

GALATIAN PROBLEMS

3. THE "OTHER" GOSPEL¹

By F. F. BRUCE, M.A., D.D.

RYLANDS PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM AND EXEGESIS IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

AFTER a brief introductory salutation, Paul begins his letter to the churches of Galatia, without any word of congratulation or thanksgiving such as we find in most of his letters,² by declaring his astonishment that they are turning so quickly away "from him who called you by grace, and following a different gospel" (Gal. i. 6). Not that this different gospel is properly called a gospel, he says, although its proponents no doubt claimed this designation for it.³ In Paul's eyes there was no gospel but one, and this was the gospel which the churches of Galatia had originally received, a gospel whose keynote, it is implied, was the grace of God. Any rival message, whatever it might be called, was a counterfeit gospel, and on its preacher—even if that preacher were Paul himself, even if he were an angel from heaven—an anathema is invoked.

I

Concerning the gospel which the Galatian churches had received we are relatively well informed. Our task is to identify the "other" gospel which they were now beginning to follow, and also to try to identify the people who brought this other gospel among them, those "agitators" (as Paul put it)⁴ who unsettled their minds by trying to distort the gospel of Christ.⁵ This task has been described as "the singular problem of the Epistle to the Galatians".⁶

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 18th of November 1970.

² See Rom. i. 8 ff.; 1 Cor. i. 4 ff.; 2 Cor. i. 3 ff.; Eph. i. 15 f.; Phil. i. 3 ff.; Col. i. 3 ff.; 1 Thess. i. 2 ff.; 2 Thess. i. 3 f.; Philem. 4 ff.

³ Gal. i. 8 f. See F. F. Bruce, "When is a gospel not a gospel?" BULLETIN, xlv (1962-3), 319 ff. ⁴ Gal. v. 12 (N.E.B.), Gk. ἀναστατούντες. ⁵ Gal. i. 7.

⁶ By J. H. Ropes, *The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians*, Harvard Theological Studies xiv (Cambridge, Mass., 1929).

By why speak of a "singular problem"? To many readers of the letter, from the second century onwards, the nature of the "other" gospel has been self-evident, and the character of its proponents not greatly in doubt. The second-century Marcionite prologues to the letters of Paul began with the prologue to Galatians, which runs thus:¹

The Galatians are Greeks.² They at first received the word of truth from the apostle, but after his departure they were tempted by false apostles to turn to the law and circumcision. The apostle calls them back to the true faith,³ writing to them from Ephesus.

In this prologue the "law" to which the Galatians were being tempted to turn was the Jewish law; this is indicated by its collocation with "circumcision", as well as by the plain meaning of the repeated references to law in the letter itself.⁴

The same understanding of the argument of Galatians recurs throughout the patristic literature. For example, Marius Victorinus, the earliest Latin commentator on the letter, puts it thus:

The sum of the letter is as follows: the Galatians are going astray because they are adding Judaism to the gospel of faith in Christ, observing in a material sense the sabbath and circumcision, together with the other works which they received in accordance with the law. Disturbed by these tendencies Paul writes this letter, wishing to put them right and call them back from Judaism, in order that they may preserve faith in Christ alone, and receive from Christ the hope of salvation and of his promises, because no one is saved by the works of the law. So, in order to show that what they are adding is wrong, he wishes to confirm [the truth of] his gospel.⁵

In the Reformation period we find no significant change, except that the Reformers pressed an analogy between the

¹ The original Greek text of the Marcionite prologues has been lost, but Latin translations survive in most Vulgate manuscripts (their heretical source having been forgotten). In order to be understood, they have to be read in the sequence in which Marcion arranged the Pauline letters. See D. de Bruyne, "Prologues Bibliques d'Origine Marcionite", *Revue Bénédictine*, xxiv (1907), 1 ff.; A. von Harnack, "Der marcionitische Ursprung der ältesten Vulgata-Prologe zu den Paulusbriefen", *ZNW*, xxiv (1925), 205 ff.

² See BULLETIN, lii (1969-70), 247.

³ Literally "to the faith of the truth" (or "belief in the truth").

⁴ Gal. ii. 16 ff., iii. 2, 5, 10 ff., v. 3 ff., etc.

⁵ C. Marius Victorinus Afer, *In Gal.*, introd. (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* viii, 1145 D—1147 A).

situation with which Paul dealt and that of their own day. Luther begins his preface to the epistle thus:

The Galatians had been brought by St. Paul to right Christian belief, from the law to the gospel. But after his departure there came the false apostles, who were disciples of the true apostles, and turned the Galatians back again to believe that they must attain blessedness through the work of the law, and that they were sinning if they did not hold the work of the law, as according to Acts xv certain highly-placed people in Jerusalem insisted.¹

This is expanded as follows in his commentary on the epistle:

St. Paul goeth about to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins, or Christian righteousness, to the end that we may have a perfect knowledge and difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. . . . For if the article of justification be lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost. . . .

