Introduction

What in the world is going on in Galatians 5.13–6.10?

If – with the aid of time travel – we journeyed back to ETS 35 years ago and entered into debate with the scholars there interested in the exegetical nuances of this most perplexing of Paul's letters, we'd quickly find ourselves embroiled in a discussion about the merits of including these verses in the letter *at all*. In 1987 – and for several decades previously – the unity, or otherwise, of the canonical letter of Galatians was one of the most energetically contested topics in Pauline studies. And this passage lay at the centre of that controversy.

After four chapters of seemingly pretty-focussed polemic against liking religious rules *too much*, Paul turns his attention to people who seem to like them *too little*. Having beaten up on circumcision and Jewish feasts and festivals, now he says 'fulfil the law' by keeping the golden rule (Gal 5.14). Now he wants his readers to say 'no' to 'the desires of the flesh' (Gal 5.16-21), and 'yes' to 'the fruits of the Spirit' (Gal 5.22–26); 'no' to '[pleasing] the flesh' – which leads to destruction, and 'yes' to '[pleasing] the Spirit' – which leads to eternal life (Gal 6.8). 'Carry each other's burdens', he says, 'and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ,' (Gal 6.2).

And to top it off, he frames this whole section with a repeated sentiment that only seems to emphasise this dissonance. In chapter 5 verse 6, he tells us that…

> 'in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.'

And then in chapter 6 verse 15, in a paragraph written in his own hand, he reiterates…

> 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation!'

How is all this to be integrated into the flow of Paul's larger argument? Should such an integration even be attempted? Those were the kinds of questions that were getting academics exercised and papers published back in 1987. But then, everything changed.

Why was that?

Not many academic texts can claim to have *single-handedly* moved the debate to which they contribute into an entirely new era, and those for which this claim *is* made are often standing discretely on the shoulders of pre-existent giants. But even with that caveat, I don't think it's an exaggeration to identify John Barclay's doctoral thesis – published in book-form in 1988 under the title *Obeying the Truth* – as one of those contributions. Surveying my shelf of Galatians

commentaries – which is rather extensive having worked on the letter for the best part of a decade now – it's apparent *both* that *Obeying the Truth* rapidly established itself as a standard, if not to say an *indispensable*, point of reference for subsequent authors, *and* that it also effectively silenced the debate about the unity of the letter.

Now that isn't to say that debates have not continued about precisely *how* that unity should be brokered. James Dunn, J. Louis Martyn, Thomas Schreiner, Douglas Moo, Tom Wright and others all have distinctive takes on the precise circumstances that motivated Paul to write Galatians 5.13–6.10 *to the same audience* that received his earlier comments about the dangers of Jewish law. But none of them doubt *it was* the same audience.

Gone are the days of 'two fronts' hypotheses in which Paul was thought to have faced two distinct groups of opponents in Galatia. Since Barclay, even the idea that there were two distinct *factions* in the Galatian church – one embracing the law-observant demands of Jewish Christian 'Agitators' and the other rejecting them and reverting to 'libertinism' – has hit low water. Gone are the days when Galatians 5.13–6.10 could be dismissed as 'boiler plate paranesis' – the kind of thing that Paul (or his later editors) just felt obliged to add into letters like this, but without any specific points of connection to the circumstances on the ground. Gone are the days when it seemed like a 'cool' idea to extract these verses (and any others deemed inconsistent with the larger thrust of the project in question) by appealing to 'interpolation,' or the 'splicing together' of originally dissociated letters to the same destination. Barclay's work has focused the minds of Pauline scholars on how the letter can be read as an integrated whole.

