

Getting Galatians Right

Introduction

Ever since the time of the Reformation, most evangelical commentators and preachers have followed the path marked out by Martin Luther and taken the main subject of Paul's letter to the Galatians to be justification – justification by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone. Of course, justification is by faith through grace in Christ alone; I'm not for a moment suggesting otherwise. What is more, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul does make this very clear. Nevertheless, justification does not exhaust the teaching of Galatians. Far from it! The main topic – the burden – of Paul's letter to the Galatians is not justification, but justification leading to inevitable progressive sanctification in the life of the believer.¹

Indeed, there was something else which preoccupied the apostle in writing to the Galatians, and that was the rise and spread of false teaching among early believers. Paul's first letter – to the Galatians – plays a very important role in his response to this danger, but it does not stand alone: apostolic resistance to false teaching and false teachers is written large across the rest of the New Testament (Acts 15:1-35; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 11:1-15; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:3-10; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude 3-23, for instance).

Paul knew that the Galatian believers had been infiltrated by false teachers and had been infected by their teaching, and he did something about it. Calling a spade a spade, he let his readers know that he was staggered that they were deserting the one who had called them, and taking up a false gospel – and doing it so rapidly:

¹ There are two aspects of sanctification – positional and progressive. For both, see my *Positional Sanctification: Two Consequences* and my *Fivefold Sanctification*.

I am astonished [he wrote] that you are so quickly deserting him who called you² in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel (Gal. 1:6).

Moreover, he spelled out what had caused this rapid apostasy: false teachers – Judaisers, professing believers (please note) who wanted to impose the Mosaic law on believers – had infiltrated many of the *ekklēsias*, including those in Galatia, and they were wreaking havoc in the lives of the believers. The apostle had already come across the perpetrators, and confronted them:

False brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (Gal. 2:4-5).

Paul, as I say, was utterly staggered by this rapid apostasy in Galatia; hence his letter, with its early ‘outburst’ following hard on the pointed absence of any complimentary introduction. Whatever criticism he might get for it, the issue was so pressing that he was not going to stand on ceremony or mince his words:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble 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 the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:6-10).

Strong stuff! But that’s the tone of the apostle’s letter. Dealing with false teaching, dealing with the false teachers, he went for the jugular, exposed the cardinal point, and set out a powerful

² There has been much debate over ‘him who called you’; I take this to be God the Father, by the Spirit, effectually calling sinners to Christ (John 3:3-8; 6:37,40,44; Rom. 8:26-30; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:15-16; 5:5,6,8; 1 Thess. 2:12; 5:23-24).

argument, one which never must be forgotten or sidelined. Nor did Paul confine his response to writing – he spoke openly, directly and personally about it, even to the extent of a public rebuke for Peter, a fellow-apostle, and Barnabas:

When Cephas [that is, Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all: ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ (Gal. 2:11-14).

And it was not only the law; the believers were returning to their pre-regenerate days and adopting pagan principles and practices. Consequently, the apostle did not pull any punches over the law or paganism when he wrote to the Galatians. As for the law, see the entire letter; as for the law mixed with paganism, he said:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain (Gal. 4:8-11).

But it wasn’t only the apostasy of the believers in Galatia that alarmed the apostle; he could speak of ‘the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches’ (2 Cor. 11:28). Witness, therefore, the same earnestness, the same inward torment, evident in his rebuke to the Colossians over a similar issue:

[Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in

love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments... See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ...

Let no one pass judgment on you [that is, let nobody impose his own rules on you] in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 1:28-29; 2:1-4,8,16-23).

That's the background to what follows.

The precise point

What, precisely, is the significant point, the cardinal point which concerned Paul so greatly, and which must be the concern of every believer throughout this age, not least for us today? This is the age of the new covenant. That is the cardinal point. It governs everything. And the ever-present danger is that, just as Israel transgressed the old covenant, adulterating it by the importation of pagan ideas and practices,³ so in this present age, men always want to adulterate the new covenant. How? By going back either to the old covenant and importing old-covenant principles into the *ekklēsia*, or by doing the same with pagan principles and

³ See my *Evangelicals Warned*.

practices. And that, let there be no doubt about it, amounts to deserting ‘him who called you’ (Gal. 1:6), and adopting ‘a different gospel – not that there is another one’ (Gal. 1:6-7).

