

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 30 • Number 1 • January 2006

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

for

WORLD EVANGELICAL

ALLIANCE

Theological Commission



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Toward an Ethic of Shared Responsibility in Galatians 5:13-15

Peter Mageto

KEYWORDS: *Freedom, love, individual, community, service, legalism, unity, Spirit, mission*

Introduction

MOST scholars agree that Paul wrote to the Galatians in response to a severe crisis that was likely to cause disunity among Christians.¹ Some scholars, depending on chapters 1 and 2, argue that Paul develops a defence for his apostleship, though Bernard Brinsmead reminds us that 'the charge concerning apostleship is one of dependence on Jerusalem, not indepen-

dence'² (cf. 1:11-12, 17-19). On authorship, there is clear textual evidence that Paul himself wrote the letter (1:1, 13-16: 2:1-14: 4:12-20). In many ways, the epistle is a unity, and this unity of diverse elements (history, theology and ethics) is one of its most characteristic and important features.³

In Galatians 5:1 Paul shows that freedom from the law is necessary. He urges the Galatians to remain constantly in that freedom by not embracing the new law which the opponents are urging them to do because they will

¹ Frank Matera, *Galatians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 3; the agitators were Christians from Judea who advocated for circumcision. cf. Robert Jewett, 'The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation', *NTS* 17 (1970) p. 207.

² Bernard H. Brinsmead, *Galatians: Dialogical Response to Opponents* (California: Scholars Press, 1982), p.15. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5, who argues that Galatians 1 and 2 introduce Paul's theological argument.

³ C.K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation: A study of the Epistle of Galatians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 9-11.

Dr. Peter Mageto is an ordained Methodist Minister who has served congregations in Mombasa and Nairobi, Kenya. He is a graduate of St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL, (PhD) where he conducted his research on theology, ethics and HIV/AIDS. Currently, Dr Mageto is serving as a Missionary-in-Residence at Aldersgate United Methodist Church and Methodist Temple in Evansville, Indiana, and does adjunct teaching at the University of Evansville. He speaks in conferences and has published widely on the topics of theology, the church, and AIDS.

be moving to a new yoke of slavery.⁴ In this section of Galatians, we begin to sense the tension between law and Spirit, command and inward motivation, individual and community.⁵ He contends that reverting to the age of the law is going back to slavery—no one can be in both ages at the same time. No wonder Paul decided to issue a series of advisory and hortatory statements here.

Freedom from and to Service: Individual and Community

In Chapters 5 and 6, Paul has worked out his theological presentation so that a redefinition of covenant fidelity in terms of the faithfulness of Christ serves as a Christological basis for his ethic. The dispute in Galatia was not simply about ethnic identity marks, but about how life was to be regulated on a daily basis. On that score, the agitators upheld the law as the means by which behaviour was to be governed and managed. Accordingly, without Paul's presentation of chapters 5 and 6, his explanation of the gospel in chapters 1 to 3, related as it is to the Galatian crisis, would have been incomplete. Therefore, Paul's use of the motif of the faithfulness of Christ in 2:20 opens the way to his discussion of a Christian

ethic of shared responsibility in chapters 5 and 6.⁶ Accepting Jesus Christ by faith moves individual members from their slavery to the elements of the world and the imposition of the law into a state of freedom and service within the new community of faith. Consequently, freedom for Christians becomes in essence a responsibility of service within the new community of faith.

In chapters 5 and 6, Paul speaks to the community that bears Christ's form and is led by Christ's Spirit. His address presupposes the presence of Christ and the constant activity of Christ's Spirit. He describes the essence of corporate patterns of life that constitute God's continuing apocalyptic rectification (meaning divine action that rectifies or justifies humanity) which is explained in this letter by reference to the way God was reaching out through Jesus Christ, even to the Gentiles, by conquering the cosmic elements and powers which had enslaved them. The corporate patterns describe what the church has been called to do, not by being a new community of faith, but because the church is fully equipped by the Holy Spirit to bear

4 Matera, *Galatians*, p. 180. Cf. Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 69, where he argues that Paul dissuades the Galatians from a course they had their desires awakened to pursue.