And Barclay himself, of course, had a solution to that problem. Under the influence of H. D. Betz, but not without distinctive inflections of his own, Barclay argued that the Galatians were left in a state of 'moral confusion' after their initial encounter with Paul. Paul had presented them with an ethically under-specified religious vision. In the place where the certainties of pagan worship had formerly stood – daily devotions to household gods, communal festivals marking the rhythms of the agricultural year, established patterns of making and redeeming vows, and a multiplicity of additional gods to call on as and when existing patterns of devotion proved ineffective – Paul had given them… *almost nothing*. He baptised them according to Galatians 3, and he may well have instituted the Lord's Supper among them too if his practice in Corinth is a useful guide. But beyond that, his recipe for spiritual growth and for navigating the complex practical ups and downs of real hopes and fears, real longings and disappointments in first-century Asia Minor was short on concrete guidance and long on the novel concept of 'transformation by the Spirit.' And in Barclay's view this approach left them

vulnerable not just to enthusiastic Jewish Christians with a much more 'developed' vision of 'what to do' as followers of Abraham's God, but also to the kind of moral dysfunctionality Paul seems to find himself dealing with in the controversial ethical section here at the end of the letter.

Barclay detects a whiff of *pastoral naivety* here. He thinks Paul was still 'learning his trade' when he planted the Galatian churches. Back then, it seemed like a good idea to eschew practical guidance and bank instead on individual spiritual renewal. But now that lacuna was being exploited by 'Agitators' his tactics didn't seem so smart anymore and he was hurriedly backfilling ethical guidance as quickly as his amanuensis could take it down. 'Paul,' says Barclay…

> 'clearly expected his converts to be "taught by God" (1 Thess 4.9) or "led by the Spirit" (Gal 5.18; Rom 8.14). [But] if his experience at Corinth is anything to go by, it appears that he tended to underestimate the needs of his Gentile converts for basic moral instruction… So long as [he] was present, he was at hand to give moral guidance. But in his absence, and without an established tradition of Christian ethics and experience, his advice to "walk in the Spirit" must have appeared distinctly unsatisfactory.'[1]

This same assumption has gone on to colour the ensuing debate. Witness J. Louis Martyn's vivid recasting of the Galatians' initial encounter with their new Jewish Christian 'Teachers.' They told the Galatians that Paul was, in fact, 'an unfaithful student of the Law-observant apostles in the mother church of Jerusalem,' who had left them:

> '[like] a group of sailors on the treacherous high seas in nothing more than a small and poorly equipped boat. He gave [them] no provisions for the trip, no map, no rudder, and no anchor. In a word, he failed to pass on to [them] [the very thing they needed to live lives of obedience to the God of Israel – namely], the law.'[2]

Martinus De Boer makes the same point, although he identifies Herman Ridderbos as his immediate inspiration:

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[1] Barclay, 1988, 71

[2] Martyn, 1997*a*, 305–306

> 'Freedom from the law as proclaimed by Paul [meant] that the Galatians [had] been left without a moral compass to guide them on their way and without potent protection from "the desire of the flesh".'[3]

But is there another way to look at the ethical under-specificity of Paul's Gentile mission? Might it, in fact, be less a matter of *pastoral naivety* than one of *shrewd pastoral policy*? In this paper, I want to affirm with Barclay, and with the scholarly consensus that has followed in his wake, that Galatians 5.10–6.13 should indeed be read as an integral part of Paul's larger argument in the letter. But I want to do it in a way that secures this subtly different outcome – helping us read his ethics more accurately, and also more applicably to the challenge of discipling new converts, and experienced believers, in the present.

Galatians Reconsidered

To get us started, I want to ask an important – but under-explored – question about Galatians: 'Why does Paul consistently describe his correspondents' problem in the letter as *going back to something they had done before?*'

Conjuring up the basic situation in our minds here clarifies the oddity of it. In Galatians, Paul is writing to a group of recently-converted pagans who are now coming under the influence of Jewish Christians urging them to keep the law. They're not just encouraging them to show up at the synagogue on a Saturday or to revere the ancient and austere pronouncements of Moses like the Godfearers in the region were seemingly wont to do, and as the Galatians themselves may have done if they had been Godfearers when Paul first met them. No, this was an initiative aimed at circumcision, at the defining step of exclusive allegiance to the God of Israel – something that Godfearers, by definition, resisted. And yet Paul thinks it is appropriate to describe the Galatians' enthusiasm for this whole thing as going back to something they were familiar with *in the past*.

Anyone conversant with Augustine's commentary on Galatians will remember this is the point where he throws his hands up in horror and incomprehension: 'When [Paul] says "turn back" he [can't mean] they're "turning back" to circumcision – they'd never been circumcised!' (Com. Gal. 33.3). And yet "turning back" lies at the heart of Paul's diagnosis of the Galatian problem from chapter 1 all the way to the end.