Christ [says Paul] hath mercifully called you in grace, that ye should be freemen under Christ, and not bondmen under Moses, whose disciples ye are now become again by the means of your false apostles, who by the law of Moses called you not unto grace, but unto wrath, to the hating of God, to sin and death. . . .

Hereby it may easily be gathered, that these false apostles had condemned the Gospel of Paul among the Galatians, saying: Paul indeed hath begun well, but to have begun well is not enough, for there remain yet many higher matters; like as they say in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts: It is not enough for you to believe in Christ, or to be baptized, but it behoveth also that ye be circumcised; "for except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved". This is as much to say, as that Christ is a good workman, which hath indeed begun a building, but he hath not finished it; for this must Moses do.²

Luther goes on to draw a parallel with the "fantastical spirits, Anabaptists and others" of his day as well as with the "Papists".³

According to John Calvin (1548), Paul

had faithfully instructed them [the Galatians] in the pure gospel, but false apostles had entered in his absence and corrupted the true seed by false and corrupt dogmas. For they taught that the observance of ceremonies was still necessary. This might seem trivial; but Paul fights for it as a fundamental article of the Christian faith. And rightly so, for it is no light evil to quench the brightness of the gospel, lay a snare for consciences and remove the distinction between the old and new covenants. He saw that these errors were also related to an ungodly and destructive opinion on the deserving of righteousness. . . .

The false apostles, who had deceived the Galatians to advance their own claims, pretended that they had received a commission from the apostles. Their

¹ *Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe: *Die deutsche Bibel*, 7, pp. 172 f.

² M. Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*: A revised and completed translation [by P. S. Watson] based on the "Middleton" edition of the English version of 1575 (London, 1953), pp. 21, 26, 62, 63.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 63 ff.

method of infiltration was to get it believed that they represented the apostles and delivered a message from them. But they took away from Paul the name and authority of apostle. . . . In attacking Paul they were really attacking the truth of the gospel.¹

In other words, the Galatian converts were being urged to observe ceremonies of the Old Testament law as integral to the gospel and to accept a doctrine of justification by personal merit. Since Paul's preaching excluded all this, it must be undermined by an attempt to diminish his status in the eyes of his converts.

This understanding of the situation prevailed into the nineteenth century, when it was taken up by the Tübingen school of F. C. Baur and his associates, who integrated it into their account of primitive Christian history. "What led the Apostle to write this Epistle to the Galatian Churches", wrote Baur, "we learn very clearly from the Epistle itself". The Galatians' falling away from the gospel as Paul preached it

was due to the influence of strange teachers who . . . represented to them that, as a first step to the Christian salvation, they must submit to circumcision (v. 2, 11). Here we first meet with those Judaizing opponents with whom the Apostle had to maintain so severe a struggle in the churches which he founded, and they appear here quite in the harsh and uncompromising Judaistic character which marks them as opponents of Pauline Christianity. . . . In one word, they were Jews or Jewish Christians of the genuine old stamp, who could so little understand the more liberal atmosphere of Pauline Christianity that they would have thought the very ground of their existence was cut from under them if Judaism were no longer to have its absolute power and importance.²

In principle, according to Baur, the declared opponents of Pauline Christianity were in agreement with the leaders of the Jerusalem church; indeed, those leaders "are themselves the opponents against whom the Apostle contends in refuting these principles".³ But their reluctant recognition, at the Jerusalem conference, that Paul and Barnabas had been entrusted with the gospel for the Gentiles, tied their hands and compelled them to take the position of non-belligerents. Other members of the Jerusalem church, however, were not so bound, and they were

¹ J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, E.T. by T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh and London, 1965), pp. 4 f.

² F. C. Baur, *Paul: his Life and Works*, E.T., i (London, 1876), 251-3; cf. his *Church History of the First Three Centuries*, E.T., i (London, 1878), 49-60.

³ Baur, *Paul*, i. 121.

the infiltrators or trouble-makers who endeavoured to subvert Paul's teaching and apostolic authority among his Gentile converts, including the churches of Galatia.