Adulterating the new covenant with either Judaism – the law – or paganism – or a mixture of both – that was and remains the issue. The false teachers did it in Galatia (and in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and elsewhere) – hence Paul (and other apostles) dealt with it in letters to those churches;⁴ the Fathers, in cahoots with the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, did it in the 2nd-5th centuries, establishing Christendom to the permanent damage of the *ekklēsia* down to the present day; the Reformed, since the days of John Calvin and his threefold use of the law, have majored on the law in the life of the believer;⁵ and modern evangelicals are increasingly adopting pagan principles and practices.⁶ Whether the old covenant – the law – or paganism, from start to finish all this was – and remains – a direct contradiction of Christ’s clear warning:

No one puts a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matt. 9:16-17).

This is nothing trivial or academic about this attempted cobbling together of the new covenant with the old covenant and/or paganism. Hence the amount of time Paul spent on it in his letters, and the frequency of his return to it. I cannot overstate its importance and relevance to today’s churches.

⁴ See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

⁵ See my *Christ is All*.

⁶ See my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?; Battle for the Church: 1517-1644; Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly; Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder; Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today; Public Worship: God-Ordained or Man-Invented?; In Church or In Christ?*.

Clearly, since Paul was so moved, so direct about all this, we can afford no confusion when we find it rearing its head among us. We dare not be half-hearted in dealing with it. The issue is always of the highest significance.

Hence this article.⁷ To limit the teaching of Galatians to justification, and thus miss its main emphasis on progressive sanctification, and, above all, to fail to see how importing the old covenant, the law, and/or paganism into the new covenant spells ruin to the gospel – producing ‘a different gospel – not that there is another one’ (Gal. 1:6-7) – and the *ekklēsia* is to make a very serious mistake indeed, with severe losses for all – both believers and unbelievers.

These are no small indictments.

Paul’s anguish

Paul’s anguish over the issue is palpable, and the point he makes is unmissable. In order to capture the full force of Paul’s anxiety, I include an earlier extract:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain...

Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They [that is, the false teachers, the Judaisers and (to coin a word) paganisers] make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them... My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you [that is, until you transformed into Christ-likeness by progressive sanctification – see Romans 8:29]! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?... Now you,

⁷ I have based this article on my *Christ Is All* pp123-127,416-419. See also my *Sanctification in Galatians*.

brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman’. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.. You were called to freedom, brothers (Gal. 4:8-11,16 – 5:13).

And so on.

Alas, as I have said, many fail to see this. By looking in a little more detail at the apostle’s argument in Galatians 3:1-5, I hope that this short article will do something to correct it.

The argument

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you...?... Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now⁸ being made perfect by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-5).

The major topic of the Judaisers at Galatia was, naturally enough, the law, though paganism was also included: the Judaisers were urging the Galatians to come under the law; otherwise, the false teachers said, believers could not be justified or progressively sanctified. Both justification and progressive sanctification needed the law. Without the law, neither! Consequently, Paul, having dealt in detail with the question of justification, especially in chapter 2 (and would briefly return to it in Galatians 5:2-12) – justification is not by the law – now turned to progressive sanctification.⁹ He wanted to shake the Galatians out of any complacency, bring them to their senses (Luke 15:17), make them think more deeply about progressive sanctification, and especially its alleged connection with the law. So he adopted the device of a linguistic explosion closely followed by a series of

⁸ Note the ‘now’.

⁹ In Gal. 2:19. Remember, there are no chapter divisions in the original.

rapid-fire bullets in the form of sharp questions,¹⁰ six in all. Consider the fourth of these: ‘Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?’

