel* him to be merciful to me. Only the well-pleasing Son of God is so fundamentally and perfectly pleasing to God that he can move God to be merciful to me, by advocating for me.

Arguably, this point is the key point that Paul wants to drive home in the book of Galatians. While Paul does not frame it in just this way, what Paul is fundamentally saying comes to this:

There are two kinds of human beings. Those who are metaphorical children of Abraham and those who are not. All those individuals who are metaphorical children of Abraham necessarily manifest this one distinctive trait: they understand that the nature and extent of human depravity and unworthiness is so great that there is absolutely nothing coming from or derived from them that could induce God to grant them the blessing of Abraham. They understand that it is solely and completely as an act of God's mercy that anyone could ever be granted eternal Life.

Those who are NOT children of Abraham do not have this same self-understanding. According to their self-understanding, they believe that, for one reason or another, they deserve the blessing of eternal Life.

Paul's passion and urgency in Galatians comes from his realization that—in their real, working beliefs—his opponents seemingly evidence the fact that—as those who are not children of Abraham—they believe their Law-keeping makes them worthy and deserving of eternal Life. They may not explicitly assert that it makes them worthy. And, indeed—like most of the unbelieving Jews of their day—they may actually insist that eternal Life could only come to them as a result of God's mercy. But Paul recognizes that their explicit admission that they are undeserving sinners in need of mercy does not necessarily reflect the true deep-down understanding of their heart. One can claim that he is in need of God's mercy while at the same time believing that he has done something to make himself worthy of that mercy. From Paul's perspective, there is no real difference in heart attitude between a person who thinks of himself as deserving of divine mercy and a person who thinks of himself as worthy to be granted eternal Life. Both individuals—in their heart attitude—believe that the blessing of eternal Life will be granted to them because of something in and about them. (E.g., their willingness to be obedient to the Law.) The fact that one individual believes that the blessing is mediated to him by divine mercy does not alter this salient fact: he thinks that it is ultimately something in himself that results in his being granted Life (for it is

32. Before Messiah Jesus came, Jews had typically misunderstood the role that God had intended for his Law (the Mosaic Covenant) to have. Once Messiah Jesus had come, the Jesus-believer was now in a position to rightly understand what was and what was not the role that God had intended for his Law. Out of his right understanding of the role of the Law, the Jesus-believer became 'free' of the Law in the sense that he became free of that necessity to keep the Law that had arisen out of the Jews' previous misunderstanding of the Law.

*ultimately something in himself that results in his being granted mercy).*³³

*The individual who, in his heart, actually thinks that there is nothing in and about him that could ever result in his receiving the blessing of Abraham—he, and only he, is the one who will be granted eternal Life. This is why Paul is concerned about the Galatians who are forsaking the gospel that he proclaimed to them. He is concerned that their readiness to embrace “another gospel” stems from the heart attitude of one who is **not** a child of Abraham—the heart attitude that thinks that, by his Law-keeping, the follower of Jesus is making himself worthy of the mercy that Jesus makes possible.*

- (6) It was God’s purpose, from before the beginning of the world, to extend the promised blessing of Abraham to those for whom his Son Jesus would choose to intercede—which is to say, to those who would believe in and follow Jesus. It was never God’s intention to extend the promised blessing of Abraham to those who merely obeyed the Law. The purpose of the Law was never to provide the BASIS for salvation from death into Life eternal. God’s intended purpose for the Law was, in most respects, temporary. Because the people of Israel—being human beings—were fundamentally sinful creatures, God gave them the Law in order—among other things—(i) to encourage them to pursue a knowledge of God, (ii) to encourage them to pursue lives of obedience to God and to resist the sin that was inherent in their being, (iii) to teach and remind them of their intractable sinfulness and unworthiness, and (iv) to keep alive their search for mercy from God.
- (7) Once Jesus had entered history and revealed God’s true, eternal purpose and plan, the real, ultimate BASIS for divine mercy was finally made clear. God’s purpose was for Jesus’ intercession to be the true BASIS for divine mercy. Such a clarification of God’s purpose changes how a Jew would look at the Law of Moses. No longer will he mistakenly think that Law-keeping is the BASIS for divine mercy. Hence, a Jew should now experience a kind of ‘freedom’ from the Law that he had never experienced before. No longer is he inviolably obligated to do everything the Law says, as if his eternal destiny depended upon it. Certainly, he can still honor God by “keeping” the Covenant that God made with the Jews. But no longer can he legitimately view every little departure from Law-obedience to be an infraction that will lead to his eternal destruction. In view of Jesus, such a perspective can no longer make any sense. For it is on the basis of the love and advocacy of Jesus that we will be granted Life, not on the basis of unfailing obedience to every requirement of the Mosaic Covenant.³⁴ Hence, since Jesus’ entrance into history, the role and importance of the Covenant must be interpreted in an entirely different light. This is not to say that it loses all

33. Paul’s insight here is that mercy that is “deserved” is, by definition, not mercy. The concept of *deserved mercy* is a self-contradictory notion. By definition, receiving mercy is receiving something that one does not deserve.