Bishop Lightfoot sums the matter up concisely:

The Epistle to the Galatians is especially distinguished among St. Paul's letters by its unity of purpose. The Galatian apostasy in its double aspect, as a denial of his own authority and a repudiation of the doctrine of grace, is never lost sight of from beginning to end.¹

This "apostasy", as he calls it,

was a Judaism of the sharp Pharisaic type, unclouded or unrelieved by any haze of Essene mysticism, such as prevailed a few years later in the neighbouring Colossian Church.² The necessity of circumcision was strongly insisted upon. Great stress was laid on the observance of "days and months and seasons and years". In short, nothing less than submission to the whole ceremonial law seems to have been contemplated by the innovators. At all events, this was the logical consequence of the adoption of the initiatory rite.³

But far from accepting the Tübingen interpretation, Lightfoot regards the Epistle to the Galatians as refuting it most conclusively, "for it shows the true relations existing between St. Paul and the Twelve".⁴ Far from agreeing in principle with the Judaizing propagandists, the Jerusalem leaders agreed in principle with Paul; if Paul at Antioch charged Peter with "play-acting"⁵ when he withdrew from table-fellowship with Gentile Christians, it was precisely because Peter on this occasion was acting in a manner at variance with his real principles.

Lightfoot's account of the situation in the Galatian churches calls, in my judgment, for very little modification. But during the present century variant accounts of the situation have been put forward by highly reputable scholars, and these accounts merit serious assessment.

II

In 1919 Wilhelm Lütgert published a monograph with the title *Law and Spirit*⁶ in which he argued that in the Galatian

¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London, 1865), p. 63.

² Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London, 1875), pp. 73 ff., 349 ff.

³ Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 27.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 68.

⁵ Gal. ii. 13; see BULLETIN, li (1968-9), 308 f.

⁶ W. Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist: eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des Galaterbriefes* (Gütersloh, 1919).

situation Paul had to wage war on two fronts simultaneously. Not only had he to deal with the attempt to impose on his converts circumcision and other obligations of the Jewish law; he had also to deal with radicals of the opposite stripe to the Judaizers, with those who wished to sever the gospel from its Old Testament roots and who held that the new life in the Spirit gave them the entrée into a realm of knowledge which dismissed the "things of the flesh" as irrelevant and had little regard for those ethical distinctions on which Paul—inconsistently, to their way of thinking—insisted. It was against these people, said Lütgert, and not against the Judaizers, that Paul had to defend his claim to apostolic authority in independence of Jerusalem. By their standards, anyone who was dependent on Jerusalem was insufficiently emancipated from the old order of Judaism; hence Paul's emphatic assertion that he had received his commission and his message from no human source—least of all from the Jerusalem "pillars"—but by direct revelation from the exalted Lord. These were the people, too, who needed the warning not to turn their Christian freedom into licence (v. 13); the Judaizers, on the contrary, had to be warned not to exchange their freedom for the "yoke of slavery" (v. 1).

Lütgert's thesis was elaborated (with modifications) ten years later by James Hardy Ropes, in his monograph already mentioned, *The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians*.¹ Ropes attempted, by means of a short commentary on Galatians included in his monograph, to show that this thesis illuminated each successive section of the epistle. In Galatians iii. 6-29, for example, the radicals who wished to forget the Old Testament antecedents of the gospel had to be reminded that, Gentiles as they were, they were children of Abraham by faith in Christ—children of Abraham in the sense that mattered most.

Ropes also argued that the Galatian Judaizers need not have been influenced by intruding visitors from Judaea; "all that we need suppose is that certain gentile Christians had proved susceptible to the efforts of local synagogue Jews, and had tried to persuade the churches as a whole to accept Jewish rites, including circumcision".² Such Gentiles may have hoped to fare rather

¹ See p. 253, n. 6.

² Ropes, *Singular Problem*, p. 45.

better than their uncircumcised fellow-Christians in any persecution originating with the Jews.¹

Johannes Munck, Professor of New Testament in Aarhus, Denmark, propounded a novel line in the interpretation of our epistle when in 1954 he maintained that the Judaizers in the churches of Galatia were not Jewish Christians, not visitors from Judaea, not local synagogue Jews, but Gentile Christians, Paul's own converts.² All that they knew about Jewish Christianity and the Jerusalem church they knew from Paul. "His words about Jerusalem and the Judaeian churches were full of sympathy and understanding".³ Knowing that the Jerusalem Christians were circumcised and observed many of the ordinances observed by the Jews among whom they lived, some of Paul's converts concluded that he had only half-evangelized them and that they should conform to Jerusalem practice. Moreover, Paul taught his converts to use the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures as their Bible.⁴ While he was with them he showed them how those scriptures spoke of the salvation of the Gentiles, but when he had left them they read in those same scriptures much that spoke of Abraham and his posterity as the recipients of God's blessing, much that spoke of the glory of Israel and the subjection of the Gentiles, much that spoke of the keeping of the law as a condition of enjoying divine approval. Was it strange, then, that they should draw those practical conclusions which so horrified Paul when he heard of them?

But there are several indications throughout the letter that the troublemakers in the Galatian churches were incomers, not some of Paul's Gentile converts. He refers to them throughout in the third person, while he addresses his converts in the second person. In his letters to the Corinthians offenders within the church of Corinth are rebuked in the second person, while interlopers from elsewhere are denounced in the third person. So we may conclude that it is outsiders whom Paul has in view when he says to the Galatian Christians, "The persons I have referred

¹ An inference from Gal. vi. 12.