Paul reminded his readers that they had not only ‘begun in the Spirit’, but they had actually received ‘the Spirit’, not ‘by the works of the law’, but ‘by the hearing of faith’ (Gal. 3:2-3). Begun what? Begun their Christian experience – that is, they had been regenerated, they had been justified by grace through faith in Christ – by the work of the Spirit, and not by the works of the law. The Galatians were believers. There is no question of it. Paul was clear about it. He could confidently address them as such:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were spiritually immersed¹¹ into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:26-29).

Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying: ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:6-7).

Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God... Brothers... my little children... (Gal. 4:9,12,19).

And all this was by the Spirit, not by the law. So far, so good. All modern law-men – covenant theologians¹² – will agree; except, as so often, their usual qualifications and glosses appear.¹³ Paul was

¹⁰ Questions are always far more potent than a statement of facts, and a very common way of teaching in Scripture. It is God’s own way. See Job 38:1 – 42:1-6, especially Job 38:3; 42:4. Paul frequently resorted to questions.

¹¹ See my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

¹² Although there are several variants of covenant theology, briefly we may say that it was devised in the 16th century, just after the death of Calvin. It closely adheres to Calvin’s threefold use of the law, and treats the old and new covenants simply as different administrations of ‘the covenant of grace’ – a theological invention imposed on Scripture with devastating results. I have dealt fully with all this in many of my works.

¹³ See my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume Two*.

not asking, for instance, if the Galatians had received the Spirit by ‘rigorous’ bondage to the ‘ceremonial’ law.¹⁴ He was referring to obedience to the Mosaic law in its entirety. ‘Did the law bring you the Spirit?’ The law, I stress! And the rhetorical answer was a resounding ‘No!’

But the point of Paul’s question was not confined to – or, indeed, strictly about – justification. It was about progressive sanctification: ‘Having begun in the Spirit’, he asked, ‘are you now being made perfect by the flesh?’ (Gal. 3:3). They had ‘begun’ – been justified – ‘in or by the Spirit’. So when Paul spoke of ‘now being made perfect’ (fully accomplished, fully complete), he was speaking about progressive sanctification, was he not? This is the force of his use of ‘now being’ when he moved on from their initial experience, to ask the Galatians, having been justified, ‘are you *now being* made perfect by the flesh?’ This is of such importance, I must say it again. When the apostle asked: ‘Are you now being made perfect?’, what was he talking about? Justification? There is no ‘being made’ about justification! It is instantaneous. No! The ‘now being made perfect’ clearly refers to progressive sanctification.

Justification – a once-for-all act of God – precedes, and inevitably leads to, progressive sanctification – a life-long process: ‘And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now¹⁵ he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in his sight’ – that is, justification – ‘if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel’ – that is, progressive sanctification (Col. 1:21-23). The link between the two is unbreakable:

¹⁴ Part of the tripartite division of the law – an invention of Thomas Aquinas adopted by Calvin, and hence a bulwark of covenant theology, and serving as a ploy or escape route to avoid passages of Scripture which destroy the theology behind the system.

¹⁵ Note the ‘now’.

For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).¹⁶

The way to glory is through holiness; no progressive sanctification, no glory:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you

¹⁶ The link between justification and progressive sanctification was one of the bones of contention between the Anabaptists and the Reformers. The latter taught the inevitable link between the two, but practice did not always go hand in hand with theory. Luther, for instance, though he rightly emphasised justification by faith, failed to give enough weight to progressive sanctification as essential evidence of it. Hence his attitude to the letter of James, dismissing it as so much hay or straw. In general, Anabaptists rightly demanded progressive sanctification as evidence of justification – so much so, the Reformers falsely labelled them with the stigma of perfectionism; Calvin, repeatedly so. As for the Anabaptists, there is abundant testimony as to their godliness of life. They insisted on it. Although the Reformers tried to dismiss the Anabaptists, they longed that their own churches might be as spiritual. Luther, envying the Anabaptists' godliness, admitted his followers lived as badly as Papists. He coped with it by saying doctrine (light) and life have to be distinguished, thus providing a pragmatic excuse for his followers – with dire consequences. Although I have introduced this historical note, the issue cannot be relegated to the mists of history; it is with us today. Reformed teachers (covenant theologians) rightly argue that justification and progressive sanctification cannot be separated, but when it comes to the believer and the law they often break their rubric.

practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

Take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:17-18).

