Faith and New Life in Christ: The Problem of Circumcision in Galatians 5:2-6

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ABSTRACT

FAITH AND NEW LIFE IN CHRIST: THE PROBLEM
OF CIRCUMCISION IN GALATIANS 5:2–6

by

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Adviser: P. Richard Choi
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University
Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: FAITH AND NEW LIFE IN CHRIST: THE PROBLEM OF CIRCUMCISION IN GALATIANS 5:2–6

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Problem

Paul explicitly addresses the issue of circumcision for the first time in the epistle of Galatians in chapter 5:2–6. The precise meaning of circumcision, however, both historically and exegetically, has been much debated in Pauline scholarship.

Method

This thesis will first provide an overview of how circumcision has been interpreted in the context of different approaches to Pauline theology. Then, the historical background of the significance of circumcision around the first century AD will be analyzed, both in the Jewish and the Greco-Roman context. Finally, an exegetical study of Galatians 5:2–6 will focus on how Paul addresses the topic of circumcision in his theological discussion.
Results

When it comes to circumcision and the argument of Galatians, there is more involved than what has typically been emphasized by Pauline scholars. Historically, circumcision was also connected to the subjection of thoughts and passions to the will of God, as well as ideals of perfection and holiness. Exegetically, Paul opposes circumcision in Galatians 5:2–6 because it would jeopardize the maintenance of the believers’ ongoing experience of faith, i.e., sanctification.

Conclusion

Paul responds to the concern of maintaining one’s experience in Christ by writing that the Christian should be known by his or her total surrender to God by faith, a surrender to the sanctifying work of the Spirit that bears fruit in the life of the believer.
Andrews University
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OF CIRCUMCISION IN GALATIANS 5:2–6

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Religion

by
Keldie S. Paroschi
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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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Cedric Vine, Ph.D.                                Date approved
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>New Perspective on Paul</td>
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<td>NT</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The issue of circumcision consumed much of Paul’s time and energy during his ministry, an issue that even after the Jerusalem Council in AD 49 (Acts 15) was not completely resolved in the early church (cf. Rom 2:25–29; 4:9–12; 1 Cor 7:18–20; Phil 2:2–3; Col 2:11–13; Tit 1:10–11). Circumcision is one of the main reasons Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians, and it directly affects the interpretation of Paul’s theological arguments (cf. Gal 2:3–6, 11–16; 5:2–6, 11–12; 6:12–15). Since the time of Martin Luther, many scholars have used Galatians to discuss the important issues of justification by faith, the role of Torah in the new eschatological age inaugurated by Christ, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and the concept of Christian freedom, among many others. Circumcision is connected to all of these issues—whether to defend the traditional interpretation of human achievement versus faith, to argue that the Mosaic law is no longer binding, or to discuss matters of ethnic exclusivity and the inclusion of the Gentiles.

The date of Galatians is disputed among scholars. The lack of direct reference to the Jerusalem Council, which would have been especially timely for the Galatian controversy, and the mention of two visits to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18; 2:1–10) are among the main arguments for supporting an early date for the composition of the epistle, i.e., sometime after Paul’s first missionary journey (ca. AD 46–48) and before the Jerusalem Council (AD 49). On the other hand, authors who support a later date for Galatians point out the many similarities between Paul’s account in Galatians 2:1–10 and Acts 15, the possibility that Paul had already visited Galatia twice (Gal 4:13), and the affinity in language and style to Romans and the Corinthian epistles. In this thesis, it is assumed that Galatians was written after the Jerusalem Council; whether shortly after, or a decade after, around the time when Romans was written, does not directly alter the arguments here presented. D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, An Introduction to the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 461–65.
Naturally, an understanding of the social and historical interactions between Jews and Gentiles and the socio-political and theological implications of circumcision unequivocally influences how one reads and interprets Galatians. As a circumstantial letter written to address a specific situation in the churches of Galatia, it is important to first seek to determine what that occasion was, and how a decision for circumcision would have affected those involved, to then draw conclusions about the implications of Paul’s theology, both for the immediate audience and for the general reader. For these reasons, Galatians 5:2–6 was chosen for the present discussion. It is the first time that Paul explicitly addresses the issue of circumcision in the epistle, and he does so with passion and intensity, leading many authors to regard this pericope as the rhetorical climax of Galatians.\(^2\) Beyond that, there are numerous parallels between Galatians 5:2–12 and other passages central to understanding the nature of the historical and theological issues of the epistle (cf. Gal 1: 6–10; 3:1–6; 6:12–17).\(^3\) Whether or not this is definite evidence that Galatians 5:2–6 is the climax of the epistle, there is no doubt that it is certainly an important pericope for understanding Paul’s argument against circumcision.\(^4\)

This thesis then seeks to investigate how Paul relates the issue of circumcision to the work of the Spirit in his argument in Galatians 5:2–6. Considering the historical


circumstances surrounding the epistle, and the perspective from which Paul addresses his readers, it seems that the acceptance of circumcision by the Galatian believers was undermining not only justification by faith, but more specifically sanctification by faith.

Paul opposes circumcision in this context because of its threat to the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Although there is considerable overlap between the concepts of justification and sanctification in Paul, this thesis argues that Paul writes Galatians 5:2–6 from the perspective of the ongoing life of the believer, in which sanctification refers to the progressive work of the Spirit in neutralizing the works of the flesh in the sinful human nature. Just as the believer is justified by faith, it is by faith that the Spirit can operate in the life of the believer.

First, a survey of Pauline scholarship on the interpretation of circumcision in Paul’s argument in Galatians will be conducted. As will be demonstrated, not much emphasis has been given to the connection between circumcision and the work of the Spirit. Then, the historical background of Galatians will be considered. Primary sources both from Jewish and Greco-Roman authors will be studied in order to understand the

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5 Justification and sanctification are often so closely connected in Paul that some authors even argue that they are one and the same. This discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis, since the focus here is rather an exegetical study regarding circumcision in Paul’s argument in Galatians. See Yong-Pil Yun, “Justification as the Work of the Holy Spirit and Its Relation to Other Spiritual Realities in Galatians and Romans” (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 6–22; Frank D. Macchia, “Justification through New Creation: The Holy Spirit and the Doctrine by Which the Church Stands or Falls,” Theology Today, no. 58 (2001): 202–17; Sam K. Williams, “Justification and the Spirit in Galatians,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 29 (1987): 91–100; D. L. Dabney, “Justified by the Spirit: Soteriological Reflections on the Resurrection,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 3, no. 1 (2001): 46–68.

6 “Justification emphasizes the initial, or ‘conversion,’ experience of the believer, but it is larger than this, including the believer’s life ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 6:23). Sanctification, although it may include initiation (Rom 6:22), is the end (telos) toward which the justified strive, eternal life (Rom 6:22, 23). Sanctification in some sense is ‘the highest level of justification’ . . . If justification in Romans describes for Paul the power of God to make righteous . . ., often equated with, though not to be limited to, the believer’s initiation into life in Christ, sanctification is used by Paul to describe the ongoing life of the believer dedicated to serve God.” S. E. Porter, “Holiness, Sanctification,” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 399.
social and theological implications of circumcision during Paul’s time. Though a detailed reconstruction of the occasion of Galatians will not be attempted, a minimal reconstruction is necessary in order to understand the purpose of Galatians and the nature of Paul’s argument. This will be done by following the general guidelines for mirror-reading provided by Barclay along with the evidence discussed in the historical background section. Then, observations resulting from a literary analysis of Galatians 5:2–6 will be discussed, followed by a syntactical analysis of the Greek text.

It will be demonstrated that in Galatians 5:2–6 Paul is making an argument about new creation and new life in Christ. Just as in justification one can boast of nothing other than faith, sanctification is also based completely on faith in the work of the Spirit. There is nothing that the believer can do to contribute to the transforming power of Christ. Paul does not oppose circumcision in and of itself. But in the context of Galatians, Paul’s readers were clearly expecting to receive some kind of benefit from the rite. Paul understands the theological implications of his opponents’ claims, and it is against these implications that Paul seeks to defend the true gospel.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE SURVEY

Martin Luther’s personal struggle to find peace with God inadvertently led to a new era in history.\(^1\) In terms of theological contributions, his objections to the prevalent ecclesiastical practices prompted redefinitions of church authority and doctrines such as faith and salvation. Luther is perhaps most acclaimed for his teaching of justification by faith, derived from his studies of Pauline theology, particularly Romans and Galatians.\(^2\) As many of his predecessors, Luther interpreted the rite of circumcision in light of Paul’s treatment of it, without much regard to historical background studies of the meaning of circumcision in Judaism.\(^3\) His main emphasis was on circumcision as a “work of the law,” which he integrated into his argument of justification by faith: anything that could be considered a self-willed action, including circumcision, was a “work of the law” and

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\(^1\) Heiko A. Oberman describes Luther’s impact in terms of “waves” that reappear at different times in history with different intensities. His study of Scriptures gave impetus to the Reformation, and its secondary effects made way for the printing press, a new age for academia, and eventually political and social reforms. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation: Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 198–200.