5 Peter Richardson, *Paul's Ethic of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), p. 80.

6 Bruce W. Longenecker, 'Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenant Community: Gal. 2:15-21 and Beyond' in James D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 88-89. Cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 254-255, where he provides a sub-division of chapter 5 and 6 into three sections, all of which serve as a restatement of the 'indicative' of salvation (5:1-12; 5:13-24; 5:25-6:6:10), and concludes with an eschatological warning (6:7-10).

fruit.⁷ Therefore, as the corporate patterns of the new community of faith are meaningful, the members in this community have to understand their freedom and its application in service to others. The community founded in the name of Jesus Christ is to be of service to the broader community, serving as an agent of transformation.

Paul makes a passionate appeal to the Christians in Galatia to embrace an ethic of shared responsibility so as not to abuse their new-found freedom and fall prey to the traps their opponents were setting before them. He challenges Christians to evaluate and understand the basis of their freedom. Consequently, Paul reminds the Christians not to fear embracing social responsibilities that come with Christian freedom. In other words, Christians must be ready to utilize effectively numerous opportunities God makes available as we seek ways and means to reach the world with the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Paul urges Christians to embrace a reach-out service founded on the holistic ministry of Jesus Christ.

In embracing Christian freedom made manifest in Christian service to others, we acknowledge that our 'obedience and ethical behaviour found in the relationship with God and the motivating power of the Holy Spirit'⁸ strengthen us to serve others in *agape* love. In other words, as Christians, we do not depend on ourselves to serve

others, but Jesus Christ is the true example of our true freedom⁹ that leads to effective service in the world. Therefore, when we serve our neighbours, we derive our actions from the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that sin separates human beings from God, as God sends us back to the world to reach others for his kingdom, we are reminded to love them as God's creatures, and treat them as potential candidates for freedom from sin, made possible in God's grace. Any Christian service toward our neighbours is only a sign of what Christian faith is all about in truly serving God and humanity.

The ethic of shared responsibility is well articulated for all believers as members of the new creation in 5:22-23. The ethic of shared responsibility is made possible through the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul was concerned that Christians may abandon the true gospel of freedom and go back to embrace the old yoke of *stoicheia* (elements of the world as found in 4:8-11). The life controlled by the fruit of the Spirit will in turn bear fruit in the lives of those that we serve. In this context then, Christians are urged to utilize their Christian freedom to establish meaningful and lasting relationships that will enhance the gospel in the world. Consequently, we can take Paul's challenge in Galatians to underscore the conviction that sin causes conflict, while the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ provides freedom from sin to all those who believe and

⁷ Cf. J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 233-4.

⁸ Richardson, *Paul's Ethic of Freedom*, p. 82.

⁹ Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, p. 43.

obey, to follow Jesus as the way, the truth and the life.

Paul's concern is broader than we might think, as it is not just about condemnation, but salvation that leads to greater light and not just a mere play-out of becoming a believer today and backsliding to sinful practices tomorrow. As the Christians in Galatia were challenged by Paul to operate on a different realm controlled by the Holy Spirit, so we are reminded as Christians today that a new life lived under the control of the Spirit is sufficient and can impact more lives as we reach the world. Therefore, Christian freedom working through love in the world is the content of the new creation, not as man's achievement, but God's gift.¹⁰

Paul's challenge to the Christians in Galatia is well summed up in 5:14b: 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself', which at the end will serve as a basis for that freedom. It is becoming clear that for Paul, freedom in God means finding the ability to mature into the personhood each one of us was created to be; it means a growing realization of those qualities of life that bring us to full participation in God's plan that has been made known to us through the love of Jesus Christ. It is from the mystery of God's love for us that we move to the life of love, which is given by God and to our fellow men. In reducing the Mosaic law to the love command (cf. Lev. 19:18) Paul alludes to Jesus' summary statement of the Torah as recorded in the synoptic gospels (cf. Mk. 12:33; Matt. 22:39;

Lk. 10: 27; cf. with Romans 13:8-10). In this, the law of Christ is the fulfilment of the new covenant with its accompanying eschatological law.¹¹