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[3] de Boer, 2011, 330

In the curtain-raising comments of chapter 1 verses 3–5, Paul warns his readers not to return to the spiritual location in which he found them. Christ gave himself 'to rescue us from the present evil age,' he says, not – by implication – to usher us back into it! In chapter 2, he warns the Galatians that even Peter succumbed to going backwards under pressure from law-observant activists. The problem wasn't that he had eaten with Gentile Christians in Antioch in the first place – the problem was that he proceeded to 'rebuild what [he had] destroyed.'

In chapter 3, Paul begins to add colour to his analysis of the situation, describing the journey to faith in Christ as a progression from minority – under the charge of a *paidagōgos* – to majority. Why would anyone in their right mind want to reverse that transition? And then in chapter 4, he continues in the same vein with another image – this time a progression from subjection to guardians to inheritance of an estate. Once again, the underlying question is 'why go back'? When we reach the famous Hagar and Sarah allegory, the same logic explicitly applies. 'You were children of the slave woman but now you are children of the free woman' he says. It would be madness to return to your former situation! And in chapter 5 verse 1, he's even bolder: 'It's for freedom that Christ has set us free,' he says…

> 'Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened *again* by a yoke of slavery.

Why does he say '*again*' there when the sentence makes perfect sense – indeed it makes *better* sense – without it? In what possible way can embracing circumcision be *familiar* to his readers already?

But all of this pales into insignificance compared with the gigantic oddity of Paul's description of his readers in Gal 4.8–9, where regression language crops up four times in the space of a single verse:

> Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are *turning back* to those weak and miserable *stoicheia*? Do you wish to be enslaved by them *all over again*?

The reference to their former devotion to 'not gods' here – to traditional pagan deities, and perhaps to the emperor as well – makes it clear that Paul sees a reawakening of his readers' past religious sensibilities in their new enthusiasm for Jewish law. But, as the extant scholarship demonstrates, explaining the proximity between these two things is far from straightforward.

Robert Jewett famously argued that, as good students of Hellenistic mystery religions and classical philosophy, the Galatians probably harboured a pre-existing penchant for spiritual

perfection – and that circumcision might have been sold to them on exactly that basis.[4] Absent the fact that the actual remains of first-century religious culture in the region provide no evidence for 'perfection' as a widespread concern, and Jewett's problematic reconstruction of the Agitators as knowingly mis-selling circumcision as a free-standing rite without matching obligations to keep the whole law, and the hypothesis has several attractions. With them, however, it becomes implausible.

Martinus De Boer is on surer ground when he observes that pagans and Jews alike shared an elaborate network of calendrical festivals – festivals that seem close to the centre of Paul's sights in Galatians 4.8–11 where he frets about his readers 'observing special days and months and seasons and years.' Might it be this centrality of seasonal festivals and remembrances in both pagan and traditional Jewish religion that irks Paul so much? De Boer thinks so – even explaining Paul's perplexing references to 'enslavement to the *stoicheia*' as an allusion to dependence on the heavenly bodies used as a means to determine the dates and times of religious feasts. But it's strange, if this is the case, that calendrical observances appear only *once* in a letter where De Boer needs them to be central. Circumcision vocabulary, by contrast, occurs *sixteen* times.

A recent contribution from Brant Pitre, Michael Barber, and John Kincaid argues that, after his encounter with Christ on the Road to Damascus, Paul believed that Jewish and pagan worship shared an unhelpful preoccupation with mediating angels, and that this provides a better explanation of Paul's troublesome *stoicheia* terminology. But even if dependence on angelic intermediaries was a defining feature of life under the Mosaic law, Paul doesn't seem to think this had any negative effects on the *Jewish* Christians who still observed it (witness his willingness to share the right hand of fellowship with law-observant Jewish Christians like Peter, James, and John in Galatians 2, and his own law-observant activities in Acts 21 and elsewhere). So why should Paul worry about law observance *for Gentiles* – even if it did have *this specific feature* in common with their former pagan devotions?