34. Accordingly, our whole attitude about our relationship with God is transformed. In *Romans*, Paul argues that, because of the gospel of Jesus, we no longer have the mindset of a “slave” where we fear being punished for every infraction. Rather, we now have the mindset of one who has been “adopted” as a son. (Cf. Romans 8:15) We are free of fear. We know that divine mercy is promised to me and is a secure inheritance. It is not based on my performance. It is not based on my deserving it. It has been granted to me as a result of the profound mercy of God, attained for me on the basis of Jesus’ advocacy for me.

importance; nor that it no longer has any role. That is false. But the Law can no longer be understood to have the role that it was thought to have by Jews before Jesus came—that is, no longer can it be thought to provide the BASIS upon which one secures divine mercy.³⁵ For this reason and in this sense, the believer in Jesus can be said to be 'free' from the Law. He no longer looks to his Law-obedience to be the BASIS for his receiving mercy. This, and this alone, is what Paul means by his contention that the Jesus-believer is 'free' from the Law. Therefore, his 'freedom' from the Law means nothing more, and nothing less, than this: the Jesus-believer is no longer obligated to strive to obey every last command contained in the Covenant as if his eternal destiny hinged on his perfect obedience to it, for the BASIS for his receiving mercy is not his Law-keeping, but is, rather, the intercession of Messiah Jesus on his behalf.

- (8) The fact that the believer in the gospel of Jesus is 'free' from the Law does not mean that he is free of Torah in the sense that he no longer needs to give heed to its instruction. Clearly the Torah continues to have instructional value for him; he would be remiss, if not rebellious, to ignore it. However, its instructional value is altered and transformed by the fact that the role that the Law plays can no longer be understood in the same way that it was before Jesus came. After Jesus, one can see that the purpose and value of the Law is to instruct Jews in how they can live lives that honor God and his Covenant and, thereby, qualify themselves to be members in good standing of the chosen people of God.³⁶ It not the purpose and value of the Law to instruct Jesus-believers in how they ought to live their lives. In other words, the purpose of the Law is not to instruct believers in how to live as obedient disciples of Jesus.
- (9) Does the point above mean that the Jesus-believer is without any *torah*? No! For Jesus promised that his followers would receive the divine gift of the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth at work in the life of the Jesus-believer now fills the role that the Torah played for Jews under the Law. In other words, the instruction of the Spirit of God (the Spirit of Truth) is the new *torah* for Jesus-believers. There will, of course, be much overlap between the instruction of Torah and the instruction of the Spirit,³⁷ but they are not exactly identical. Three important points can be made with regard to how the instruction of the Spirit and the instruction of Torah compare to one another:

35. Why were Jews before Jesus inclined to misunderstand the role and place of the Law? The short answer is that they did not possess a sufficient amount of the right sort of data. If there had been particularly astute and insightful Jew, he might possibly have had a more accurate understanding. But it is entirely understandable that the *typical* Jew misunderstood the Mosaic Covenant in the way that he did. Furthermore, even an astute and insightful Jew did not have enough data to arrive at a completely filled-out and accurate understanding of the role of the Law. Apart from Jesus' teaching and deeds, the data necessary for a full and accurate understanding of the role of the Law was simply not there. For a fuller examination of the "old" understanding *vis à vis* the "new" understanding that came with Jesus, see *Table E* above.

36. See [4-C] in *Table E* above.

37. That is why the study of Torah will continue to be of great benefit to the disciple of Jesus.

- (a) They are *not* incompatible with one another. Nothing taught by Torah will contradict or be incompatible with what is taught by the Spirit of God.
- (b) Some of the instructions within Torah will not be included in the instruction given by the Spirit, for some of the instructions of Torah do not apply to Gentiles, who are not members of God’s chosen people.
- (c) Some of the instructions of the Spirit will not be explicitly included in the instructions contained within Torah. Indeed, some of the instructions of the Spirit will be far more exacting than the instructions contained within the Torah, for the Spirit of Truth ultimately demands a higher form of godliness than the Torah *explicitly* requires.³⁸

Part 4: Paul’s Defense of His Position in the Controversy

The purpose of this section is NOT to explain *how* Paul makes the points that he makes. It is NOT to demonstrate that I have rightly understood Paul and his thought in *Galatians*. (That is what a good commentary would do.) Rather, the purpose of this section is simply to explain—according to my interpretation of *Galatians*—*what* points Paul makes as he seeks to defend his understanding of the implications of the gospel. Therefore, I simply list below what I take to be the most important points that Paul makes as he winds his way through the discourse of the letter.