\(^2\) Luther referred to the doctrine of justification as “the principal doctrine of Christianity.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, Luther’s Works 26 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963), 106.

\(^3\) Livesey surveys exemplary early Christian interpreters from Justin to Augustine and Aquinas before discussing Martin Luther. Statements on early and medieval interpretations of circumcision follow her representative study. Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe 295 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 123.
powerless to save the sinful human being.\(^4\) True righteousness, on the other hand, is to be received passively by God.\(^5\)

Luther followed in the similar path of early and medieval exegetes in his view of circumcision as being in opposition to salvation. According to Nina Livesey, his definition of circumcision as a “work of the law,” however, placed the emphasis on the “practitioner of circumcision” rather than on the rite itself.\(^6\) Modern discussions on circumcision largely build off of Luther, either following his line of interpretation, or reacting against it.\(^7\) However, there has been little effort to show the connection between Paul’s objection to circumcision and his argument concerning the sanctifying work of the Spirit in Galatians. In light of these dialogues, this chapter will focus on the different ways circumcision has been treated in the study of Galatians and the considerable lack of emphasis on the role of the Spirit in Paul’s argument. First, focus will be given to the traditional protestant interpretation of Paul, where circumcision is explained mainly in terms of human “doing.” With E. P. Sanders and the “New Perspective on Paul,” circumcision is understood as a sign of Judaism in the context of Jewish ethnic

\(^4\) Luther defines “works of the law” as including the entire law, both the ceremonial and the moral: “Thus circumcision, the institution of the priesthood, the service of worship, and the rituals were commanded by God as much as the Decalog [sic] was. In addition, it was the Law when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac.” All of these are declared “fatal without faith in Christ.” Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, 138–39.

\(^5\) Ibid., 4–5, 129–130.

\(^6\) Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 143.

\(^7\) “The consequences of Luther’s rediscovery of justification by faith were dramatic, not just in theology and church but also in their social and political, their literary and cultural outworkings. By no means all in the interval since then will have agreed that justification was ‘the main doctrine of Christianity.’ But in the twentieth century there can be little doubt that the theme has stood at the centre of Pauline theology.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 336. See also N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 15–16.
The next section focuses on a more recent approach to Paul called “Paul within Judaism” in which circumcision is understood similarly to the New Perspective on Paul as a mark of Jewish distinction but differs from the New Perspective in regard to the interpretation of Paul’s stance on circumcision. To conclude the survey of literature, an analysis will be made of authors who argue that the work of the Holy Spirit is the main focus of Galatians.

**Traditional Protestant Interpretation**

German scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built upon the foundations of F. C. Baur and the historical-critical approach to theology. With the Lutheran tradition as the theological background and the Hegelian philosophical view of history, use of the historical-critical method advanced the notion that Paul encouraged the break with Judaism and its legalistic tendencies, and cleared the way toward a new, more enlightened understanding of God and the world known as Christianity. In this context, circumcision is considered a symbol of the universal issue of human works as a means for salvation, which is antithetical to faith.

Following along these lines, Rudolf Bultmann interprets the “flesh” in Paul to be a reference to the outward, visible, literal expressions of sinful and destructive desires,

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8 Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 143.

9 Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 12–16.

10 “Paul’s teaching on justification was seen as a reaction against and in opposition to Judaism. As Luther had rejected a medieval church which offered salvation by merit and good works, the same, it was assumed, was true of Paul in relation to Judaism of his day. Judaism was taken to have been the antithesis to emerging Christianity: for Paul to react as he did, it must have been a degenerate religion, legalistic, making salvation dependent on human effort, and self-satisfied with the results.” Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 336–37.
associated with Judaism, works of the law, and inauthentic existence. Circumcision, along with zealous law-keeping and everything that encourages self-reliance in one’s own accomplishments, belongs to the realm of the flesh.

In Bultmann’s train of thought, the realm of the flesh is antithetically opposed to the realm of the Spirit, where the “miraculous, life-giving power of God” is at work. Because of this, every human attempt to seek righteousness by doing what the law requires, including circumcision, might lead to the belief that one “is able to procure his salvation by his own strength.” According to Paul, this person is just in much need of grace as the one who transgresses the law, thus finding salvation “only when he understands himself in his dependence upon God the Creator.” Bultmann understands that Judaism considers law-keeping to be the condition for being justified by God, while Paul defends righteousness by faith. Faith is defined as “the absolute contrary of ‘boasting,’” which is the “fundamental attitude of the Jew, the essence of his sin.” Thus in describing circumcision in terms of a “work of the law,” Bultmann essentially interprets the rite allegorically as a visible expression of self-reliance in terms of salvation.

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13 Ibid., 234–37.

14 Ibid., 264.

15 Ibid. See also Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 72.

Ernst Käsemann followed closely along the lines of Bultmann in his interpretation of circumcision in Paul. He describes circumcision in the Jewish view as a sacrament containing “saving force” that works *ex opere operato* and is considered a “fully recognized” reality in Israel’s history that provides “escape from judgment.”\(^{17}\) Paul, however, does not recognize any such sacraments. Instead, Käsemann compares Paul’s discourse on circumcision to be similar to the spiritualizing theme of circumcision of the heart found in Philo, though Philo never completely dismisses the importance of the physical rite as Paul does.\(^{18}\) Further, Käsemann considers the notion of righteousness by law-keeping to be a Jewish misunderstanding that can point people toward the Christian faith, thus “putting an end to pious achievement.”\(^{19}\) In Paul, everything depends solely on faith, as shown in the example of Abraham, who received righteousness prior to his circumcision.\(^{20}\)

Hans Dieter Betz’ commentary on Galatians was groundbreaking in terms of its rhetorical-analytical approach to the Pauline epistle. Nevertheless, when it came to his theological interpretation of Paul and circumcision, not much differed from Bultmann and Käsemann. For him, Paul had separated “what Judaism joined together: possession of the Spirit and observance of the Torah.”\(^{21}\) It was the realization of the ineffectiveness of

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17 Ernst Käsemann and G. W. Bromiley, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 72.


19 Käsemann and Bromiley, *Commentary on Romans*, 93–94.

20 Ibid., 116.

the “works of the Torah” for justification before God that had led the Jewish Christians to become believers in the first place.\textsuperscript{22} Ironically, they were the ones pushing the Gentile believers in the Galatian church to submit to circumcision. Although Betz does write that Paul’s opponents in Galatia were likely pushing for circumcision and Torah observance in order to “complete and perfect” the gift of the Spirit, he does not develop the meaning of this in terms of sanctification.\textsuperscript{23} Instead, for him, the experience of the Spirit is one of “ecstasy and miracles,” and the advocates of Torah observance were seeking a climactic experience in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{24} But because the Gentile Christians were now “in Christ,” Betz writes that faith had become the deciding factor for their salvation, and since Paul “separates Gentile Christianity from Judaism and establishes it \textit{de facto} as a new religion,” the “symbol of circumcision (or its absence) no longer has any power.”\textsuperscript{25} Authors in the past thirty years that continue to hold the view of circumcision in Paul as characteristic of the issue of human works as a means of salvation have been compelled to interact with the so-called “New Perspective on Paul”\textsuperscript{26} and its ensuing discussions. There is more sensibility to the historical data and to the immediate context

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 133–34.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 262–63. That the view of circumcision having lost its salvific power in Paul was the mainstream understanding in German scholarship up until the end of the twentieth century can be seen in the “circumcision” entries in the following classical reference works: Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., \textit{Theological Dictionary of the New Testament}, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), s.v. “περιττέμνω”; Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller, eds., \textit{Theologische Realenzyklopädie}, 36 vols. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), s.v. “Beschneidung”.

\textsuperscript{26} First coined by James D. G. Dunn in his Manson Memorial Lecture in 1982, the “New Perspective on Paul” refers to a reinterpretation of the traditional protestant view that Judaism was a legalistic religion and that Paul was reacting against this. This debate will be explored in the following section discussing circumcision as an “identity marker.”
of Galatians. As Moo, says, “perhaps the Reformers may be criticized for moving too quickly and without what we in the modern era would consider sufficient argument from the historical particularities of first-century Galatia to the conflicts and issues of their own day.” But many commentators, including Moo, still contend that the abstract, theological principle of the inadequacy of human works in general is central to Paul’s polemic against circumcision. Moo, however, elaborates that “the agitators were not arguing that people get right with God by doing works but that people can have their right standing with God vindicated only by faithful observance of God’s covenant stipulations.” Moo therefore claims that while Paul’s opponents were arguing for the importance of circumcision and other requirements of the Mosaic law for the eschatological vindication of believers, Paul opposes them because they are making salvation dependent on human works. While there is an eschatological outlook in Galatians 5:4, this thesis will focus, rather, on the issue of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the present lives of the Galatians believers.