None of these efforts to explain 'going backwards,' then, really provides a compelling account of Paul's diagnosis. But *there is* a compelling explanation at hand within the letter if we're prepared to think about one of its most familiar passages in an unfamiliar way.

In Galatians 2.15–16, most of us have been raised on the assumption that Paul is contrasting two different strands within Judaism as he knew it. 'We who are Jews by birth,' he writes…

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[4] Jewett, 1971a, 207

> '…and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified *by the works of the law*, but *by faith in Jesus Christ*. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.'

Here, it seems, we have a compact summary of the difference between Paul and his opponents; between Paul – who believes in justification *by faith* (putting on hold, for a moment, the controversial question of what exactly he thinks 'justification' means) and the Agitators – who believe in justification by '*the works of the law*.'

But that's not actually what Paul says. Paul is addressing *Peter* here in Antioch, and his logic depends on an assumption that both men *share*. 'Jews like us,' says Paul, '*know* that justification (whether that's right standing before God, or confidence that we're included in his family, or both) – is something that depends *on faith*.' Later in chapter 3, he's going to go further still, arguing that this awareness is not restricted to the 'Christian era' – if you'll forgive a blatant anachronism – and that Jews have always known that right standing with God and inclusion in his family are pendant on faith going all the way back to Abraham.

And so the point of these verses is not, in fact, about divergent perspectives within first-century Judaism. The point of these verses is that this foundational principle about the *Jewish* God and his dealings with people is *not shared by Gentiles*.

'We who are Jews by birth – *and not sinful Gentiles* – know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith.' That's what Paul actually says. Judaism offers a wealth of inbuilt reminders that God can't be persuaded to bless – that he can't be influenced, that he can't be manipulated. But paganism (or at least paganism as Paul understood it) *did not*. And it's this specific feature of paganism that I think Paul sees being reawakened in Galatia.

Most reconstructions of what was happening in the background here begin (and end) with speculation about the Agitators. But the truth is, we know very little about their identity or their motives. Paul tells us they were no friends to him personally and that they acted out of fear of persecution. But even as he says it, he acknowledges them as fellow believers, and their message as 'another *gospel*' not no gospel at all. What if they were law observant Jews like the 'men from James' whose arrival in Antioch he describes in Galatians 2? Many scholars have found that version of events appealing. But even if they were, we have no reason to believe they were encouraging the Galatians to abandon Christ for works. All we know is that they wanted Paul's converts to express their newfound faith in the same way they did – in the same way Jews had done for millennia and which Paul also seems to have been entirely comfortable

with himself. The problem that Paul is dealing with in the letter has less to do with the Agitators' message than it does with how that *message was being received*.

Just imagine it. Enthusiastic Jewish Christian missionaries arrive, perhaps seeking to 'complete' what they saw as Paul's half-baked proclamation of the earth-shaking, 'apocalyptic' good news that Jesus had made a way for Gentiles to join the Abrahamic family. And they introduce the Galatians to Jewish festivals, to Jewish food laws, and to circumcision as the quintessential Jewish 'identity marker.' How would the Galatians have reacted? We may not be able to derive a truly precise, forensic response to that question, but that shouldn't stop us saying what can be said about the general locus of the answer.

You see, the Galatians had a pre-existent paradigm for these kinds of demands. However we reconstruct their pre-Pauline past, there's no evading the evidence that they were very religious. Paul himself tells us that 'formerly… [they] were slaves to those who by nature [were] not gods,' (Gal 4.8). And even if he hadn't said this, the archaeological evidence would require the same conclusion. We can't be sure exactly what cocktail of traditional, local, and imported gods they worshipped. The answer to that question varied from household to household in first-century Asia Minor not just from city to city. But whichever way we cut the data, the Galatians would have been deeply familiar with religious rites – with purity laws and dietary restrictions, with vows and costly offerings – and all packaged with the sense, however boldly or tentatively it was embraced, that human beings had cards to play in the divine-human game and that playing them well maximised their chances of blessing and minimised their chances of being cursed.