It is not my purpose to explain here the logic of his discourse, nor the structure of the flow of his discourse. My purpose is simply to outline the primary points that Paul makes to his readers throughout the course of his arguments.

All of the following points are related to the main issue of the letter. They are the points Paul makes to defend his point of view with regard to the controversy that the letter is addressing. He does make other points in the letter that are not directly relevant to his defense of his position on the controversy—points of a more personal nature (about Paul’s relationship to the Galatians, about Paul’s reaction to the news about the Galatians, about the Galatians’ experience, about Paul’s history and experience, about the nature of Paul’s authority to teach them, etc.). I do not list those points in this section. As interesting, insightful, and profound as they might be in their own right, they are not germane to the essential argument and purpose of the letter.

Here, then, are the nine primary points that Paul makes in the book of *Galatians* in defense of his position with regard to the Gentile controversy that roiled among the first-generation Jesus-believers:

(A) Outline of the Points Paul Makes in *Galatians*

- (1) One aspect of the promise that God made to Abraham was that “in Abraham” all the people-groups of the earth would find blessing.³⁹ (The other aspect of the promise was that God would make Abraham a “great people.”) God’s promise to Abraham, therefore, entailed that

38. This point is included within Paul’s argument, rightly understood, in *Galatians* 5:13–26.

39. See *Galatians* 3:8 where Paul cites *Genesis* 12:3.

there would be two groups of people who could inherit the blessing promised to Abraham.⁴⁰ Those two groups were as follows: (1) those who were biologically and culturally members of Abraham's people (the Jews, ultimately); and (2) those who were biologically and culturally members of various other people-groups (Gentiles). Hence, from the very beginning of God's promises, God foresaw the inclusion of Gentiles right alongside Jews as heirs of the promised blessing of Abraham, which is to say, as heirs of eternal Life.⁴¹

- (2) God's promised blessing of eternal Life is not granted to every human being. Only some are qualified to receive it. What distinctive feature qualifies a person to receive that blessing? Not circumcision; which is to say, not being Jewish—as Jews are wont to believe. Rather, the distinctive feature that qualifies a person to receive the blessing of Abraham is having a heart that leads to one's coming to believe in God's promises. After all, it was Abraham's willingness to believe that was taken into account by God and that resulted in God's finding Abraham acceptable in his eyes (that is, in God's considering Abraham *dikaïos*).⁴² It stands to reason, then, that the distinctive element that marks each and every person who will inherit the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) is a belief that emulates the belief of their "father" Abraham. But if "belief" is the distinctive feature that qualifies a person to be a child of Abraham who will inherit the promised blessing of Abraham, then—in this sense—Gentiles can be children of Abraham just as surely as Jews can.⁴³
- (3) It is critical to understand that every human being—whether a Jew under the Mosaic Covenant or a Gentile outside the Covenant—stands under the "curse" of being a morally depraved creature who is deserving of death.⁴⁴ Granted, God made a Covenant with Israel and promised them mercy if they would keep the terms of the Covenant. But, keeping the Covenant does not make a person worthy or deserving of the blessing of Abraham. It only meets the condition that God laid down for receiving mercy from him. The question for every Jew then—as it is for every human being—is this: how might I escape the death that I deserve? How might I be rescued from the destruction that I deserve? Law-keeping is a provision that God made whereby a person might receive *mercy*. But Law-keeping is not—nor did God ever intend it to be—a way that one could prove himself worthy of eternal Life. No depraved human creature could ever be "worthy" of the blessing of eternal Life. It is only by God's mercy that any human being could ever possibly be granted eternal Life. And what is the basis upon which God would grant the requisite mercy? It is on the basis of the sacrificial death of Messiah Jesus. God does not grant mercy to the Covenant-keeper *on the basis of* his Covenant-keeping. Rather, he grants mercy to the Covenant-keeper *on the basis of* Jesus' death (and all that that death involves). Only Jesus' death and subsequent

40. Paul clearly interprets this promised blessing to be the promise of Life after death in the eternal age to come.

41. Also see (1) in the "Outline of Paul's Understanding of the Gospel" above.

42. See Galatians 3:6 and 3:11 where Paul cites Genesis 15:6 and Habakkuk 2:4 respectively.

43. Also see (2) in the "Outline of Paul's Understanding of the Gospel" above.

44. See Galatians 3:10 where Paul cites Deuteronomy 27:26.

intercession can serve as the basis for God dealing mercifully with us depraved sinners and granting us eternal Life—whether we are Jews or Gentiles.