Stephen Westerholm demonstrates that most challenges to the Lutheran contrast of law/works and gospel/faith are not convincing. He writes that Paul takes the issue of circumcision in Galatians to the broader questions of the nature and function of the entire Mosaic law, which cannot justify the sinner. Westerholm agrees with Räisänen’s distinction between “soft” and “hard” legalism, where “soft” legalists seek to sincerely obey God’s law out of love for God, fear of his judgment, or because that is what God

27 Moo, Galatians, 26.
28 Ibid., 27.
29 Ibid.
asks of humans, while “hard” legalism has the intention of seeking salvation through one’s own effort. But contrary to most proponents of the “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP), who argue that only “soft” legalism applies to Judaism, Westerholm emphasizes that “in Paul’s argument it is human deeds of any kind which cannot justify, not simply deeds done ‘in a spirit of legalism.’”

In his Galatians commentary, Richard Longenecker recognizes that the issue in the epistle involves not only salvation and acceptance by God, but also that the message of Paul’s opponents included an addition to Paul’s preaching to bring the Galatian believers “to perfection.” In other words, their message was “one of both legalism for full salvation and nomism for Christian living.” However, in Longenecker’s exposition, circumcision is only associated with being adequately accepted by God and a proper Jewish lifestyle; its rejection by Paul is not associated with the implications for the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Bruce also associates circumcision with reliance on law-keeping for salvation. Those who consider undergoing circumcision would be doing so under the motivation of becoming acceptable to God. Though he recognizes that there is a contrast between the Spirit and circumcision in Paul’s argument in Galatians 5:5–6, he does not mention the

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31 Ibid., 134, 150.
33 Ibid., xcviii.
34 Ibid., 226–27.
36 Ibid.
sanctifying work of the Spirit. His comment that “it is noteworthy that here he [Paul] does not make baptism (…) the Christian counterpart to Jewish circumcision” shows that his interpretation of circumcision in this text is limited to justification.\(^\text{37}\)

The entry on circumcision in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* by Thomas Schreiner explains several of Paul’s theological arguments against circumcision: the outpouring of the Spirit proved that circumcision was not necessary for the Galatians to be included in the people of God; just as Abraham was justified by faith before being circumcised, so circumcision is irrelevant for the justification of the Gentile believers; circumcision belonged to the old covenant with Moses and is no longer necessary in the new covenant with Christ; and finally, for Paul, circumcision is replaced by the cross as a way of entrance into the people of God.\(^\text{38}\) In this sense, Schreiner still holds the importance of the traditional protestant interpretation, while at the same time dialoguing with and adding what he judges to be important from the New Perspective on Paul. Schreiner concentrates on the significance of circumcision as necessary for membership in the people of God in his summary of Paul’s theological reasons for rejecting circumcision. Focus is always given on how the Gentiles can now *enter* the people of God: they are included by faith rather than by works, and it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that identifies them as members of the people of God rather than circumcision.

In his commentary of Galatians, however, Schreiner oscillates between identifying circumcision as an issue of membership and an issue of salvation. Schreiner sees the “presenting issue” in Galatians to be circumcision: according to Paul’s

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 232.

opponents, membership in the people of God meant membership in the Mosaic covenant, which implies that “the people of God are fundamentally Jewish.” When defining “works of the law,” however, which Schreiner considers to be “part and parcel of the same question” of circumcision, first he says that works of the law and faith are always opposed to each other in Galatians, meaning that neither righteousness nor the reception of the Spirit are by works of the law. Then, Schreiner states that “‘works of the law’ does not refer fundamentally to boundary markers, nor does it designate legalism.” In other words, Schreiner says circumcision is not necessarily a sociological boundary marker of Judaism nor a legalistic effort towards salvation, but at the same time, the acceptance of circumcision implies that “the people of God are fundamentally Jewish” and that there is a “saving benefit” in its observance.

When Schreiner comments Galatians 3:1–5, he says that it could be argued “that the issue in Galatians was not how to get into the people of God but how to stay in the people of God.” He goes on to distinguish Paul’s view from that of the Judaizers: the Judaizers were pressing for circumcision because it was required for entrance in the covenant, while Paul treats the Galatians as already members of the people of God and thus “describes their desire to be circumcised as a misguided attempt to make progress in

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39 Schreiner, Galatians, 398.
40 “The discussion of the law and circumcision in Galatians are part and parcel of the same question. The Galatians’ desire to be circumcised reflects a desire to be under the law as a whole (4:21). Therefore, all that Paul wrote about the law in 2:15—5:1 applies to circumcision. . . If they rely on circumcision for salvation, they cannot lean on Christ for the same.” Ibid., 312–13.
41 Ibid., 396.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 312, 396, 398.
44 Ibid., 184.
the Christian life on the basis of the flesh instead of the Spirit.\(^{45}\) But this is the only place in Schreiner’s commentary that he makes this assertion, elsewhere claiming that the entire epistle of Galatians is about *entrance* into the people of God. In fact, in a footnote on that same page, he contradicts his own assertion in the text and says that reading Galatians as though the main issue were how to stay in the people of God is to misunderstand Paul’s argument and the nature of circumcision as an entrance requirement.\(^{46}\) The objective of this thesis is precisely to defend this idea that Schreiner leaves unaddressed: that Paul’s opposition to circumcision is discussed in the framework of the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

As has been pointed out, the understanding of circumcision as symbolizing human works places the emphasis on the practitioner as someone seeking righteousness by means of law-keeping. In general, this leads to an abstract, and in the case of some authors, almost allegorical, view of circumcision. Beyond that, the notion that Paul is breaking with Judaism as a whole contributes toward this generally negative assessment of circumcision as the antithesis of the gospel. Because of the major emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith in Paul’s theology, little or no attention is given to the connection that Paul makes in his argument in Galatians to the sanctifying work of the Spirit. The authors that do recognize the importance of the experience of the Spirit either do not make the connection with the opponents’ push toward circumcision or understand the Spirit as an ecstatic experience rather than an ongoing work of sanctification.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 184–85.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 184 n. 33.
Authors who maintain a modified traditional approach, dialoguing with the New Perspective on Paul, realize that circumcision in Judaism had both broader theological and specific sociological implications, especially since in the ancient mindset religion, culture, society, and politics were so intertwined. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to separate the soteriological from the sociological agenda of the Judaizers and vice-versa, as well as the soteriological and sociological implications of Paul’s theology. But this thesis seeks to go one step further and show that the element of perfection and sanctification is also present when it comes to circumcision, especially in Paul’s argument concerning the Spirit in Galatians.

**The New Perspective on Paul**

The NPP has led to a reevaluation of Pauline theology and soteriology, in specific as it relates to the doctrine of justification by faith and the Jewish roots of Christianity.\(^47\) According to NPP scholars, it is wrong to understand Judaism as a legalistic religion, therefore either arguing that Paul and Judaism agreed in terms of soteriology, or that Paul had a distorted view of Judaism.\(^48\) Instead, in Galatians Paul argues against the notion that God’s grace is not exclusive to Judaism, and that in advocating circumcision and Torah observance, Paul’s opponents were defending an outmoded view of salvation history.\(^49\) The NPP has made valuable contributions, especially in demonstrating that there is not a complete break between Paul and Judaism, and that it is important to situate the argument of Galatians within its historical context. The publication of E. P. Sanders’

\(^{47}\) Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 340.

\(^{48}\) Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith*, 143–44.

\(^{49}\) Moo, *Galatians*, 24.
Paul and Palestinian Judaism was considered groundbreaking in that regard. His main objective was to compare what he called “the basic pattern of religion” of Rabbinic Judaism and Paul.\(^{50}\) According to him, although there are differences between Paul and Judaism, when it comes to the soteriological role of grace and works, they are in agreement.\(^{51}\) Sanders recognizes that the question “What must I do to be saved?” is not prominent in Rabbinic literature. Still, the basic “pattern” of soteriology in Judaism according to Sanders should be called “covenantal nomism,” which he defines as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.”\(^{52}\) In this view, it is God’s grace that establishes the covenant, while obedience to the commandments is the human response to divine initiative, meaning that the law is for the maintenance of one’s membership status within the covenant people of God.\(^{53}\) Here, says Sanders, is where Paul agrees with Judaism. This was a reaction to the traditional protestant view in that it questioned the assumption that Judaism was primarily a religion of righteousness by works, while Paul’s gospel preached righteousness by faith.\(^{54}\)

The issue of circumcision, however, seems to somewhat rattle Sanders’ claim. Since circumcision as human works was at the core of the traditional protestant

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., 517–18, 543.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 75.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 237, 420. See also Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 338–39.