It is true that our service will be real service if something essential takes place for others through what we will and do in our turning to them. The same God who alone is good makes us responsible, even as those who are not good, to be available to him and therefore to our neighbours. In other words, the wound with which our neighbour comes to each one of us shows that we should serve our neighbours without reservation. The neighbour needs our unconditional service and, where possible, our presence. Therefore, Paul urges the Galatian Christians to 'lead a life in accordance with the Spirit, because such a life is *de facto* the fulfilment of the Torah.'¹²

We do not serve our neighbours when we use our encounter with them to draw attention to ourselves. In this way, in the case of very many supposed works of care and charity, we have to

11 C. Marvin Pate, *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom and the Law* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2000), p. 205. Cf. Matera, *Galatians*, pp. 196-197, where he asserts that love satisfies the requirements of the law because it is a gift of the Spirit, accomplished in Christ. Therefore the law is fulfilled through love.

12 Betz, *Galatians*, pp. 275-276. Cf. Pate, *The Reverse of the Curse*, p. 210 argues that since the law is indivisible and binding on Jew and Gentile alike, one must keep it in entirety to be justified by God, or, preferably, one can trust in Christ, who fulfilled and terminated the law. This concept is still lacking in many Christian teachings, as some think that Paul wholly condemned the law in upholding justification by faith.

10 Barrtett, *Freedom and Obligation*, pp. 59-63.

ask ourselves whether ultimately the individuals concerned, or the relevant society, church or community, or the state in general, are not simply putting on an act to show and prove their worth. The challenge is to develop human willingness to do one thing: to be available to one another in the true Christian sense, that we reckon ourselves as God's, and that we forgive one another for our sins. Paul certainly emphasizes the fact that no more and no less is required of us than to be Christ's ambassadors to each other.

The challenge that Paul is setting before the Galatians is to evaluate the essence of *agape* love that has been made manifest by Jesus Christ himself. This love has to be experienced in a corporate context. Individualizing this love is only destroying that community of faith that Paul intended to establish. Genuine love in which the whole law is fulfilled creates true community; community enhances it. Thus,

the power of the new age is love—not just love in general, but God's love, the love through which God has created all that is, in which God wills that it be sustained, and by which God acts to redeem it. For Paul the decisive event of God's love is Christ's death.¹³

We encounter neighbours with our whole attitude as people whom God truly counts to be God's, just as God counts us to be his. God's love is visible, not just because of retelling the story of Jesus, but also through the ongoing life of the community of faith,

the church.¹⁴ This love provides a distinction between

the religious and the irreligious, between the covenanted and the un-covenanted that is abolished in Christ. Abraham is the ancestor of all believers, of the Jew who sees through the precepts of Torah to its real requirement of faith rather than works, and sees that faith directed towards Christ, and of the Gentile who has the work of the law written in his heart and trusts Christ, knowing that he has no religious works to offer.¹⁵

Toward an Ethic of Shared Responsibility: A Model for Christian Unity

People outside the church have tended to criticize Christians for their legalistic tendencies, though in most cases Christians tend to ignore that criticism. This criticism shows up our lack of concern for others and insensitivity to the effect of our legalism on others. The kind of Christianity that has been planted in many mission fields tends to appeal to legalistic tendencies, thus becoming condemnatory rather than forgiving. I see in Paul's writing to the Galatians a flexibility that opens up an alternative, one that can be linked with the operative principle of *agape* love, derived from God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the power of the Spirit,

¹³ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 26.

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1996), p. 375.

¹⁵ Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, p. 37.

keeping always in the path of the true gospel. Because of its ethical tradition and insight and anticipation, the Christian community should be especially open to opportunities for fulfilment and especially sensitive to forces which frustrate it.

The church has found itself at a crossroads. It is faced with divisive dilemmas in cases of divorce, homosexuality, circumcision (especially in African countries), ordination of women, and in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is Paul's message that local congregations should form the ground on which the right teaching is to be done so that members can do away with their pride cherished in works that usually undermine the unity of the church. 'Anything that does not work itself out in love, though it may conceivably be verbal orthodoxy, is not faith in Paul's sense of the term.'¹⁶ God is active in the world as well as in the church. He does not intend a different kind of wholeness for the church from that which he desires for the world.