² J. Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte* (Copenhagen, 1954), pp. 79 ff.; E.T., *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London, 1959), pp. 87 ff.

³ Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, p. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 132.

to are paying court to you, but not with an honest envy : what they really want is to bar the door to you so that you may pay court to them " (iv. 17, N.E.B. margin).

Walter Schmithals, in an article published in 1956,¹ put forward a simpler account than that of Lütgert and Ropes : Paul was not waging a war on two fronts ; the sole target of his attack was a body of Jewish Christian Gnostics such as Dr. Schmithals had already identified with the target of Paul's attack in the Corinthian correspondence.² But Gnosticism has really to be read into the teaching of these people as reflected in Paul's attack on them before it can be read out of it.³ And it is begging the question to argue, as Professor Willi Marxsen does, that this is due to Paul's own failure to understand properly what they were teaching⁴ (he heard that they were teaching circumcision and assumed too hastily that they were straightforward Judaizers, whereas they were in fact "introducing something new—a Christian-Jewish-Gnostic syncretism") :⁵ if we cannot determine the nature of their teaching from Paul's refutation of it, we have no other evidence to guide us.

There is nothing improbable *per se* in Paul's having to defend the gospel on two fronts at once ; he certainly had to do so at Corinth.⁶ But there is no substantial evidence of his having to do so in the churches of Galatia. No doubt he realized the necessity of warning his converts there, as elsewhere, against misinterpreting his message of liberty in an antinomian sense : they must not turn their freedom into licence to indulge in the "works of the flesh", but rather live in mutual love, the first "fruit of the Spirit" (v. 13 f., 22). But while he reminds them that those who manifest the works of the flesh "will never inherit

¹ W. Schmithals, "Die Häretiker in Galatien", *ZNW*, xlvii (1956), 25 ff., reprinted (in revised form) in his *Paulus und die Gnostiker* (Hamburg-Bergstedt, 1965), pp. 9 ff.

² Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth* (Göttingen, 1956, 21965).

³ Cf. R. McL. Wilson, "Gnostics—in Galatia?", *Studia Evangelica*, iv, ed. F. L. Cross (=TU 102, Berlin, 1968), 358 ff.

⁴ W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, E.T. (Oxford, 1968), pp. 55, 58.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁶ Cf. H. Chadwick, "All Things to all Men", *NTS*, i (1954-55), 261 ff.

the kingdom of God" (v. 21),¹ this is not the main thrust of his letter. It is *a priori* likely that in the churches of Galatia, as in other Gentile churches, there were some people who took an ultra-libertarian line, and conflict between them and the legalists may be indicated in the warning of v. 15 : "But if you go on fighting one another, tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction". But in the Galatian churches ultra-libertarians were evidently an uninfluential minority. In any case, the course for them as for the legalists was to have a larger measure of that faith which is "active in love" and in that love to "be servants to one another" (v. 6, 13).

III

Paul's insistence on his independence of Jerusalem is quite intelligible as part of his argument against Judaizers whose main appeal was to the Jerusalem leaders. These Judaizers argued : "The Jerusalem leaders are the only persons with authority to say what the true gospel is, and this authority they received direct from Christ. Paul has no comparable authority : any commission he exercises was derived by him from the Jerusalem leaders, and if he differs from them on the content or implications of the gospel, he is wrong". Paul replied : "At no time did I derive any commission from the Jerusalem leaders. My call to apostleship and the gospel I proclaim were alike received by me 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (i. 12). My apostleship was to be discharged among the Gentiles ; the gospel which I received by revelation was to be preached among the Gentiles, and the Jerusalem leaders recognized this when they 'acknowledged that I had been entrusted with the gospel for Gentiles as surely as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for Jews ; for God, whose action made Peter an apostle to the Jews, also made me an apostle to the Gentiles' (ii. 7 f.). If it is a question of defining the content or the implications of the gospel so far as it affects Gentiles, I speak with authority—not I indeed, but the Lord, who called and commissioned me". Not that Paul differed from the Jerusalem leaders with regard to the essential

¹ Cf. 1 Cor. vi. 9 f. ; Eph. v. 5.

content of the gospel : it was based on the facts of Christ's death, burial and resurrection, and these were proclaimed equally by both sides (cf. 1 Cor. xv. 11). But there might well be differences of opinion with regard to the practical implications of the gospel in the lives of Gentile believers, and in this sphere Paul, commissioned by Christ to be the Gentiles' apostle, would brook no interference from those whose apostolate was to the Jews, and still less from people who claimed to speak in their name.