- (4) Now, while it is true that God gave the Covenant to Israel and established Covenant-keeping as the *condition* for receiving God's mercy—and while it is true that Covenant-keeping can be a distinguishing mark on one who will inherit eternal Life⁴⁵—it was never Covenant-keeping *per se* that was the real condition placed on divine mercy. The real condition was a heart that was open to God and his promises and that expressed itself in a desire and willingness to keep God's covenant.⁴⁶ Hence, the Covenant-keeper would not receive God's mercy because of his Covenant-keeping *per se*. He would receive mercy because of his heart—a heart that was willing to believe, trust, and obey God, and, therefore, a heart that took God's covenant seriously. So, while Covenant-keeping was a particular historical manifestation of a heart of belief, it was always and only a heart of belief (like that of Abraham) that qualified a person for God's mercy. In sum, then, it is those who manifest a belief like that of Abraham who are his children. Those who obey the Covenant might be children of Abraham (if they do, in fact, have a believing heart), but it is their heart, not their Covenant-keeping that makes them children of Abraham. What every child of Abraham has in common is a heart like his father Abraham. Gentiles can have such a heart without being Covenant-keepers. Hence, because it is a believing heart—and not Law-keeping—that is the necessary condition for being a child of Abraham (who will inherit the promised blessing of Abraham), then clearly there can be two different classes of Abraham's children: children of Abraham who "keep" the Covenant (in its entirety) and children of Abraham who *do not* "keep" the Covenant (in its entirety).⁴⁷
- (5) God established Jesus and the priestly, intercessory "offering" he offered up to God (his own death as a propitiatory offering on our behalf) as the ultimate basis upon which he will grant mercy. Jesus' propitiatory offering was his voluntarily going to the cross in order to allow God to display the wrath that was deserved by sinners like us—that is, in order for God to represent the "curse" that mankind was under.⁴⁸ It is *belief in Jesus* (in his capacity as our Messiah and our true high priest) that serves as the ultimate measure of our hearts. If an individual does believe in Jesus (and, therefore, in God's means and purpose for offering Life to sinful mankind) then he shows himself to be like his father Abraham. For he has a heart that is willing to embrace the purposes and promised blessings of God. Once again, then, there can be two kinds of people who will inherit the blessing of Abraham: (1) Jews, subject to the Mosaic-Covenant, who believe in Messiah Jesus, and (2) Gentiles, not subject to the

45. See *Galatians* 3:12 where Paul cites *Leviticus* 18:5.

46. See *Galatians* 3:11 where Paul cites *Habakkuk* 2:4 .

47. See also (2) in the "Outline of Paul's Understanding of the Gospel" above.

48. See *Galatians* 3:13 where Paul cites *Deuteronomy* 21:23.

Mosaic-Covenant, who believe in Messiah Jesus. One is a child of Abraham by virtue of his belief in Jesus—whether he keeps the Covenant or not.⁴⁹

- (6) The Mosaic Covenant, which came 430 years after God had made his promise to Abraham, did not render invalid, nor supersede the promise that God had made to Abraham. When God made his promise to Abraham, the Genesis account makes it clear that his promise was to Abraham and his “seed.” However, it was not any and every descendant of Abraham who constituted that promised “seed.” It was a very distinctive subset of Abraham’s descendants who were destined to inherit Abraham’s blessing. Which distinctive subset was that? Was it Israel? Does any and every descendent of Israel inherit the blessing that was promised to Abraham? No. Rather it was those who belong to the Messiah. All who belong to Jesus will inherit the promised blessing of Abraham. It is the Messiah—not Israel—who is the ultimate progenitor⁵⁰ (metaphorically speaking) of every child of Abraham who will inherit the blessing that was promised to him.⁵¹ We can now know that it is everyone who is a follower of Jesus who belongs to the one distinctive promised seed of Abraham. Therefore, contrary to common Jewish perception that the promised seed of Abraham consists of those individuals who are members in good-standing of Israel (that is, who strive to keep the Mosaic Covenant), the promised seed of Abraham, rather, consists of those individuals who believe