Therefore, Christian freedom enables us to enter into meaningful relationships with other persons and to find the fulfilment of our own lives in God as we live for him and for others, since a Christian is one who is free to care for others. If we are to understand that service to the neighbour is required as part of our faithful Christian living then concern for the effects of sin should motivate us to reach our God-given neighbours in love and service as made manifest in the life and

ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. To serve humanity with a Christian eye is not just to want to live together in unity, but to take into account what Christ has done to redeem humanity. We are Christ's ambassadors in declaring Christian freedom in our world today.

The way Paul deals with the identity marks that his agitators were urging the Galatians to accept, as well as his challenge to the Galatians to serve one another, is the church's challenge today in seeking unity. Sin affects the transformation that the church proclaims and it deforms the law, making others turn law into legalism by using it as a stepladder to ascend to God's level. We have a true example in Paul in his dealing with the agitators who were urging the Galatian Christians to accept unnecessary identity marks. The church's challenge today is to witness truly for Christ by declaring null all the identity marks that society and the world have accepted as standards for humanity. The church's challenge is to acknowledge truly the principalities and powers of darkness in the world as they obstruct access to the true transformation that Jesus offers to all those who believe and trust in him. Any identity marks that are enhanced by rigid political or cultural legalism only enslave all those who are not willing to surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of their lives. True Christian freedom is what Jesus provides by setting us free from any legalistic tendencies that dehumanise rather than liberate.¹⁷

Emphasis on the church as a body or

16 Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, p. 71.

17 Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, p. 62.

community is an essential factor that minimizes the individual and maximizes corporate reality. For Paul, to be in freedom is to be in service to and for others. Freedom is the well-being of the community that is founded on *agape* love and perfected in serving one another. The church, as a community of faith, is where all members are valued and their individual contributions are respected. In other words, freedom is more than asking for equality, human rights, and justice or to be in solidarity with the oppressed and suffering. Freedom should be understood through the faithfulness and love of Jesus Christ

Love as service introduces a dimension which is not found in mutual love: the element of self-giving. The sacrificial love of Christ remains the paradigm for our Christian service to the world, without denying the value of that love which we experience in Christian fellowship. Love is mutual sharing, mutual support, binding the human community together in special ways. In other words, the Christian marks of baptism, confirmation, Holy Communion, speaking in tongues or leadership should not enslave the body of Christ. When these marks become barriers to others, then Christians slide back to become legalists.

It is indeed clear that Paul grounds the community's life in the Spirit. For Paul, 'participation in the crucifixion of Christ is the sole condition for ongoing life in the Spirit'.¹⁸ In other words, Paul

sets a clear picture for the church today whereby Christians are persuaded as a community of Christ to remember and return to the life in Christ. The great warning that Paul extended to the Galatians can be extended to the church today, that our understanding of the life in the Spirit should not be distorted by thinking that we are free from ethical responsibility. Rather we should come to terms with the fact that the new life in the Spirit is a life in which Christians are called to an ethic of shared responsibility as Paul says, to 'bear one another's burdens' (6:2). However, we have to ensure that the call of forbearance does not lead the church to 'grow weary in doing what is right' (6:9a). Therefore, in the context of Paul's ethic of shared responsibility, by Christian living and walking in the Spirit, the church is mutually determined. Living by the Spirit is the motive and power of walking in accordance with the Spirit's leadership. Walking in accord with the Spirit leads believers to the place where the life of the Spirit upholds those under assault.¹⁹

In discovering love of one another, the true image of God is brought to us. There is no way an individual believer can journey alone. The community is very important. It is absurd that the church of Christ in the world has been divided for ages on doctrinal issues, some of which arise from a misrepresentation of Paul's teaching. The denominational demarcations (established by missionaries under colonialism in line with the spheres of influence in third world countries), racial

18 Charles H. Cosgrove, *The Cross and the Spirit: A Study in the Argument and Theology of Galatians* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), p. 172.