This means, of course, that it is a very serious mistake to suggest that Paul's great concern in this letter is justification, though, as I have observed, it is commonly believed and said. No! The apostle was speaking to believers (who were, therefore, already justified!) about *advancing* in Christian experience, not *entering* it. He was speaking not only of the basis of faith, but progress in it – not the ground of salvation, but the way to grow in it. Paul's use of the present continuous tense, 'now being made perfect' (Gal. 3:3), must not be overlooked. He was speaking of the process and progress of progressive sanctification, of transformation into conformity to Christ. More precisely, it was not the *ground* or *standard* of the believer's progressive sanctification which concerned him here. Rather, *it was the way the believer is to be progressively sanctified*. Judaisers – then and now – want to concentrate on the 'what' of progressive sanctification. The real question is the 'how'. What is more, of even greater importance is the 'who' will be progressively sanctified, and 'why'.

So how, according to Paul, are believers progressively sanctified? How does he argue his case? He presses his case by asking these bullet-like questions, not issuing a series of bland statements. As always, he is making his readers *think*. Building on their experience of justification, Paul calls on the Galatians to think, and to think clearly, about *how* they were justified, and, now, *how* they are being progressively sanctified: 'Having begun [justification] in the Spirit', demands Paul, 'are you *now being made perfect* [progressive sanctification] by the flesh?' And when he dismisses the possibility of being 'made perfect *by the flesh*', is he referring to natural powers and abilities? Certainly! He is denying any hope of progressive sanctification by human effort,

yes. But Paul is saying far more than that. In the context, the expressions ‘by the flesh’ and ‘in the flesh’ are virtually one and the same with ‘under the law’ and ‘by the works of the law’. A reading of Galatians 3:2-3 will prove it. In addition, these verses show that to be ‘living by the flesh’, ‘in the flesh’, ‘under the law’ and ‘by the works of the law’, is diametrically opposed to ‘living, walking in [or by] the Spirit’. So important is this point, Paul returns to it (more than once) and drives it home:

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh... If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are... But the fruit of the Spirit is... Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in [or by] the Spirit... He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life (Gal. 5:16-25; 6:8. See also Rom. 8:1-17; 13:14; Gal. 4:5-6).

Finally, Paul’s question in Galatians 3:3 – ‘Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?’ – is, as I have hinted, clearly rhetorical. There is no doubt about the answer. The expected answer, the obvious answer, is a resounding: ‘No! Of course not!’ Progressive sanctification most decidedly is not by the flesh, is not by works of the law. Just as justification is not by the works of the law,¹⁷ but by the work of the Spirit, *so it is with progressive sanctification*. In asking them about their experience of the Spirit, Paul’s purpose is not to shine the spotlight on how the Galatians received the Spirit, but rather to get them to grasp the Spirit’s role in their ongoing life as believers. They had started the Christian life without the works of the law, he reminds them. Well, then, so they must go on, and go on to the end. There is no more place for the works of the law in the continuance of the believer’s experience than there was at its start. In other words, the law could not justify; it cannot sanctify. And just as the unbeliever should not go to the law for justification, neither should the believer go to the law for progressive sanctification. Both should go to Christ! Christ is all

¹⁷ Note the emphasis in the Greek upon ‘works of the law’ (Gal. 3:2).

(Col. 3:11)! As Paul declared to the Corinthians: ‘What I received I passed on to you as of first importance’. What was that? Strictly speaking, it was not ‘what’; it was ‘whom’ – ‘Christ’, his death, burial and resurrection, all according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4); in other words, the scriptural Christ (1 Cor. 3:11; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-12; Col. 1:28).