49. See *Galatians* 3:28–29.

50. See *Romans* 9:6–13. When the Bible speaks of a promised “seed” of Abraham, it is speaking of a particular line of descent from Abraham. The specific offspring of Abraham who exists as the “progenitor” of that particular line of descent is the one who defines that particular promised “seed” of Abraham. So, it is Isaac, and not Ishmael, who is the offspring who becomes the progenitor of the promised seed of Abraham. Similarly, Jacob (Israel), and not Esau, is the offspring who becomes the progenitor of the promised seed of Abraham. Paul’s point in *Galatians*, though, is that not every member of the tribe of Israel belongs to Abraham’s promised seed. Rather, Abraham’s promised seed is but a further subset of Israel. Specifically, it is only those members of the tribe of Israel who have a heart like Abraham who belong to his promised seed. Because they have a heart like Abraham, they will believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah. Hence, the promised seed of Abraham is that subset of Jews who have believed that Jesus is the Messiah. Therefore, the offspring of Abraham who becomes the true and final “progenitor” of the promised seed of Abraham is not Israel, it is Messiah Jesus. It is by being associated with Messiah Jesus that one establishes himself as a true child of promise, not through association with Israel. Jesus, therefore, is the defining metaphorical “progenitor” of the one true, seed of Abraham who are destined to inherit the blessing of Abraham. In view of the promise God made to Abraham that “all the peoples of the earth will be blessed,” it becomes clear, Paul thinks, that Gentiles who are associated with Messiah Jesus, as his disciples, become children of Abraham in a metaphorical sense. They are not literally descended from Abraham. But they share his heart of belief and will, accordingly, be granted the promised blessing that was promised to any and all who are associated with him. In that sense, believing Gentiles are “children of Abraham.”

51. See *Galatians* 3:15–18.

that Jesus is the Messiah from an authentic heart that emulates the heart of the believing Abraham.⁵²

- (7) An obvious question arises in response to the argument that Paul has articulated: if the promised seed of Abraham was not to be constituted of Covenant-keeping members of Israel, then why did God establish the Mosaic Covenant at all? Paul’s answer is this: the Mosaic Covenant was given to make clear and evident the reality of human evil and depravity among the people of Israel, and, hence, to make it clear that there can be no blessing of eternal Life from God apart from an act of mercy on his part.⁵³ If it had been possible for God to make a covenant with Israel whereby an individual Jew could prove that he was *deserving* of eternal Life, then God’s acceptance of the individual Jew (*dikaiosune*) would have been based on that individual’s keeping that covenant. But the reality of universal human depravity makes such an eventuality impossible. God could never make a covenant whereby a human being could prove himself *worthy* or *deserving* of the blessing of eternal life; for he isn’t worthy and never could be worthy.⁵⁴ He is too inherently sinful to ever be worthy.
- (8) If it is belief in Jesus that is the ultimate condition for receiving the blessing of Abraham, and if Law-keeping is not necessary for receiving that blessing, then is the Mosaic Covenant completely at odds with the promise that God made to Abraham to bless him and his seed—a promise that comes to those who are “in Jesus,” and not to those who are Law-keepers? Paul says that the Covenant is *not* at odds with the promise to Abraham. As Paul has come to understand it, God never intended for keeping the Mosaic Covenant to be the basis upon which one would establish his status as a child of Abraham. From the very beginning, God intended that the advocacy of his Messiah would be the basis for one’s inheriting the promise of eternal Life. The purpose for which God established the Covenant, therefore, was secondary and subsidiary to God’s purpose to rescue people from death through his Messiah. Specifically, the purpose of the Covenant was to keep God’s people, Israel, oriented toward knowing, serving, and honoring God until the time came to bring his Messiah into the world. When Jesus, the Messiah, entered into existence, the individual whom God had always intended to serve as the defining touchstone of the promised seed of Abraham had now come into being. But prior to that—before Jesus, the Messiah, had come—God established the Mosaic Covenant with his people Israel out of a desire to keep them focused on a right relationship with Him, the one and only true God. (Paul uses the analogy of guardians, tutors or managers—the individuals put in charge of the education and welfare of the children of a household. The Mosaic Covenant was the tutor and guardian that God had employed for that period of time when the Jewish people were yet children. Its role was to keep them securely and safely related to him until the time might come when they would enter into their adulthood. Adulthood, in Paul’s analogy, was the time when Israel could be ‘free’ of the Covenant⁵⁵ due to their belief in Jesus, the Messiah.) Not only was the Covenant’s role to