\(^{54}\) Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 338.
interpretation of Paul, in order to support his argument, Sanders had to demonstrate that the practice of circumcision in Judaism still fit into the pattern of covenantal nomism and Judaism as a religion of grace. Nevertheless, Sanders recognizes that circumcision was an important ritual to convey the acceptance of the covenant by proselytes.\footnote{Sanders, \textit{Paul and Palestinian Judaism}, 206.} When it comes to the situation in Galatia, he believes that Paul’s opponents were indeed requiring circumcision and acceptance of the Mosaic law as essential entrance conditions, though he explains this as being solely the opinion of these “Christian missionaries,” and did not reflect the general understanding within Judaism.\footnote{E. P. Sanders, \textit{Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People} (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 18–20. On this point, Gundry notes that Sanders shifts from his original position that entrance into the covenant was entirely dependent on God’s grace. In a personal letter from Sanders to Gundry, partially quoted by Gundry in his article (footnote 23), he distinguishes between entry requirements, which includes circumcision, and behavioral requirements. Gundry’s articles seeks to question Sanders’ claim that Paul and Judaism agreed on “staying in” the people of God by obedience to the law, but in this footnote and elsewhere in the article he also questions whether Sanders’ position that both Paul and Judaism believed in grace as the only means of “getting in” is tenable. Robert H. Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” \textit{Biblica} 66, no. 1 (1985): 1–10. The issue of “getting in” and “staying in” will be addressed again later in the literature survey.} Although it could be argued that the issue in Galatia in regard to circumcision was indeed somewhat idiosyncratic within Judaism, it is important to keep in mind that Judaism of the first century was not monolithic, even in regard to how circumcision was enforced,\footnote{See, for example, Longenecker, who quotes a number of texts from Second Temple Jewish literature to support his argument that “it remains true that a doctrine of the necessity of doing all the law was not absent in early or formative Judaism.” Longenecker, \textit{Galatians}, 227.} as will be argued later in this thesis. But, according to Sanders, it is this argument regarding the necessity of circumcision for membership that Paul is countering in Galatians.\footnote{“The subject of Galatians is not whether or not humans abstractly conceived, can by good deeds earn enough merit to be declared righteous at the judgment; it is the condition on which Gentiles enter the people of God.” Sanders, \textit{Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People}, 18.} Elsewhere, Sanders includes circumcision among the “commandments which govern relations between man
and God,” which according to Paul the Gentiles do not need to keep, as opposed to “commandments which govern relations between man and man,” which continue to be a central part of Christian ethics in Paul.\(^5^9\) In other words, for proselytes in general and in the situation of Galatians, Sanders connects circumcision to the entrance and acceptance of the covenant, though he does his best to not allow this to undermine his general argument about Judaism as a religion of grace. In any case, granting he spends considerable time explaining the “staying in” aspect of Judaism and in Paul, Sanders makes little reference to this when it comes to Galatians, and is at best ambiguous as to how circumcision as an entrance rite relates to his argument regarding obedience to the law as a means of “staying in.”

Krister Stendahl’s book was published just one year before Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and also made quite an impact on the NPP. In his view, Paul’s epistles had the “very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promise of God to Israel,” and do not address what continues and what does not continue to be valid for Jewish Christians.\(^6^0\) Stendahl calls attention to the fact that Paul was not converted from Judaism to Christianity. Instead, the focus of Paul’s encounter with Christ is on the assignment he receives to take God’s message to the Gentiles, himself still being a Jew.\(^6^1\) In Stendahl’s exposition, Paul’s argument in Galatians is that the law was given as a custodian for the Jews until the coming of Christ, which is when all receive access to the promise of Abraham,

\(^{5^9}\) Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544.


\(^{6^1}\) Stendahl also argues that Paul does not at any moment display remorse or pious repentance of previous sins connected to a life of righteousness by works. The only sin he mentions is his previous persecution of the church. Ibid., 7–23.
whether Jew or Gentile. In this sense, circumcision and other Jewish laws do not apply to Gentiles, who do not need to convert to Judaism in order to be saved, but nothing is said about whether the commandments have continued validity for Jewish Christians. Stendahl understands the acceptance of circumcision on the part of Gentile Christians to signify conversion to Judaism, but does not go much beyond that.

It is James D. G. Dunn who builds off of Sanders’ notion of covenantal nomism and explores its significance for exegesis in Paul. For Dunn, “works of the law” in Paul does not refer to human effort or achievement in general, as in the traditional protestant view, but specifically to “what the law required of Israel as God’s people.” These “works of the law” refer to that which set Israel apart from the nations and served as a sign of their privileged status in the covenant. Dunn refers to these as “identity markers,” symbols that pointed to a distinctly Jewish identity, among which circumcision was one of the main requirements. In this sense, Paul opposes circumcision and other “works of the law” because they are inadequate means to distinguish God’s people. These “works of the law” inadequately portray the true intent of the law and preserve a function of the law

62 The example that Stendahl uses is the law as a babysitter taking care that the children of Israel do not raid the refrigerator before the Gentiles arrive at the party. Ibid., 18–23.

63 However, it is certainly implied in Stendahl’s argument that Paul changes nothing when it comes to the Jewish faith and practices. N. T. Wright summarizes Stendahl’s position as following: “Paul was offering gentiles a way of access to Israel’s God without implying that Jews who did not recognise [sic] Jesus as Messiah were somehow at a disadvantage. Jews could stay Jews and gentiles could become Christians.” N. T. Wright, The Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding the Apostle (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 69.


65 Ibid.
that is prior to the Christ-event. In the new reality brought by Christ in salvation history, it is only through faith that Gentiles can be fully included into God’s people.\footnote{James D. G. Dunn, ed., The New Perspective on Paul (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 451–55; Moo, Galatians, 24.}

Therefore, in Dunn’s reconstruction of the problem in Galatia, Paul’s opponents believed that the Gentile converts would not be able to fully participate in the blessings of Israel unless they accepted circumcision and converted to Judaism, since they understood “covenant grace as restricted and determined by national and ethnic boundaries.”\footnote{James D. G. Dunn, “What was the Issue between Paul and “Those of the Circumcision”?,” in Paulus und das antike Judentum, ed. Martin Hengel and Ulrich Heckel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 312; Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 8; James D. G. Dunn, “The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism,” in Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul, 175–76.} In this context, Dunn stresses the importance of the experience of receiving the Spirit in Galatians, since it was a sign that God had accepted the Gentile believers on the basis of faith rather than on the basis of their nationality.\footnote{Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 59.} In Paul’s theology, it was no longer necessary to be a Jew to receive Abraham’s blessings and to be a part of Israel, “an Israel where Jewish distinctiveness need no longer be maintained and in which Gentiles can be a part while still being Gentiles.”\footnote{Ibid., 100.} This is the reason, then, that Paul objected to circumcision: it gave the wrong idea that to belong to the people of God meant being separated from other nations, and Paul did not want to leave any space for “boasting in the flesh, in physical and ethnic distinctiveness.”\footnote{James D. G. Dunn, “‘Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, But…’: Gal. 5.2–12; 6.12–16; cf. 1 Cor. 7.7–20),” in Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul, 314–18, 323. N. T. Wright, building on the NPP and the work of Sanders and Dunn, also understands circumcision as an identity marker, a sign of ethnic Jewish distinctiveness. N. T. Wright, Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 87–88.}
Daniel Boyarin follows a similar approach to Dunn’s: what motivated Paul’s theology was a dissatisfaction with the narrow ethnocentric understanding of salvation. For him, “works of the law” refers to the specific Jewish identity markers such as circumcision, kashrut, and Sabbath observance, and Paul argues that salvation is now available to Gentiles without the necessity of conversion to Judaism. Boyarin goes further to argue that when the “works of the law” lead to exclusion and distinction, it is rejected, but when “works” are the expression of faith and love, and have universal application, they remain valid. Boyarin refers to this hermeneutic as “allegory”: the death and resurrection of Christ serves as the “hermeneutical key” through which the understanding of the law changes from its view of outward observance to the “true Law,” which is “the spiritual, allegorical, inward interpretation of the external, which is only its sign.” Circumcision is rejected by Paul because it is connected to physicality, nationality, gender, and religion. It is “the most complete sign of the connection of the Torah to the concrete body of Israel,” which Paul now spiritualizes. For Paul, Israel is now universal, not restricted to gender or nationality, not dependent on a physical rite, but on faith.

Boyarin makes an interesting observation based on some later Rabbinic texts which connect circumcision to a mystical experience of seeing God. Although the texts are much later than Paul, Boyarin suggests that it is possible that a similar, embryonic

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72 Ibid., 123.