19 Cosgrove, *The Cross and the Spirit*, p. 194.

divisions, class, gender, ecclesiastical privileges, economics and politics remain a challenge to the church today. In order to overcome these kinds of barriers so that Christians of all ages and gender attain their true freedom in Christ and are of great service to the world, the church must be the church and be transformed in Jesus Christ so as to become 'a sign of God's eschatological reconciliation of the world'.²⁰

The local congregation should be a community characterized in its life, mission and worship by inclusiveness and advocacy for the rights of others. The congregation in its contextual challenges has to underline the reconciling work of Christ, who has broken down the barriers of ethnic identity marks, racism and many other barriers by creating a new people in the Spirit. In this way, the local congregation will champion the true freedom and *agape* love in proclamation, and by deeds in Jesus Christ in whom 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). At heart the Christian church is to be a welcoming and open community to all those who are powerless and helpless, by unmasking the dehumanizing powers often inherent in serving others.

This ethic of shared responsibility must stem from our theological institutions. Most of the seminaries give an impression of being remnants of the monasteries of the middle ages, living far away from the real issues of life.

Our seminaries must reformulate their programs to enable the church to become a community immersed in history, living perpetually in action and reaction with the society in which it finds itself. The freedom of faith must not be destroyed by legalism but has to be enhanced through service to others. The church has to remain the conscience and the servant within the human society. It is only by discerning when and where and how God is revealed and manifested in the early church that we will come to terms with what God wants the church to do today. The option for all Christians is to demand that we review in critical terms the history to which we belong. This faith gives rise to spiritual experiences that urge many Christians to labour for forgiveness, reconciliation and love across the inherited boundaries of religion, ethnicity, culture and sexuality in yearning for a world reconciled in love and justice.

Paul's ethic of shared responsibility summons the church to work towards genuine community, in which each ethnic group remains faithful to its dynamic and changing identity and yet is enriched by and enriches others. In this way, the churches must seek to contribute not only to the development of each culture but also to bring harmony among all those who share the Christian faith.

The church is called to participate in the mission of God to establish God's new creation, to bring everything together under the lordship of Christ (Eph. 1:10). This is to be done by inviting people to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, as well as by struggling together for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The

20 Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 441.

church therefore needs to challenge structures and practices of economic, political, sexual, racial, ethnic and other kinds of oppression, recognizing the intersecting nature of these oppressions and their specific impact on equality within community.

The churches are called to move towards visible unity in order to proclaim the gospel of hope and reconciliation for all people and to show a credible model of the life that God offers to all. Christians, though scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the lamb to form one multi-cultural community of faith. The 'blood' that binds them as brothers and sisters is more precious than the 'blood', the language, the customs, the political allegiances or economic interests that may separate them. This is the essence of Paul's ethic of shared responsibility in summoning Christians to account for their freedom in Jesus Christ in their daily endeavours.

Conclusion

We cannot afford the luxury of selecting one aspect or another of Paul's teaching. We must interpret Paul in some appropriate way for ourselves in the light of our circumstances. But understanding Paul's argument in his context will give respect and appropriate understanding rather than passing judgment or interpreting Paul out of our own ignorance of the apostle. I am

persuaded that life-forming principles should be derived from the teachings of Paul.

In essence, Christians must be ready to help all those who are stumbling rather than condemning and expelling them. This action is reciprocal; no privileged group stands out from the rest, as we are reminded by C. K. Barrett: 'I must bear up the burdens that weigh my fellows down, but I cannot look to anyone else to bear my responsibilities. All Christians are equal, and all share in responsibility for the good of the whole.'²¹

The church is challenged constantly to search the scriptures critically, to open itself up to new insights and honestly acknowledge where it has abused scripture to justify its own understanding of issues that divide people. The church is called to examine and explore its relations with people of other faiths. Jesus Christ is our paradigm of the responsible person. Jesus shows us what it means to be faithful to God and to other people, to be free from the power of evil and from the accepted ethos of the time, to release into the world a transforming power, to love others unselfishly and sacrificially, to hope in face of suffering and defeat. An ethic of shared responsibility is ultimately a new paradigm, which teaches us what it means to be human and to be responsible.

21 Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, p. 90.