52. See Galatians 3:29.

53. See Galatians 3:19.

54. See Galatians 3:21.

55. As we have seen, their ‘freedom’ from the Covenant is not freedom from any actual obligation that they had

preserve Israel in a relationship with God, but, further, it was to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. It was to prepare them to understand and accept the role that the Messiah would play when he arrived. In that respect, the Law was like a tutor. Its role was to teach them to understand, recognize, and appreciate the Messiah when he came. Historically speaking, therefore, the entrance of Messiah Jesus into the world changes everything. Before the entrance of Jesus into history, it made sense for Jews to see themselves as under obligation to engage in various divinely-ordained practices of religious piety, rituals, and ceremonies as they sought to be pleasing to God. They were children in relation to God; they knew no better. However, after Messiah Jesus had come—that is, after the one had come into existence through whom one actually becomes an heir of Abraham’s promise—then the Jews became free from their obligation to engage in the religious practices of Judaism. The prescribed religion of the Mosaic Covenant no longer had the same weight and import as it had had before Jesus came. As full-grown adult heirs of the promise of Abraham who were no longer under a tutor and caretakers, the Jews were now free to forego the practices of Mosaic religion without forfeiting the promised blessing of Abraham. In other words, before Jesus came—and before they could understand the import and significance of his role—they were not free to forego practicing the Law, for they had no way of knowing that they would not forfeit eternal Life by doing so. But now that Jesus had come—and now that they understood the import and significance of his role—they were now free from the Law in a way that they had not been free before,⁵⁶ for they now understood that it was not their Law-obedience that made them heirs of the promise.⁵⁷

before God. Their ‘freedom’ is freedom from a certain kind of necessity and obligation to keep the Covenant that was born of a misunderstanding of the role that the Covenant was purposed to play in their lives. See Table E, especially [3-C].

56. See *Galatians* 3:22-24, 4:1-12a, 4:21-5:1.

57. To understand Paul’s point here, it is vital to understand that—though he does nothing to stress this point in *Galatians*—Paul still believes that it would be necessary for a Jew to “keep” the Covenant if he was going to be a member in good-standing of the Covenant people. However, at the same time, he would not have to “keep” the Covenant in order to belong to the children of Abraham, the children of the promised blessing. Furthermore, it is vital to understand that a Jew can “keep” the Covenant (and be a member in good-standing of the Covenant people) while not necessarily obeying each and every *religious* requirement of the Covenant. Since religious requirements are not moral and absolute in nature, obedience to them is relative to other moral obligations. Hence, Paul—*out of love* (a moral obligation)—can live like a Gentile when he is among the Gentiles in order to effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus to them. When he does so, he is not *failing* in his covenant obligation to “keep” the covenant. To “keep” the covenant is ultimately *attitudinal* in nature. To “keep” the covenant is to act like one who desires to honor and respect the Covenant and the God who made the Covenant. Paul’s setting Law-obedience aside in order to persuade Gentiles to believe in Jesus is not motivated by any disrespect for God or his Covenant. Rather, it is out of love, and out of an understanding of the true purpose and proper role of the Law. Hence, such a failure to obey the Law is nonetheless NOT a failure to “keep” the Law.

(9) Paul responded to what would undoubtedly come as an objection from any ethnic Jew: Paul, telling people they are 'free' from the Law will lead to all sorts of unrighteousness! Paul's answer to this objection runs like this: There is no excuse for a person turning his 'freedom' from Law-keeping into an opportunity for his innate moral depravity to manifest itself. The Jesus-believer, while he is 'free' from the Law, is committed to conducting his life in keeping with what the Spirit of God teaches him to do. Following the dictates of the Spirit of God will always lead to godly and righteous behavior. Giving oneself over to one's own natural-born tendencies as a human being will always lead to wicked and sinful behavior. The true believer—the one who has committed himself to following Jesus—will always strive to walk in accord with the instruction of God's Spirit. Hence, a full and accurate understanding of the gospel (as Paul understands it and teaches it) would never lead to evil and unrighteous behavior, for being 'free' from the Law is not the same thing as being without reason to pursue righteous behavior. In truth, the believer in Paul's gospel (who is instructed to “walk in accord with the Spirit”) will live in pursuit of a higher standard of righteousness than the standard of righteousness that is found in the Mosaic Covenant.⁵⁸

Additionally, in a variety of different ways and places, Paul warns his readers of the stakes. The individual who rejects the gospel that Paul has proclaimed and who, instead, embraces the perspectives of Paul's opponents will find that he has been cut off from the blessing of Abraham and will meet with destruction rather than with Life eternal.⁵⁹

Part 5: What Paul Understands to Be At Stake

To understand the passion with which Paul responds in his letter to the Galatians, one needs to understand Paul's perspective on what is at stake. Paul's implicit assumption is that an individual's eternal destiny ultimately hinges on how he responds to the truth of the gospel. The person who has a heart that resonates with the truth of the gospel (this is typically evidenced by his overtly believing the gospel) will be granted the gift of eternal Life (=the blessing of Abraham). The person who has a heart that does *not* resonate with the truth of the gospel (this is typically evidenced either by his rejecting the gospel outright or by his willfully misconstruing the gospel and believing an altered version of it that is more to his liking) will be condemned to destruction. Accordingly, the eternal destiny of these Galatian believers is at stake in how they respond to the counsel and instruction of the false teachers who have come among them. The false teachers are tempting them with a new, altered version of the gospel of Jesus. The new, altered version would be attractive and interesting to a person whose heart does not resonate with the truth and who is not destined for eternal Life. It would be very bad for these Galatian believers, therefore, if they were to find themselves rejecting the gospel that Paul proclaimed to them in favor of the “different gospel” being propagated by the false teachers. In the interests of waking them up and of stimulating their “hearts” to desire the truth—so that they might obtain eternal Life rather than destruction—Paul writes *Galatians*. His purpose is twofold: (i) to

58. See *Galatians* 5:13–24.

59. See *Galatians* 5:2–4.

demonstrate that his understanding of the gospel is the truth, and (ii) to warn them of the consequences of closing their hearts against it.