73 Ibid., 36.

74 Ibid., 36–39.
understanding was already circulating during Paul’s time that connected circumcision to experiencing the Spirit and could have been one of the arguments the Judaizers in Galatia were disseminating.\(^{75}\) Boyarin paraphrases Galatians 3:1–5 as if Paul were answering to this possible view:

They are telling you that only the circumcised can see God, but you yourselves have already experienced visual experiences in the Holy Spirit, so their claim is shown to be a lie! Moreover, since the spirit is higher than the flesh, and you have already jumped (from the very beginning) to that level, will you now return to the lower level of the flesh?\(^{76}\)

However, there is little evidence, if any, in the text itself that supports the notion that the experience of the Spirit is something similar to a mystical, ecstatic vision. Paul is not referring to “visual experiences in the Holy Spirit,” but is stating that their transformed lives is a concrete sign that they have received the Spirit in response to the preaching of faith (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2:2), which then excludes circumcision. This thesis argues that it is the continuing sanctifying work of the Spirit in the lives of the Galatian believers that is in danger of being jeopardized through circumcision.

Finally, Barclay objects to Luther’s tendency of generalizing theological principles, a generalization that is done without clear focus on the specific historical situation of Galatia.\(^{77}\) In regard to circumcision, Barclay points out that neither circumcision as seeking salvation by self-reliant law-keeping by itself nor circumcision merely as a nationalistic “identity marker” is fully capable of explaining why Paul

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 126–30.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 130.

considers both circumcision and uncircumcision as irrelevant in Christ (Gal 5:6; 6:15). Instead, he argues that Paul rules out Torah observance because the Christ-event is an “unconditioned gift” which, contrary to the mindset of gift-giving in the ancient world, “subverts and reconstitutes what counts as worth.”

The NPP reminded scholars of the importance of the historical context of the New Testament (NT). Digging deeper into first-century Judaism, it was no longer the practitioner of circumcision that was emphasized, but the meaning of the rite itself as a sign of ethnic distinction was brought to light. Sanders described Judaism as a religion of grace when it came to “getting into” the people of God, but it was Dunn who called circumcision an “identity marker”—it functioned as one of the signs that identified the Jews as the people of God. Paul was not opposing all of Judaism, nor did he consider it a legalistic religion; instead, he was saying that ethnic boundaries and distinctions no longer had a place in the new era inaugurated by Christ. Therefore, Paul rejects everything that can be considered a sign or a badge of such ethnocentrism or particularism. Here, as before, the focus is on the meaning of justification by faith in

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78 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 393. To be fair, James Dunn has an article devoted to what he calls the “slogan” of “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” in which he explains that Galatians 5:6 is a “denial that ethnic identity counts for anything with God, a refusal to allow that the uncircumcised state per se disadvantages before God any more than the circumcised state per se advantages before God.” He compares this passage with Paul’s assertion in Galatians 3:28 about “neither Jew nor Greek.” But, as Barclay points out, Paul goes beyond nationalistic identity markers and “subverts any form of symbolic capital that operates independently of Christ.” Dunn, “‘Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, But…’,” 330.


80 Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 143–44.

81 Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 100; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 12, 75; Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’ Advisors to King Izates,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 145–46. Moo points out that there seems to have been a recent shift in both James D. G. Dunn and in N. T. Wright. There have been publications by both authors in which they mention that the
Paul, and on how one enters the people of God. The sanctifying work of the Spirit in Galatians merely occupies a secondary role.

**Paul Within Judaism**

The “Paul within Judaism” approach, so labeled by the scholars who share the conviction that Paul should be interpreted from within “his most probable first century context,” build on the foundations set by Stendahl, Sanders, and others. These scholars believe other reconstructions of Paul are anachronistic and do not always do justice to the Jewish framework of Paul’s time. This approach maintains that “the writing and community building of the apostle Paul took place within late Second Temple Judaism, within which he remained a representative after his change of conviction about Jesus being the Messiah.” Important for this approach is the understanding that Second Temple Judaism was multifaceted, and that Paul contributed toward the creation of a “(sub)culture” within this diverse Jewish context. This section focuses on how a few of these scholars understand Paul’s arguments on circumcision. In general, circumcision is understood as a mark of Jewish distinction, similar to the NPP, but instead of Paul

“New Perspective concentration on the problem of ethnic restrictiveness is by no means intended to deny the ‘Lutheran’ concern about the danger of attributing salvation to human achievement.” Still, Moo claims that neither Dunn nor Wright have satisfactorily and exegetically explained this understanding. Moo, *Galatians*, 24–25.

82 Sanders points out that “righteousness” language in Judaism refers to obedience of the law as a maintenance requirement, while “righteousness” in Paul refers to one’s “transfer to the body of the saved,” a means of entrance. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544.


84 Ibid., 3–4.

85 Ibid., 9.

86 Ibid., 9–10.
abolishing all such Jewish identity markers,\textsuperscript{87} he only argues that Gentiles should not convert to Judaism through circumcision.

Crucial for understanding Paul’s argument, according to these scholars, is the Jewish eschatological expectation of Gentiles turning to God.\textsuperscript{88} In this Jewish perspective, there is no mass conversion to Judaism through circumcision, which is “the \textit{sine qua non} of becoming a Jew.”\textsuperscript{89} Instead, Gentiles leave idolatry and turn to the living God. For Paula Fredriksen, this is the framework for understanding Paul’s theology, since this eschatological era had begun with Christ.\textsuperscript{90} However, in Fredriksen’s reconstruction of the Galatian controversy, the push toward circumcision was a “startling novelty both within Judaism and, \textit{a fortiori}, within the Christian movement” of the mid-first century.\textsuperscript{91} For her, Gentiles (in this case, Godfearers) had been allowed to adhere to the synagogue and worship with the Jews with little or no set requirements, while still being pagans and still worshiping their ancestral gods.\textsuperscript{92} Their acceptance of the gospel and voluntary abandonment of idol worship, even in the early years of the Christian movement, led to them being embraced by the apostles without being circumcised as Jews as a fulfillment

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 7; Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” 145–46; Dunn, \textit{The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians}, 100.


\textsuperscript{89} Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” 546.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 547; Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” 241–42.

\textsuperscript{91} Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” 559.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 547–48.
of their eschatological expectation. It was only when their expectations of an imminent Parousia were not fulfilled and the realization that Israel was increasingly indifferent to the gospel message that some “false brethren” began pressing to Gentile conversion through circumcision.

The book of Acts, however, which Fredriksen refers to on several occasions throughout her article, does not support such a reconstruction. In Acts, the question of Gentile acceptance without circumcision became an issue only after Paul’s first missionary journey, when numerous Gentiles had accepted the gospel (Acts 13–14). Before that, the isolated case of Cornelius shows that the apostles were unsure of how to proceed when it came to Gentiles, not happily embracing them as Fredriksen’s reconstruction suggests. Peter was not only reluctant to socialize with Cornelius and other Gentiles, thus having to receive a vision from God to encourage him to meet with them (10:9–20), but he then had to justify his actions to the “circumcision party,” which no doubt included some of the apostles as well (cf. 11:1–18). The issue in Cornelius’ story, however, seems to have been more connected to impurity through association with Gentiles (cf. 10:14–15, 28; 11:3, 8–9), and not so much the salvation of the uncircumcised, which would be discussed in the Jerusalem council years later (Acts 15). Thus, the situation in Galatians seems to be more consistent with the view that many Jewish Christians were still struggling with the acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles.

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93 Ibid., 553.

94 Ibid., 560.

95 Although a number of scholars do not consider the data in Acts to be historical, it does not seem consistent to refer to evidence found in Acts when it is consistent for one’s thesis, but at the same time to disregard the complete picture provided in Acts. See ibid., 532, 535, 541, 549, 552, 557, 562–64.
Nevertheless, Fredriksen does make an important point in demonstrating the “social reality that ethnic distinctiveness and religious distinctiveness are simple synonyms” in the ancient world.\textsuperscript{96} This shows just how deeply the decision to accept circumcision would have affected possible Gentile converts to Judaism, as well as the Galatian believers contemplating circumcision:

In a culture where what we call “religion” was seen as an innate, not detachable, aspect of identity, this phenomenon scarcely made sense: it was tantamount to changing one’s ethnicity. What we term “conversion” was understood by ancient contemporaries as forging a political alliance, entering the Jewish πολιτεία and, as Celsus complains, assuming foreign laws and traditions. (For that reason, it struck some observers as a species of treason.) Worse than turning their backs on their human kin, however, was the fact that such people also turned their backs to the gods who were theirs by birth and blood.\textsuperscript{97}

Beyond that, it demonstrates just how “Jewish” Paul’s gospel really was: in asking the Gentiles to abandon idolatry and sexual immorality and saying that they had been “separated” from the unbelieving pagans and dedicated, or “made holy,” for God,\textsuperscript{98} Paul was in reality making a “Judaizing demand.”\textsuperscript{99} In other words, the new eschatological era in which the Spirit is the key element made it possible for Gentiles to turn to the God of Israel without the necessity of conversion to Judaism through

\textsuperscript{96} Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” 234.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 239–40.