But what of his words in Galatians v. 11 : " And I, my friends, if I am still advocating circumcision, why is it I am still persecuted " ? What was the point of charging Paul with advocating circumcision, and what was meant by this charge ? The point of the charge was probably this : " Don't listen to Paul when he says you must not be circumcised ; he preaches circumcision himself ". This was contrary to the Galatians' experience of Paul's preaching, but if (as was suggested) Paul was a trimmer, adapting his preaching to his environment, then plainly he need not be taken too seriously. That this sort of thing was actually suggested may be implied in Paul's indignant words in i. 10 : " Does my language now sound as if I were canvassing for men's support ? Whose support do I want but God's alone ? Do you think I am currying favour with men ? If I still sought men's favour, I should be no servant of Christ ".¹

But what was meant by the charge that Paul himself advocated circumcision ? Was there anything in his teaching or action that lent it colour ? We can well imagine how readily such an action as his circumcision of Timothy² could be appealed to in this way ; but perhaps all that was meant was that, true to his policy of living like a Jew among Jews, he did not discountenance the practice of circumcision among *Jewish* Christians. There is a relevant passage in Acts xxi. 21, where Paul, on his last visit to Jerusalem, is told by the elders of the mother church that rumours have reached Jerusalem " that you teach all the Jews in the gentile world to turn their backs on Moses, telling them to give up circumcising their children and following our way of

¹ Cf. H. Chadwick, *NTS*, i (1954-55), 261 f.

² Or of Titus, if this is indeed implied in Gal. ii. 3—but see *BULLETIN*, li (1968-9), 307.

life ". The elders make it plain that they know these rumours to be unfounded, and the narrative goes on to represent Paul as acquiescing in their suggestion that he should give a public demonstration that they were unfounded. There is no need to regard this as an example of Luke's policy of making the gulf between Paul and the Jerusalem church less unbridgeable than, according to the Tübingen tradition, it actually was ; there is nothing in Paul's letters which contradicts the picture given of him in Acts xxi. Even in Galatians, his most uncompromising deliverance on this subject, his concern is solely with the imposing of circumcision on Gentile Christians ; whether Jewish Christians continued to circumcise their children or not was probably a matter of small importance in his eyes, on a par with their continued observance or non-observance of the sabbath and the Levitical food-laws.

IV

The most certain feature of the false gospel was its insistence on circumcision. In itself circumcision was neither here nor there so far as Paul was concerned : he says so twice in this very letter (v. 6, vi. 15). What disturbed him was the enforcement or acceptance of circumcision as a legal obligation, as though it were essential to salvation or to membership in the community of the people of God. There is nothing inconsistent with Paul's principles in his circumcision of Timothy, as a matter of expediency, according to the record of Acts xvi. 3¹—although it is easy to appreciate how this action could have been misrepresented or misunderstood. But in the situation which obtained in the churches of Galatia it was a very different matter : " Mark my words : I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision Christ

¹ Timothy's circumcision is recorded quite incidentally ; there is no further reference to it, and it betrays no " tendency " on Luke's part. As the son of a Jewish mother, who had been brought up by her in the Jewish faith, he was a Jew in everything but circumcision, which had not been performed because his (late) father was a Greek, as the local Jews knew. Presumably Paul judged it advisable to make him a thorough-going Jewish Christian, but the precise point of the phrase " out of consideration for the Jews who lived in those parts " is somewhat obscure. See A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible : Companion to the New Testament* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1970), p. 459.

will do you no good at all. Once again, you can take it from me that every man who receives circumcision is under obligation to keep the entire law" (Gal. v. 2. f.). If circumcision was accepted because it was required by the law of Israel, it was impossible to stop there: every part of that law was of equal obligation. But none of those who were disposed to accept circumcision as a legal obligation, nor any of those who pressed them to do so,¹ contemplated keeping the *whole* law: as for the latter, says Paul, "they only want you to be circumcised in order to boast of your having submitted to that outward rite" (vi. 13). Anyone who admitted the principle of salvation by keeping the law and did not take seriously the consequent obligation to keep it in its entirety would incur the doom invoked by the law itself: "A curse is on all who do not persevere in doing everything that is written in the Book of the Law" (iii. 10, quoting Deut. xxvii. 26). When that curse had been incurred, the only way to be delivered from it was through the redemptive death of Christ: "Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the law by becoming for our sake an accursed thing; for Scripture says, 'A curse is on everyone who is hanged on a gibbet'. And the purpose of it all was that the blessing of Abraham should in Christ Jesus be extended to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (iii. 13 f., quoting Deut. xxi. 23). It was preposterous for those who had experienced this deliverance to expose themselves to the sanctions of the law all over again by acknowledging a token obligation to keep it—just as preposterous as it would be for people set free from the yoke of slavery to place their necks voluntarily and deliberately under that yoke anew. The gospel of salvation by grace and the doctrine of salvation by law-keeping were mutually exclusive: to accept the latter was to renounce the former. "When you seek to be justified by way of law, your relation with Christ is completely

¹ Those who press circumcision on the Galatian Christians are called *οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι* ("those who receive circumcision") in Gal. vi. 13, but it is unnecessary to understand this passive participle of Gentile Christians who were accepting circumcision themselves and trying to persuade their brethren to follow their example; so J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, pp. 87-89, following E. Hirsch, "Zwei Fragen zu Galater 6", *ZNW*, xxix (1930), 192 ff.

severed: you have fallen out of the dominion of God's grace" (v. 4).