Part 6: The Value of *Galatians* for Us Today

(A) The Import of the Primary Teaching of *Galatians* for Us Today

The primary message and arguments of *Galatians* are timeless. They are just as relevant and meaningful today as they were in the time of Paul. Granted, we are not in the midst of the same doctrinal controversy. We do not have the same factions seeking to win our hearts and minds. But the basic gospel message is still greatly misunderstood at exactly those same points where the Galatians were prone to misunderstand it. Hence, we still have need of the clarification of the gospel that Paul offers us in this letter.

There are likely a number of different ramifications of the teaching of *Galatians* that would be important for the modern Jesus-follower to grasp. However, four stand out as worthy of special mention:

- (1) Modern Jesus-followers frequently make the same mistake that the false teachers who opposed Paul in Galatia made. Namely, they distort the gospel message in such a way that the basis for a person’s salvation is ultimately some action, attribute, or virtue of the person. They typically articulate their understanding of God’s act of salvation in such a way that they explicitly affirm it to be a gift of God’s mercy and grace. But—like the false teachers in Galatia—their true “working” belief is that God’s mercy and grace is granted to an individual because of some merit or virtue that is connected with him. *But this is a significant and dangerous mistake.* And we desperately need to understand Paul’s passionate opposition to this mistake—a mistake that, in Paul’s view, makes their teaching a “different gospel.” This is the Pauline perspective that we need to embrace and proclaim: *eternal Life comes to me if, at the core of my being, I recognize that there is absolutely nothing in or about me that provides any basis upon which God will grant me mercy and the blessing of Life; eternal Life comes to me if and only if I unhesitatingly embrace the truth that Jesus alone—on the basis of his merits alone—is able to secure mercy and eternal Life for me by serving as my advocate.*
- (2) Many biblically savvy Jesus-followers today know enough to avoid the above mistake. They do seem to truly understand that absolutely nothing in or about them provides the basis upon which God will grant them eternal Life. They clearly confess that eternal Life comes to them on the basis of Jesus’ merits alone. That they understand. However, when it comes to less ultimate blessings, they lapse into the Galatians’ mistake all over again. Joy, peace, victory—whatever blessing for this present life they believe the gospel promises them⁶⁰—it is theirs on

60. Actually, part of the fallacy of the modern perspective is to understand the gospel to have promised any less ultimate blessings for our lives here and now. The promise of the gospel is the promise that we will be rescued from ultimate death and destruction and granted eternal Life. There is no promise of lesser blessings. Certainly, God is a gracious God who grants lesser blessings. But the gospel of Messiah Jesus does not *promise* any such lesser blessings to us.

the basis of some sort of good performance that renders them worthy of that blessing. But this is the same mistake all over again. What each and every one of us deserves is death and destruction. Any blessing from God—whether the ultimate blessing of eternal Life or a less ultimate blessing for this life—can only come as a gift of God’s undeserved and unmerited mercy. Only a false and distorted self-understanding (the mistake Paul feared the Galatians were making) could believe that one could do something to make himself *worthy* of a blessing—no matter what that blessing might be.