Offer them Jewish laws to keep, then, and what would be the obvious result? That they would accept them with the same expectations that marked their acceptance of pagan religious laws in the past and that – *whether the Agitators intended it or not* – they would think of sabbaths and circumcision as ways to play their new God on side, just as they had hoped to play their former gods on side before Paul arrived.

Paul, therefore, is simply showing his relational intelligence here. Yes, of course, he believes in the power of God to transform the human heart (more of that in a moment). But that doesn't mean he discounts the tenacity of the expectations that have grown up around certain types of religious action in his Gentile converts' past.

Step back to 1 Corinthians 8 with me for a moment and you can see him doing exactly the same thing. There, the question is all about food sacrificed to idols. Monotheism has broken out among the Corinthian believers and, as a consequence, all their scruples can be

abandoned, right? They can eat in idol temples without fear of pollution because 'an idol is nothing at all in the world' and 'there is no God but one,' right? Wrong! While agreeing with his readers theologically, Paul *disagrees* with them pastorally. However persuaded the believers in Corinth are about this brave new monotheistic world, 'some [of them],' writes Paul, 'are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their [consciences are] weak, they are defiled,' (1 Cor 8.7).

As they ate, the weak believers in Corinth were drawn off into the familiar complex of fear and reverence that had accompanied their eating in the past, only grasping the spiritual implications in the rear-view mirror, when their faithfulness to Christ – despite their pledge of unstinting devotion to him – had already been compromised. The language of spiritual destruction that follows is incredibly strong and closely parallel to the warnings in Galatians. Pagan practices and the pagan expectations that went along with them were so tightly and intricately interwoven in Corinth that re-exposure to the former was reawakening the latter with catastrophic effects, whether the subjects wished it or not.

And that, I think, is exactly what Paul feared in Galatia. Paul didn't fear the Galatians embracing Jewish law with the *Jewish* expectations of his opponents – *whatever* they were. He feared them embracing Jewish law with the *pagan* expectations that had been drilled into them from infancy as participants in pagan forms of worship. Paul feared the Galatians would embrace food laws, and festivals, and the covenant sign of circumcision, as means to secure divine goodwill, as means to persuade God that they deserved preferential treatment, as means, in short, to be '*justified*' in a manner entirely antithetical to the central message of his gospel. And that's an interesting conclusion. Because, reading Galatians *that* way, justification retains the same fundamental meaning it always had under the 'old perspective' but without the appeal to Jewish legalism in the background that has been critiqued so effectively by the 'new.' And it also integrates elements of the '*radical*' new perspective – making sense of Paul's positivity about Jewish law in other contexts, but without a two-track, 'Moses-for-the-Jews, Jesus-for-the-Gentiles' soteriology.

Treating the Symptoms, Treating the Disease

Does it also help us parse the integration of Gal 5.13–6.10 within the larger argument of the letter? The answer, I think, is that it helps us very much.

If the argument of the first four chapters is read in the way I propose here, Paul is reacting, as he does in many of his other letters, to a specific pastoral situation that requires *urgent* action.

Pastoral insensitivity as much as theological ineptitude on the part of the Agitators has left the Galatians in danger of imminent spiritual disaster. They stand right on the threshold of apostasy, not because circumcision or the Mosaic law is inherently bad, but because, as Gentiles, they're not equipped to receive it without immediately triggering their habitual assumptions about what these kinds of rites achieve. And, in response, Paul swings into paramedic mode. At the scene of a car accident, the first thing to do is check for vital signs and get the victims out of the wreckage. And in Galatians 1–4 we see a similar triaging of priorities. This isn't the moment for a balanced presentation of Paul's overall programme. This is the moment for clear warnings and illustrations designed to separate the Galatians from the law as swiftly as possible.

But, of course, that isn't where the treatment *stops*. Paul understandably *begins* with an attempt to halt the damage, to staunch the bleeding. But he isn't content to just return the Galatians to the same vulnerable situation the Agitators found them in. This is what the whole emphasis on 'spiritual transformation' was about in his ministry among them originally. It wasn't some idealistic *alternative* to ethics that Paul went on to repent of at leisure. It was the means he had in mind to work pagan expectations out of his converts so they could receive more prescriptive guidance in future without immediately sliding back into the network of assumptions that had attended similar teaching in the past. Paul wants nothing less for his churches than he aspired to himself – that they should be all things to all people in order that they might save some (1 Cor 9.22). But to get there he knows he can't just ask 'those not having the law' to live like those 'under the law' because their past experience of similar practices will send them spiralling back into the abyss. Becoming 'a Jew to the Jews' or 'a Gentile to the Gentiles' is a long term project requiring inner transformation through the agency of the Spirit if it is to be accomplished safely.