It is not certain that in all schools of Jewish thought at this time circumcision was insisted on as a *sine qua non* for admission into the commonwealth of Israel. Philo seems to know of those who argued that, provided the spiritual significance of circumcision was maintained, it was permissible to dispense with the external rite; and he opposes them: "let us not abolish the law of circumcision on the ground that circumcision signifies the cutting away of pleasure and passions of every sort and the destruction of ungodly conceit".¹ About A.D. 40 Ananias, the Jewish instructor of King Izates of Adiabene, assured him that he could worship God according to the Jewish law without being circumcised; but later, when Izates was persuaded by another Jew, Eleazar by name, that he could not hope to be a true proselyte and win divine approval without circumcision, he submitted to the rite.² In debates with the school of Shammai, some members of the school of Hillel maintained that, for Gentiles to become proselytes to Judaism, the initiatory baptism was sufficient apart from circumcision³—but this is more likely to have been a position defended in debate than a matter of practice. Those Gentiles who went all the way in the direction of Judaism but stopped short of circumcision were treated as God-fearers, still outside the Jewish fellowship, and not admitted as proselytes to membership within it.⁴

Disciple of the school of Hillel though he was by education, Paul's line was not that of those Hillelites who argued that circumcision was not essential to a Gentile's becoming a Jew, if he underwent proselyte baptism. He was not concerned to make Gentiles into Jews, but to introduce Jews and Gentiles alike into a new community through faith in Jesus as Lord. In this new community circumcision was irrelevant, and any attempt to treat it as essential was inadmissible. Circumcision, with

¹ Philo, *Migration of Abraham*, 92.

² Josephus, *Antiquities*, xx. 34 ff.

³ TB *Yebamot* 46a (*baraita*).

⁴ Like Cornelius of Caesarea, who, despite his piety (Acts x. 2 ff., 22), was still classed as an uncircumcised Gentile, with whom no observant Jew could have table-fellowship (Acts x. 28, xi. 3).

many other features of the law of Israel—food-restrictions, sacred seasons, and the like—had traditionally kept Jews and Gentiles apart; such things had no place in the “new creation” (vi. 15) where there was “no such thing as Jew and Greek” (iii. 28). Any attempt to impose them was to put the clock back to the time before the coming of Christ.

V

Together with circumcision, the Galatians were observing “special days and months and seasons and years” (iv. 10).¹ And what was wrong with that? In itself, nothing. To Paul, the observance or non-observance of a sacred calendar was religiously indifferent, just as circumcision was. “This man regards one day more highly than another, while that man regards all days alike. On such a point everyone should have reached conviction in his own mind” (Rom. xiv. 5). According to the record of Acts, Paul regulated his own movements in some measure according to the Jewish calendar, especially in arranging his visits to Jerusalem,² and this was in complete accord with his settled policy, as set out in 1 Corinthians ix. 19 ff., to conform to Jewish ways in Jewish company and to Gentile ways in Gentile company, so as to commend the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike. But to observe sacred occasions as a matter of religious obligation, as though this were of the essence of gospel faith and church membership, was a retrograde step, back from liberty to bondage; it was, in fact, a token of submission to the “elemental spirits of the universe”, to reproduce the rendering of Galatians iv. 3 in both R.S.V. and N.E.B.

The Greek word translated “elemental spirits” is *stoicheia*, a word which by derivation means “things arranged in rows”.³ It is not easy to determine its precise meaning in its two occurrences in this letter (iv. 3, 9). It is most commonly found in the

¹ W. M. Ramsay hazarded the guess that news came to Paul that his Galatian converts were observing the sabbatical year A.D. 48 (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London, 1920), p. xxxi).

² Cf. Acts xviii. 21 (Western text), xx. 16 (cf. xxvii. 9); also 1 Cor. xvi. 8.

³ Cf. G. Dellling, s.v. *στοιχείον*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, E.T., vii (Grand Rapids, 1971), 670 ff.

sense of “elements” or “basic principles”—with reference, for example, to the sounds of which speech is made up or the letters of the alphabet of which written words and sentences are made up (so in Heb. v. 12, where the readers are told that they need to be taught the ABC of the gospel all over again), or to the elements of which the material universe is composed (so perhaps in 2 Peter iii. 10, of the elements which will “disintegrate in flames” on the day of the Lord).¹ But the sense of the word in Galatians iv. 3, 9 must fit the context of its two appearances.