- (3) Given that there is a trend among certain groups of Jesus-believers today to take up the various practices of the Jewish religion as a way of restoring the Christian faith to its Jewish roots, we would do well to understand what Paul says about the implications of the gospel as he laid them out in *Galatians*. The false teachers in Paul’s day were suggesting that, to be a real, *bona fide* disciple of Jesus, one needed to perform the religious practices of the Jewish religion. That was true if you were a Gentile just as surely as if you were a Jew. But is the teaching of the false teachers in Galatia significantly different from the “back-to-the-Jewish-roots” perspective of today. Do these modern teachers not maintain—implicitly, if not explicitly—that a real, *bona fide* disciple of Jesus will perform the religious practices of the Jewish religion? And, do they not likewise maintain that, if one does not perform the religious practices of the Jewish religion, then there is something fundamentally inadequate about his discipleship to Jesus, since it is a discipleship that has been cut off from its Jewish roots? Paul would passionately oppose these modern claims just as surely as he opposed the claims of the false teachers in Galatia. And for exactly the same reason. The “working” understanding that underlies such claims certainly appears to involve the “working belief” that I somehow make myself worthy or deserving of the mercy and grace made possible by Jesus by doing the religious requirements of the Law. The whole thrust of Paul’s teaching in *Galatians* is that Messiah Jesus has changed things. He has not restored us to the Jewish roots. Rather, he has fundamentally transformed *everyone’s* relationship to those roots. He has “set us free” from the Law. Paul’s ringing exhortation to the Galatians is just as apt today as it was to the Galatians to whom he wrote, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” The person who does not understand that Jesus changes everything has not understood the true meaning and significance of Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus did not simply “die for the sins of the world.” Rather, Jesus heroically went to his death on the cross, in obedience to his father, in order that he might finally establish the one and only BASIS upon which any human being can be given mercy by God. His death changes everything. For no longer can we think of Law-obedience, of any kind, as part and parcel of the BASIS upon which God will grant mercy. Jesus, and he alone, is the one and only true BASIS upon which anyone can receive mercy. Understanding the fundamentally Jewish nature of our belief is wonderful—and *essential*; but we must take great care that we don’t leap frog over Jesus’ death on the cross as if it did not transform Judaism itself.
- (4) When we understand exactly what Paul is and is not saying in *Galatians*, then we understand that nowhere in *Galatians* does Paul ever contend that it is wrong for Jews to perform the religious obligations of the Mosaic Covenant. It would be wrong for anyone (Jews included) to look to their Law-obedience as the BASIS upon which God will grant them mercy. And it would be wrong for anyone (including Jews) to insist that Gentiles cannot receive God’s

mercy unless they perform the religious requirements in the Law. But *nowhere at all* does Paul suggest that now—after Jesus—it is wrong for a Jew to perform the religious obligations of the Jewish religion. Indeed, I think it is clear that Paul would fully support a Jew wanting to perform the religious obligations of the Jewish religion. Paul did so himself, when he wasn’t “living like a Gentile” in order that he might be better able to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. Granted, Paul does not explicitly defend Jews living like Jews in *Galatians*. But that is clearly because Jews living like Jews is not even at issue in that time and place. This is an important point to grasp today. From the very earliest beginnings of the Christian religion, Christians have predominantly taken the position that a Jew cannot be a *bona fide* disciple of Jesus if he continues to perform the distinctive religious obligations of the Jewish religion. Contrary to the way *Galatians* is all too often misinterpreted, there is nothing in Paul’s instructions or exhortations in *Galatians* that would lend any support to this clearly false contention. It is an attitude and perspective that Paul would never teach and support. Indeed, he would most surely oppose it. In some ways, it is the same mistake that is made by Paul’s opponents in Galatia, but made in the opposite direction. I cannot merit, deserve, or become worthy of divine mercy by *forsaking* certain religious practices any more than I can merit divine mercy by *performing* those same practices. And, I cannot merit, deserve, or become worthy of divine mercy by being loyal to the Christian religion any more than I can merit it by being loyal to the Jewish religion. This early mistake by the founders of Christianity was *a very tragic and consequential one*. It drove a wedge between Judaism and Christianity that was completely illegitimate and unfounded. A proper understanding of *Galatians* down through the ages would have helped prevent that mistake. A proper understanding of *Galatians* now will help us correct it.

(B) Other Things *Galatians* Has to Offer

In addition to the content of its primary arguments and exhortations, *Galatians* has other things that it can offer the modern student of the Bible who seeks to follow Jesus. I will briefly mention a few of the more important of these things. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop these observations any further than the brief mention I give here:

- (1) A portion of *Galatians* (the end) is devoted to describing how a follower of Jesus ought to conduct himself. It describes various aspects of what the Jesus-believer’s life and behavior should look like. Hence, *Galatians* offers some important ethical and moral instruction to the Jesus-follower.
- (2) Various portions of *Galatians* offer data which is valuable and important for understanding a variety of different issues:
 - (a) There is important information for understanding the nature and extent of apostolic authority.
 - (b) There is important information for understanding Paul.
 - (A) Data for understanding the timeline of his life.
 - (B) Data for understanding the cause and nature of his conversion.
 - (C) Data for understanding how he developed into the teacher of the gospel that he became.

- (D) Data for understanding the nature of his heart—what drove him and motivated him, what made him “tick.”
- (E) Data for understanding the fact and import of the miracles that accompanied his ministry—that is, the “signs” of his apostleship.
- (c) There is important information for understanding the nature of those turbulent early years of the first generation of Jesus-believers and for understanding the challenges they faced.
- (d) There is important information for understanding the role and the import of the Scriptures (the Torah) to Paul.
- (e) There is important information for understanding the ways in which Paul read, interpreted, and utilized the (Old Testament) Scriptures in his life and ministry.