In Galatians, Paul’s point about progressive sanctification is *not* secondary compared to the primary thrust of justification, as is claimed. In any case, even if it is, it does not alter the fact: progressive sanctification is not by the law. But secondary, this is not! From Paul’s sixth rhetorical question – ‘Therefore he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?’ (Gal. 3:5) – we can see that faith, not the works of the law, is the vital element in the ongoing Christian life. Galatians 3:3 demands detailed exposition since it strikes at the heart of the Reformed thesis. Unfortunately, it does not always get it. Indeed, it is sometimes made to say the opposite of what the apostle actually did say! Paul was *not* saying that the law is the way God gives his Spirit to his people when they are justified. Far from it! The fact is, the law cannot justify, nor does it enable the believer to reach that standard of life which must accompany justification. In short, the law can neither justify nor sanctify.

There are two dangers if we get the connection between justification and progressive sanctification wrong. *First*, if we mistakenly put them into separate compartments, forgetting that progressive sanctification can only come after and from the same source as justification – that is, by the power of Christ – we shall become legalists, trying to be holy by our own power, by obeying the law (or man-made rules). Read again Galatians 4:8-11 and Colossians 2:16-23. The *second* danger occurs when justification and progressive sanctification are treated as one and the same. This leads us to ignore our responsibility to obey God in his word, and thus to work out that which he has worked in us. ‘Let go and let God’, or ‘God does it all’, is a tragic misunderstanding of the way to attain a godly life:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

The believer does not become holy by ‘taking it by faith’. He is under the law of Christ.¹⁸

The Mosaic law is to do with sin. It has nothing to do with grace. Indeed, it stands in striking contrast to it (John 1:17; Rom. 3:19-22; 4:15-16; 5:20; Gal. 3:19-25). The Mosaic law cannot save. It cannot bring grace. While ‘grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17), ‘the law brings about wrath’ (Rom. 4:15). Of course it does, since ‘the carnal [fleshly] mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God’ (Rom. 8:7-8). So much for the natural man, the sinner outside of Christ. This is what being ‘in the flesh’ means. This is Paul’s way of speaking of those outside of Christ. They cannot, they do not, they will not, submit to God’s law. And they are in this state because they do not have the Spirit. So, as Paul reminded the Galatians (and, later, the Romans), justification is not by the flesh, not by the law, but by the hearing of faith, by the work of Christ through the power of the Spirit. No sinner can be justified by the law; he hates it, he will not be subject to it (Rom. 8:7)! The law arouses ‘the sinful passions’ (Rom. 7:5), it makes sin live (Rom. 7:8-9), and kills the sinner (Rom. 7:10-11). Justification can only be by grace through the Spirit. There is no middle way between ‘the works of the law’ and ‘the hearing of faith’. It is one or the other (Gal. 3:2). And justification is not by the law. So much for justification.

But in Galatians 3:2-3, I reiterate, Paul was going further than this. ‘How stupid, how wrong of you believers’, he was saying, ‘to imagine for a moment that, having begun in the Spirit, you might now go to the flesh – that is, to the Mosaic law – to progressively sanctify you! The law could not save you; nor can it progressively sanctify you’. This is what the apostle was teaching. As before, as with justification, so with growth in the Christian life – neither is by the works of the law.

¹⁸ See my *Christ is All; Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

To conclude: the believer began his spiritual experience – he has been justified – in the Spirit, not by the law, and just as he began, so he continues – by the Spirit, and not the law. In short, as with justification, so with progressive sanctification. Both are by the Spirit, and not the law. This simple though crucial point, if firmly grasped and fully worked out, would go a long way to sorting out the issue of the believer and the law. The law does not sanctify. The law cannot possibly be the believer's perfect rule of life. Paul's rhetorical questions have ruled it out once and for all.

And, it must not be forgotten, behind all these questions lies the fundamental point: believers must never adulterate the new covenant by importing the law or paganism into it, or allowing it to happen by default. Alas, today, in one way or another, this adulteration is going on, and at breakneck speed. Sleeping believers must wake up – before it is too late! Not only that! We must learn from the apostle: whenever and wherever we see the new covenant being adulterated, we must remind ourselves of what is at stake, and do what we can to put a stop to the adulteration. Unless we return to the principles and practices of the new covenant the damage will be immense and long lasting.