One interpretation of the *stoicheia*, which is very much in line with Paul’s general teaching, thinks of them as the law and the flesh (unregenerate human nature), two elemental forces inherent in the world, operating before Christ and apart from Christ.² The law is good, because it is God’s law, but the human material on which it operates is vitiated; the result is that law stimulates in this material the very sin that it forbids, and sin produces death. The law, which in itself is “holy and just and good” (Rom. vii. 12), thus becomes in effect “the law of sin and death” (Rom. viii. 2).

So, in Galatians, the observance of the Jewish law is interpreted as submission to the *stoicheia*. “During our minority”, says Paul, “we were slaves to the *stoicheia* of the universe” (iv. 3). If the Galatians accept the Jewish law as a religious obligation, they will be subject to this slavery, but curiously, although the Galatians are Gentiles, Paul says they will *revert* to this slavery. “Formerly, when you did not acknowledge God, you were the slaves of beings which in their nature are no gods.”³ But now that you do acknowledge God—or rather, now that he has acknowledged you—how can you turn back to the mean and

¹ Alternatively, the *στοιχεῖα* in 2 Peter iii. 10 may be the planets, doomed to dissolution on the last day as they were created in the beginning.

² Cf. A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World* (Kampen, 1964); also E. D. Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh, 1921), pp. 510 ff.; E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund, 1946), pp. 156 ff.; B. Reicke, “The Law and this World according to Paul”, *JBL*, lxx (1951), 259 ff.; H. N. Ridderbos, “Vrijheid en Wet volgens Paulus’ Brief aan de Galaten”, in *Arcana Revelata . . . aangeboden aan F. W. Grosheide* (Kampen, 1951), pp. 89 ff.; *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids, 1953), pp. 152 ff.

³ An echo of Deut. xxxii. 17 (cf. 1 Cor. x. 20).

beggarly *stoicheia*? Why do you propose to enter their service all over again"? (iv. 8 f.). Is Paul equating his own former Judaism and their former paganism as both alike consisting in the service of the *stoicheia*?

It is immediately after these words that he reproaches them for keeping "special days and months and seasons and years" (iv. 10). Three of these four words appear in Genesis i. 14, where the heavenly luminaries are appointed "for signs and for seasons and for days and for years".¹ To observe sacred days and seasons as matters of religious obligation, then, and not in a spirit of Christian liberty, could be interpreted as subservience to the heavenly luminaries by which the calendar was regulated—and there is ample attestation, at least from the second century A.D. onwards, for the use of *stoicheia* in the sense of stars, constellations or planets. But to the mind of antiquity the seven planets—sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn—were not merely inanimate spheres moving in their orbits; they were associated with supernatural forces which profoundly influenced the lives of men. To the believer in Christ, according to Paul, all such forces were robbed of their potency (we might almost say demythologized), and what could be more insensate than for those who had experienced liberation from their dominance to submit to that dominance afresh?

But, apart from the sacred calendar, was there any reason to associate the Jewish law in general with such forces? Perhaps there was: in a passage in this epistle where Paul emphasizes the inferiority of the law to the gospel he says that the law was "promulgated through angels" (iii. 19). This piece of information, absent from the Pentateuchal account of the law-giving, appears in three places in the New Testament;² but Paul reproduces it in order to underline the inferiority of the law to God's unmediated promise to Abraham, which was fulfilled in the gospel of Christ. Some connection between these angels and

¹ With Gal. iv. 10 (ἡμέρας . . . καὶ μῆνας καὶ καιροὺς καὶ ἐνιαυτοὺς) compare Gen. i. 14 (εἰς σημεῖα καὶ εἰς καιροὺς καὶ εἰς ἡμέρας καὶ εἰς ἐνιαυτοὺς).

² The other two are Acts vii. 53 and Heb. ii. 2. The earliest known allusion to this angelic mediation is Jubilees i. 29; it is mentioned later in a number of *midrashim* (*Sifre Num.* 102 on Num. xii. 5; *Mekhilta*, tractate *Bahōdeš* 5, on Exod. xx. 18; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 21).

the *stoicheia* is rendered the more probable by the suggestion in iv. 8 f. (quoted above) that the *stoicheia* are to be identified with the previous objects of the Galatian Christians' worship.