This, then, is why I think Paul began his mission among the Galatians with such a light touch on ethics. It *wasn't* naivety. It *was* shrewd pastoral policy. It was his awareness of the fact that anything more than the minimum in terms of basic 'Christian' practices with this kind of audience was likely to lead them into all kinds of problems. So, yes, he baptised them, and yes, he probably instituted the Lord's Supper among them. But even with just those two sacraments in place, we can see the kinds of problems he was forced to deal with in Corinth where communion meals were reawakening a whole host of pre-existent pagan expectations about food and dining.

Paul had spent too long in Asia Minor to overlook the tenacity of indigenous religious assumptions there. For centuries the Greeks and Persians had crossed and recrossed the region

conquering and being conquered, foisting their gods and their priests and their temples on client populations and then returning in surprise decades later to find them being worshipped with exactly the same expectations the locals had espoused before they arrived. The same thing is true of later Christian missionary initiatives in contexts all over the world. Without detailed, thoughtful, individual attention to the transformation of each convert's spiritual assumptions, outreach leads to syncretistic hybrids that look like 'the new faith' on the outside but which still work like 'the old faith' on the inside. And why should we expect anything different? Belief and practice are not so hierarchically related that a change in the former leads automatically to changes in the latter. A soldier, driven by combat-anxiety to obsessively clean and maintain his gun, will experience combat-anxiety again when he performs even tangentially similar tasks years after he has left the battle field, unless the connection is deliberately and carefully overwritten. What then makes us think that connections between religious actions and the beliefs that accompanied them in the past will be any less persistent?

Paul seems to have *anticipated* these kinds of 'deprogramming' problems and to have responded to them with considerable sophistication. In Galatians he gives us not just the short term 'symptomatic' remedy for his readers' problem but he also sketches out the medium-to-long term 'systemic' response. Perhaps in the long run, they *might* be able to participate in traditional festivals with a Jewish neighbour without slipping back into the familiar pagan pattern in which rites like this improved their chances of being blessed? But the way to get there was a thoroughgoing work of Spiritual transformation in their intentions.

The Spirit transforms the pagan assumption that God is a power who must be *persuaded* to bless us, replacing it with the distinctively Christian assumption that he is 'Abba Father' and that he *longs* to bless us (Gal 4.6). The Spirit transforms the pagan assumption that we are responsible for *making* the future give us what we think we deserve, replacing it with the distinctively Christian assumption that, by faith, we can *wait* for the righteousness for which we hope (Gal 5.5). Warnings against law and license make uncomfortable bedfellows in conventional attempts to hold the beginning and ending of Galatians together, but in reality, it shouldn't surprise us that enthusiasm for the former involved a reawakening of the latter if law was transporting Paul's readers back to the norms and assumptions of their *pagan* past. Paul's ethical injunctions are not the fingerprint of some abstruse proto-gnostic sect as Jewett claimed, still less a signal that he's pivoting to a different audience. They simply underline the counterintuitive result of preaching law to immature pagan believers – that it reanimates their pagan expectations, simultaneously softening their resistance to the lifestyle that used to accompany them.

Paul is not repudiating his original approach here, he is reasserting it! He doubles down on spiritual transformation in Galatians 5.13–6.10 because now, it seems, he's even more convinced that this is what his readers need. The way to be a person for whom 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything' in the end is not lists of 'religious things to do,' although of course they have their place. The way to reach that aspirational state of maturity is 'new creation,' (Gal 6.15) – the fulfilment of Jewish expectations for the new covenant era, reaching forward from Jeremiah and Ezekiel all the way to Paul. That is what drives his conviction that his readers' maturity depends on Spirit and not flesh in the final analysis. And *that* is the point of focus that holds the whole of Galatians together.

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