\textsuperscript{98} For Paul’s use of ἁγιασμός and other temple language in the context of Gentile believers, see ibid., 244–49.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 251–52. But since the Gentiles are leaving behind their former identity, though without fully embracing Judaism, they find themselves in a difficult social and political situation. Johnson Hodge refers to this as a type of “hybrid identity”: “not completely ‘other’ than what they were, but is certainly not identical to their previous status.” Caroline Johnson Hodge, If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 149. For Skarsaune, this is what made Gentile believers liable to persecutions under the Roman government, much more so than Jewish believers, since they still fell under the umbrella of Judaism, a religio licita in the Roman empire. More on this topic is found in the discussion on the historical background of this thesis. Oskar Skarsaune, In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 59–64. Nanos also briefly discusses the “sociopolitical marginalization” of the Gentile believers in his article: Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” 120.
circumcision. This differs from the NPP in that instead of completely abolishing the “markers” of ethnic distinction such as circumcision, Paul only says that ethnicity is irrelevant; Jews are saved as Jews, and Gentiles are saved as Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor 7:17–20).

Although Pamela Eisenbaum questions whether circumcision could really be considered the “distinguishing mark of Jewishness”—she argues that reality must be differentiated from the rhetoric of ancient authors—she also believes that circumcision continued to be valid for Jews in Paul’s argument:

The commandment to circumcise applies specifically and exclusively to Jewish males, meaning it is not appropriate to circumcise Gentiles, for God did not and does not command Gentiles to be circumcised. When Paul says, ‘Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything,’ he is not therefore claiming that circumcision is a meaningless ritual that can be ignored. Rather, Paul’s point is that God does not require the same things of all people at all times. Priests, for example, had to obey a set of purity laws that did not apply to Israelites in general. Since only Jews are commanded to be circumcised, Gentiles are following the will of God by not being circumcised.

This interpretation of Paul’s argument seems to be misleading, for it implies different standards and requirements for different people, which ultimately leads to different paths of salvation and of sanctification (cf. Rom 1:16; 3:29–30; 1 Cor 1:24).

Though the temple remained fully functional until its destruction in AD 70, Paul understands that a new eschatological era was inaugurated by Christ (cf. Gal 4:21–31).

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100 Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” 244. Where I do not agree with Fredriksen, however, is that she implies that Jewish identity and beliefs surrounding the physical temple continue to have value and importance for Paul. See, for example, the following assertions: “Paul, further, continuously draws distinctions between Israel and the nations (‘the Jew first and also the Greek’). The divinely granted promises, privileges and prerogatives of Israel, ‘the gifts and the call of God’, abide forever (Rom 11:29). . . For Paul, ‘Israel’ always means his ‘kinsmen according to the flesh—they are Israel’ (Rom 9:4). The distinction of the covenant, and of the promises to the forefathers, remain” (p. 249–50). We will return to this issue later in this section, but an exhaustive discussion of the topic would require an analysis of Paul’s theology in Romans 9–11 and elsewhere, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” 244, 248–50.

101 Eisenbaum, Paul Was Not a Christian, 240.

102 Ibid., 62–63.
Paul did not cease being a Jew, but he understood that typological elements of the Mosaic law found their fulfillment in Christ (Gal 3:19–25). In this context, Eisenbaum’s example of the priests becomes anachronistic from Paul’s perspective. Thus, one of the strongest points in the “Paul within Judaism” approach becomes also one of its greatest weaknesses: while it is true that Paul never ceased being a Jew, and that the argument of the new eschatological reality is crucial for understanding the issue of the inclusion of the Gentiles in Paul, these scholars do not perceive the shift in reality when it comes to the Mosaic law as well (cf. Rom 9:6–8, 27; 10:2–4; Gal 4:1–7).

Mark Nanos also argues that in his discussions of circumcision, Paul is addressing specifically adult, male, non-Jews who should not convert to Judaism by accepting circumcision. In his reconstruction of the situation in the Galatian churches, Nanos argues that Paul’s opponents were not Jewish Christians coming from Palestine or elsewhere, but rather local Jews who did not believe in Jesus, and considered the Gentile believers to be potential proselyte candidates. These opponents, in Nanos’ view, saw themselves as allies to Paul as though they were completing his work. In this context, circumcision was not only an identity or boundary marker of Jewish identity, but a rite of passage symbolizing the completion “of the transition process that takes place when a

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103 “Central to Paul’s discontinuous reading is the insistence that the Mosaic covenant, with its focus on the law, is a temporary phase in salvation history, subordinate to and intended to accomplish something different than the Abrahamic covenant (3:15–25). The law, with the works it calls for, entered into salvation history 430 years after Abraham (3:17) and was intended to be in effect only until Messiah came (3:19, 24–25).” Moo, Galatians, 23.


106 Ibid., 123.
non-Jewish person passes from being regarded as a pagan to a liminal proselyte candidate to a proselyte (Jew).”¹⁰⁷ This, of course, presupposes the idea that Paul opposed conversion to Judaism through circumcision, “but he did not oppose, and instead promoted, them practicing Judaism (i.e., ‘converting’ into a Jewish way of living).”¹⁰⁸

Naturally, distancing themselves from their native gods while resisting circumcision and full identification with Judaism resulted in the Gentile believers having “an anomalous identity leading to sociopolitical marginalization, both from Jews . . . and, for different reasons, from their non-Jewish families and neighbors.”¹⁰⁹ Nanos claims that this is the context in which Paul calls for these non-Jews to be faithful to a Jewish God and lifestyle; in this new apocalyptic era inaugurated by Christ, Gentiles are called to faithfulness to God in this position of sociopolitical marginalization.¹¹⁰ This, however, is a misrepresentation of Paul’s theology. Although sociopolitical marginalization was certainly the consequence of accepting the gospel for many Gentile converts—as can be deduced by many of Paul’s encouragements to his readers to remain faithful and persevere, no matter what (cf. Rom 5:3–4; 2 Thess 1:4–5; 2 Tim 1:8, 12; 3:10–17)—it was definitely not the motivation of Paul’s opposition to the circumcision of Gentiles. Instead, as will be argued in this thesis, Paul opposes circumcision because of its general lack of value in Christ, for salvation or otherwise (Gal 5:2–6), regardless if one is a Jew

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 88–91.

¹⁰⁸ Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” 106. This is similar to Fredriksen’s view that Paul’s message of the Gentiles giving up their native gods and idolatrous, immoral practices was a specific “Judaizing demand.” Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” 251.

¹⁰⁹ Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” 120.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 125.
or a Gentile (cf. Rom 2:25–29; 3:30; 10:12–13; 1 Cor 7:18–19; Gal 6:15; Phil 3:3; Col 3:11).

In conclusion, the “Paul within Judaism” approach has important insights and contributions, especially in regard to the religious, social, cultural and political context of the first century AD, and the implications of the gospel in such a background. It also helps see Paul, the Jew, from within his Jewish context, and identify his message as a “Judaizing” message within the new eschatological era of Christ. However, in seeing Paul as almost entirely integrated into his Jewish background, the uniqueness of his message is undermined, and the “bigger picture” of his theology is lost. The implications of the eschatological framework of Paul’s theology does not apply only to Gentiles; it is a complete reevaluation of reality as a whole, including that of Paul himself (Phil 3:9; cf. Rom 9:30–32; 10:2–4). The implications of saying that the Jews are still bound to circumcision, while it is meaningless for Gentiles creates a contradiction with the assertion that ethnicity means nothing for salvation in Christ (cf. Rom 10:12–13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), for it presupposes different requirements for different people. This mentality is precisely what Paul worked so adamantly to change. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to argue that in limiting the interpretation of Paul in regard to circumcision in Galatians to ethnicity is to miss further nuances of his theology, including the topic of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in Galatians.