Among the objects of pagan worship the deities who shared their names with the planets were particularly prominent. In the faith of Israel such deities were included among the *b'ne 'elohim*, members of the heavenly court of God Most High.¹ The Jews did not worship those beings as the Gentiles did. If, in the age before Christ, they regulated their religious life by ordinances imposed through the agency of these beings, that was in keeping with the stage of spiritual infancy through which they were then passing. But for believers who had been emancipated by Christ and attained their spiritual majority through faith in him to revert to such ordinances was little short of apostasy and scarcely to be distinguished from relapsing into pagan worship.

It was in the light of the gospel that these *stoicheia* were "mean and beggarly": Christ had exposed their bankruptcy. For those who did not live in the good of Christian freedom the *stoicheia* were "principalities and powers", keeping the souls of men in bondage.² Their overthrow by Christ on the cross is depicted in the Epistle to the Colossians, the only other writing in the Pauline corpus where the *stoicheia* figure—and figure in much the same way as they do in Galatians (although the "heresy" which Paul combats in Colossians is apparently a more complex form of syncretism than the "other" gospel which he denounces in Galatians).³

According to Paul, pagan worship was always culpable because it involved idolatry and the vices which followed from idolatry;⁴ Jewish worship in the pre-Christian stage of God's dealings with men was far from being culpable—it was divinely instituted—but it had the character of infancy and immaturity as compared with the coming of age into which men were introduced by faith in Christ. Just as a minor required the direction of

¹ Cf. Deut. xxxii. 8 (reading "sons of God" rather than MT "sons of Israel"); Psalm lxxxii. 1 ff.

² Cf. G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford, 1956); H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, E.T. (Freiburg, 1961).

³ See BULLETIN, xlviii (1965-66), 268 ff.

⁴ Cf. Rom. i. 18 ff.

tutors, guardians or slave-attendants, so the people of God in the days of their minority were under the control of the *stoicheia*. But for believers in Christ to put themselves under the control of these *stoicheia* afresh was not just reverting to infancy; it was tantamount to a declaration that the death of Jesus had no redemptive power: "I will not nullify the grace of God; if righteousness comes by law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal. 2: 21). Paul could hardly have expressed himself with greater urgency or severity had his converts been on the point of relapsing into paganism. We may compare the attitude of the writer to the Hebrews towards another group that was in danger of giving up its distinctive Christian standing and merging in its former Jewish environment: this, he warns, would be downright apostasy, desertion from the living God.¹

VI

The simplest interpretation of Galatians, on the basis of its internal evidence, agrees remarkably with the statement in Acts xv. 1 that, some time after the extension of the gospel to Asia Minor, "fierce dissension and controversy" arose in the church of Syrian Antioch because "certain persons who had come down from Judaea began to teach the brotherhood that those who were not circumcised in accordance with Mosaic practice could not be saved". If such persons also visited Antioch's daughter-churches in Galatia with this same teaching, and found some acceptance for it there, the stage would be set for the Epistle to the Galatians—whether such a visit was paid about the same time or later. We have been warned so often in recent years to forget the Acts of the Apostles when trying to understand Paul's letters that there is some reluctance to relate the two bodies of literature even where the evidence of the one corroborates that of the other without any distortion. But this is an extreme reaction from the older custom of forcing the contents of the epistles into the framework of Acts. That visitors of this kind did come down to Antioch from Judaea is confirmed by the reference in Galatians ii. 12 to the person or persons who came from James and persuaded Peter to discontinue his table fellowship with Gentile

¹ Heb. iii. 12.

Christians during his stay in Antioch some time before the writing of Galatians.¹ The simplest account of the "other" gospel is that persons of this outlook also visited the churches of Galatia and tried to persuade Paul's Gentile converts there that unless they received circumcision and other customs of Jewish religion they could not hope to win the acceptance of the church of Jerusalem and other fellow-believers of Jewish birth—that in their eyes they would have at most the status which Gentile "God-fearers" had in the eyes of the synagogue. The "full" gospel included circumcision and the observance of the Jewish food-laws and calendar; the gospel which they had received from Paul was a truncated gospel. To which Paul replied that such a "full" gospel, denying as it did the all-sufficiency of Christ, was no gospel at all, and in so far as it involved a reversion to legal bondage it undercut the message of justification by faith, disallowed the claim that Jesus by his death and resurrection had inaugurated the messianic age which superseded the age of law and thus in effect disallowed his title to be the Messiah.² Far from being a gospel in any sense, such teaching was plain apostasy from Christ. Hence, no matter who its propagator might be, *anathema esto*.³

¹ See BULLETIN, li (1968-9), 308.

² Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* E.T. (London, 1931), p. 186; L. Baeck, "The Faith of Paul", *Journal of Jewish Studies* iii (1952), 93 ff.; H. J. Schoeps, *Paul*, E.T. (London, 1961), pp. 42, 168 ff.; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 180 ff., 446 ff.

³ Since this lecture was delivered, an important contribution to the subject has been made by R. Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation", *NTS.*, xvii (1970-71), 198 ff.