“Staying in” and the Spirit in Galatians

Since this thesis argues that one of the reasons Paul opposes circumcision in Galatians is because it hinders faith in the sanctifying work of the Spirit, this section will survey authors who see the issue of “staying in” the people of God as Paul’s main
emphasis in the epistle. The distinction between “getting in” and “staying in” the covenant people of God comes from E. P. Sanders’ discussion about the role of grace and works in Paul and Palestinian Judaism. According to Sanders, both for Paul and Palestinian Judaism, grace is the means of “getting in”—i.e., salvation—while works are “the condition of remaining ‘in’, but they do not earn salvation,” though of course for Paul grace comes through Christ.111 Robert Gundry writes an article to dialogue with Sanders precisely on this point: he disagrees with Sanders’ implication that on the issue of “staying in,” Paul “lapses back to his inherited Jewish, un-Christological way of thinking.”112 For Gundry, the primary issue in Galatians is the question of “staying in,” contra Sanders. Even if the Judaizers did not consider the Gentile believers to be entirely acknowledged as a part of the people of God, thus pressuring them to accept circumcision as an entry requirement, Gundry states that Paul, “regarding Gentile believers as already in, transposed the question to one of staying in,” thus evincing that Paul did not, in reality, agree with Judaism “with respect to continuing in the Christian life.”113 Instead, Gundry argues that faith as opposed to works is Paul’s primary argument both for “getting in” and for “staying in,” “with the result that works come in as evidential rather than instrumental.”114

Gundry does indeed mention that in Galatians Paul deals with the question of “whether believing Gentiles could stay in without submitting to circumcision and keeping

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114 Ibid., 12.
other parts of the law.”¹¹⁵ For this, he quotes Galatians 3:3, 10, 5:4, 7, 6:13.¹¹⁶ One of the main shortcomings of Gundry’s article, however, is that he does not dedicate enough space to argue his case exegetically. Gundry starts out well by explaining Sanders’ view and seeking to show that, contra Sanders, for Paul the Christian belief is about grace and faith from start to finish, but Gundry seems to lose focus. He ends up spending more time pointing out inconsistencies in Sanders’ argument in general than on exegetically arguing his case against a works-oriented approach for “staying in” in Paul. This can be seen in Gundry’s conclusion, where he states that “Paul rejected Judaism and Judaistic Christianity not only because of a conviction that God had revealed his Son Jesus in him . . . but also because of a conviction that works-righteousness lay at the heart of Judaism and Judaistic Christianity.”¹¹⁷ Furthermore, although circumcision is the central and prompting issue of the epistle to the Galatians, Gundry does not expand on its contextual meaning for Judaism and how it connects to the issue at hand in Galatians,¹¹⁸ which is the main objective of this thesis.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 9, 11, 26.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 37–38.

¹¹⁸ Other than the quote from the article mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph (page 9), Gundry only mentions circumcision in relation to his main argument in one other section on page 11. The few other times circumcision is mentioned in the article, it is either in connection to an affirmation by Sanders, or to circumcision as an entry requirement. See ibid., 7, 10, 23. The important footnote 23 on page 10, where Gundry points out a shift in Sanders’ view regarding the need of at least one aspect of law-keeping, circumcision, as an entry requirement, has, I believe, a small but significant mistake: instead of “In effect, Sanders now admits that Jews and Judaizers were synergists on the topic of getting in, and that at least on the question of circumcision Paul was not a synergist even with respect to staying in, let alone with respect to getting in,” I understand that Gundry intended to say that “. . . at least on the question of circumcision was not a synergist even with respect to getting in, let alone with respect to staying in” (emphasis supplied). This does not necessarily contradict Gundry’s statement that Paul deals with the issue of circumcision in regard to the Gentile believers “staying in” (page 9), since he is pointing out an inconsistency in Sanders’ argument. But since this footnote is the place where Gundry deals most extensively with the topic of circumcision, it proves my point that Gundry does not expand on its significance for his main argument.
Gordon Fee in his commentary on Galatians goes against the mainstream scholarly opinion in stating that what is at stake in Galatians “are not entrance requirements (i.e., how people get ‘saved’), but maintenance requirements (that for full membership into God’s covenant people Gentiles must become Abraham’s true children by means of circumcision).”\(^{119}\) The entire letter, he writes, is devoted to answer the question “Once given rightstanding with God, how is such a relationship sustained and maintained?”\(^{120}\) He places this argument within the context of the Jewish expectation that the eschatological gift of the Spirit “would lead people to obey the law,” and therefore that the receiving of the Spirit in Galatia “probably signaled the need to be ‘completed’ by adhering to Torah.”\(^{121}\)

In this context, Fee defines circumcision as one of the distinguishing aspects, or identity markers, of Judaism, along with Sabbath and food laws, which Fee refers to as “Jewish Torah.”\(^{122}\) Since the Spirit has been given, Torah observance has come to an end, for the Spirit replaces the Torah as the “identity marker” of his people, and the “ongoing life in the Spirit” is in direct opposition to “Torah observance.”\(^{123}\) Submission to circumcision would be to revert back to the old covenant, to life before Christ, and to

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\(^{120}\) Ibid., 107.


express confidence in the “flesh” rather than in Christ,\textsuperscript{124} thus demonstrating an attempt to “be righteous by Torah.”\textsuperscript{125}

In other words, although Fee recognizes that the issue in Galatians is “being circumcised as a way of ‘completing’ their salvation,”\textsuperscript{126} which is similar to the position in this thesis, he does not elaborate on the significance of circumcision for the sanctification argument, nor does he emphasize the sanctifying work of the Spirit in Galatians 5:2–6. His argument that the gift of the Spirit means the end of Torah observance is ultimately a restating of the traditional protestant interpretation, where Paul and the Old Testament law are in direct opposition, even though he also includes the aspect of circumcision as an “identity marker.” Contrary to Fee, Paul does not seem to argue that life in the Spirit means the end of Torah observance in general (cf. Rom 3:31; 6:15–16; 13:8–10), nor the entire abrogation of so-called Jewish identity markers (1 Cor 7:17–20). Instead, Paul simply argues that, while they can still be practiced in certain contexts,\textsuperscript{127} they are irrelevant and contribute nothing for salvation, sanctification, or otherwise in the sphere of Christ (Gal 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19).

Another author who believes Galatians is about “whether the believers can promote their ongoing experience of the Spirit by doing the law” is Charles Cosgrove.\textsuperscript{128} For this, Cosgrove dedicates the entire first chapter of his book to argue that the

\textsuperscript{124} Fee, \textit{Galatians}, 108.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 187–89.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 187.


beginning point of Paul’s theological exposition and decisive clue of the Galatian problem is chapter 3:1–5. Everything else in Galatians must, then, be read in light of this passage. According to him, justification by faith therefore loses its value as the main theme of Galatians, since it is “used emphatically” only in the autobiographical part of the epistle, although it is also mentioned in 3:8, 11, 24, and 5:4–5.\textsuperscript{129} The importance of chapters 5 and 6 are devalued because, as the parenetic section of the epistle, it “consists of general, traditional materials, [and] does not disclose its specific occasion.”\textsuperscript{130} However, Cosgrove’s methodology in using Galatians 3:1–5 to interpret everything else in the epistle seems questionable. It seems methodologically more sincere to use the epistle as a whole in order to attempt a reconstruction of the problem in Galatia as well as Paul’s main line of argumentation to refute it. In dismissing the relevance of the first and the last two chapters of Galatians for determining its occasion, then reading those sections in light of 3:1–5, Cosgrove seems to fall into the pitfall of “undue selectivity,” which can ultimately lead to a number of different arbitrary interpretations and reconstructions.\textsuperscript{131}

When it comes to the push for circumcision, Cosgrove argues that the agitators were advocating law-keeping in order to “experience more of the Spirit and its power,”\textsuperscript{132} or “for the increase of life in the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{133} Two points in Cosgrove’s argument deserve attention. First, it is difficult to envisage that the agitators were pushing for circumcision

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 2–3, 32–34.

\textsuperscript{131} Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 79.

\textsuperscript{132} Cosgrove, The Cross and the Spirit, 86.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 118.
solely to promote an increase of the experience of the Spirit. Too much of the historical data connects circumcision to membership in the covenant people of God. In fact, in Cosgrove’s chapter on “The Logic of the Opposing Theology,” where he discusses numerous primary sources in support of his argument, circumcision is only briefly mentioned twice, without any explanation.\textsuperscript{134} Nowhere does Cosgrove elaborate on how the understanding of the specific issue of circumcision in Judaism, as opposed to the more general law-keeping, supports his reading of Galatians. And secondly, to attribute the emphasis on the Spirit to the theology of Paul’s opponents could be considered an “over-interpretation” of the data at hand.\textsuperscript{135} Although some of the content of the message of Paul’s opponents can be deduced from the epistle, all we have available is Paul’s own arguments.

In short, even the authors who understand that the pressing issue in Galatians was how to \textit{remain} and how to \textit{grow} in the people of God rather than how to \textit{enter} do not connect circumcision to sanctification. Either they have a different idea of sanctification, or they barely even discuss circumcision in the context of their argument, which is what this thesis seeks to demonstrate.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 115, 118.

\textsuperscript{135} Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 79–80.
CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL AND EXEGETICAL DISCUSSION

This section will explore the historical and exegetical basis for the thesis being presented in this paper. In order to do so, first, general considerations regarding the occasion and the nature of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians will be discussed, as well as the historical background of circumcision, which is certainly one of the main points of contention in the epistle. Then, an exegetical analysis of the literary, syntactical and linguistic aspects of Galatians 5:2–6 will be undertaken.

The Historical Background of Galatians

The general purpose of the epistle of Galatians is to remind the Galatian believers of the true gospel, and to denounce the “false gospel” that had “bewitched” them (Gal 1:6–9; 3:1). The exact nature of this “false gospel” and the identity of Paul’s opponents,¹ however, has been the object of much debate. Was Paul opposing one or two groups? Were his opponents Jewish or Gentile believers? Or were they unbelieving Jews, or possibly Gnostics? Was their message legalistic or libertine?² Were the Galatians falling

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¹ Paul’s opponents have been referred to in many different ways: opponents, teachers, false teachers, missionaries, influencers, etc. The traditional term “opponents” is maintained here because it seems clear from Paul’s tone in Galatians that both his message and his authority as an apostle was being questioned (cf. 1:1, 7, 11–12; 2:2–9).

² For a summary of the main theories regarding the identity of Paul’s opponents in Galatia, see Timothy George, Galatians, The New American Commentary 30 (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 1994), 50–60.
back into paganism, seeking conversion into Judaism, or accepting a version of a law-keeping gospel? Following the methodological guidelines provided by John Barclay, it is possible to narrow down the options to a general framework for the epistle, though we can only speculate as to the precise identity of the opponents and the complete content of their message. Since it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these matters at length, focus will be given to the identity of the opponents and to the likely logic behind their push for circumcision, as well as to the possible receptiveness to their message on the part of the Galatian believers.

As Barclay points out, it seems clear that Paul’s opponents were Christians, as is implied in the reference to “another gospel” (1:6–9). While it is true that τὸ ἀγγέλιον was also used in the secular world in a broader sense of “good news” or “glad tidings” in general, it is certainly not “anachronistic” to say that Paul uses it in a specific “Christian” way in reference to the gospel of Christ (cf. Rom 1:16; 15:16, 19; 16:25; Gal 2:5; Eph 1:13; 1 Thess 1:5). This becomes especially clear in verse 7, where Paul accuses the opponents of distorting, or changing (μεταστρέφω), specifically the gospel of

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5 Moo, Galatians, 19–20.


7 Ibid., 86. See also the discussion in the chapter “The Task of Reconstruction” in the following book: Moisés Silva, Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 103–12.

8 Nanos, The Irony of Galatians, 288–95.

9 Ibid., 289.
Christ (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Nanos’ argument concerning the use of irony in this passage is insufficient to support his claim that the opponents were not Christians at all.\textsuperscript{10}

Besides the likelihood that the opponents were Christians, it is “highly probable” that they were Jewish Christians.\textsuperscript{11} Although Barclay believes the ethnicity of the opponents is “slightly less certain” than whether or not they were Christians because of the ambiguous phrase οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι (Gal 6:13), their identity does not depend on that phrase alone. Rather, the content of their message, based on the points Paul is resolutely trying to counter, is strong evidence that they were Jews: their emphasis on circumcision (cf. 2:3–5; 5:2–6, 11–12; 6:12–13) and Torah observance (cf. 2:14; 3:6—4:11, 21), as well as the appeal to Abraham (3:6–29; 4:21–31). Furthermore, Paul’s detailed defense of his apostleship and his connection to the apostles in Jerusalem seems to imply that the false gospel and the need for circumcision being preached in Galatia had some type of connection to Palestine (cf. 2:2–6).

Circumcision in Jewish Literature

So, why circumcision? It is first important to understand that circumcision “occupied a central place in the Hebrew sense of cultural and religious identity.”\textsuperscript{12} It symbolized a belonging to the people of God and a commitment to God’s covenant community. To be circumcised meant not only that one was a Jew, but that one was to be

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. Nanos dedicates an entire chapter to explain how Galatians 1:6–7 does not necessarily imply that the “influencers,” as he calls them, were Christians. He argues that Paul is drawing a contrast between “two different messages of good, not two different messages of Christ.” Most of his argument depends on how to read the εἰ μὴ exception clause in verse 7, but he does not discuss the meaning of the last part of the verse (θέλοντες μεταστρέψαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which considerably weakens his case.

\textsuperscript{11} Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 86.

distinguished from the world of unclean, godless people.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, circumcision was one of the main practices that allowed Jews to preserve their identity in the culturally and religiously diverse Roman empire.\textsuperscript{14} The centrality of circumcision is also attested by its association with conversion to Judaism in several primary sources, such as in Esther 8:17, where there is a parallel between the verb “to circumcise” (περιτέμνω) and “to live like a Jew” (ιουδαίζω; cf. Plutarch, Cic. 864; Josephus, J. W., 2.17.10). The rite of circumcision is also central to the conversion of Achior in Judith 14:6, where he is said to have left the religion of the Gentiles, believed in God, received circumcision, and joined the people of Israel. While Josephus’ account of the conversion of Izates of Adiabene could be used to support the argument that circumcision was not always required of converts, it is important to point out that Ananias, who told Izates that circumcision was not necessary, was thinking about self-preservation, saying that God would “
\textit{pardon} him if, constrained thus by \textit{necessity} and by \textit{fear} of his subjects, he failed to perform this rite” (emphasis added), thus implying that circumcision was actually necessary and important, but that Izates could be excused from the rule for exceptional reasons.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{14} Other practices central to the preservation of Jewish identity were: avoidance of idolatry and the observance of food and Sabbath laws. “That these were effective markers of identity and group boundaries is attested by the fact that, if gentiles knew anything about Jews at all, they knew that Jews followed at least these practices.” David A. DeSilva, “Jews in the Diaspora,” in \textit{The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts}, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee M. McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 284. See also Archie T. Wright, “Jewish Identity, Beliefs, and Practices,” in Green and McDonald, \textit{The World of the New Testament}, 310. According to Bar-Kochva, that Gentiles were very much aware of these Jewish “identity markers” needs to be qualified, for Sabbath, kashrut, and circumcision are not mentioned in non-Jewish literature as often as one would think. On the other hand, these issues “were central in the religious persecutions by Antiochus Epiphanes, and formed the basis of privileges granted to Jewish communities.” Bezalel Bar-Kochva, \textit{The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature}, Hellenistic Culture and Society 51 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 521–22.

As in the story of Izates, it was interaction with Hellenistic culture\(^{16}\) that brought strong pressure against the practice of circumcision, because it was regarded with such contempt by Greeks and Romans. Public nudity was common in social activities such as participating in sports or visiting public baths, so it was a situation Jews were confronted with every so often.\(^{17}\) Besides that, Jews faced also political and financial pressure at certain points in history by the imposition of taxes on circumcised Jews, or even the criminalization of the practice with the penalty of death (cf. 1 Macc 1:60–61; 2 Macc 6–7).\(^{18}\)

This strong stance against circumcision in the Greco-Roman world led some Jews to abandon Judaism completely, while others found ways to spiritualize or allegorize it in order to avoid the literal practice. For our purposes, however, it is the two groups that maintained the practice of circumcision that are most relevant: the ones who advocated in

\(^{16}\) As Barclay points out, scholarship in the last few decades has demonstrated that “Diaspora Jews developed their Judean identity precisely by creative engagement with Hellenistic/Roman culture, not by isolation from it.” Barclay, \textit{Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews}, 5.


\(^{18}\) Hall, “Circumcision,” 1025–31. This is questioned by Eisenbaum. For her, just because circumcision was often associated with Jewishness by non-Jewish authors does not mean that that was an accurate reflection of daily life reality. She writes: “As Shaye Cohen has convincingly argued, since circumcision is applicable only to half the population, and since people in antiquity did not generally appear in public nude, it is difficult to imagine that circumcision ever served as a useful way to distinguish a Jew from a Gentile in antiquity.” Eisenbaum, \textit{Paul Was Not a Christian}, 104. This is a difficult claim to support, however, for if literary evidence and the imposition of laws and belief in their proper enforcement is not a trustworthy witness to reality in antiquity, we are left with insubstantial guesswork at best.
favor of it and tried to find ways to make it more acceptable to the Gentile world, and those who produced an even more rigid stance in support of circumcision, almost as a form of protest and resistance against Hellenization.\textsuperscript{19} Interestingly, it has been suggested that literature produced by the Diaspora Jews, who were in closer contact with Gentiles, is generally more “evangelistic” in nature than literature produced in Judea,\textsuperscript{20} which seems to be true of the general attitude toward circumcision displayed by the two aforementioned groups.\textsuperscript{21}

The book of \textit{Jubilees} is an example of the second, more rigid position:

\begin{quote}
And anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the LORD made for Abraham since (he is) from the children of destruction. And there is therefore no sign upon him so that he might belong the LORD because (he is destined) to be destroyed and annihilated from the earth and to be uprooted from the earth because he has broken the covenant of the LORD our God (\textit{Jub}. 15:26).\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

In this book, not only is circumcision a sign of the covenant people of God, it is practically synonymous with salvation and sanctification itself. To be uncircumcised is to forsake God’s covenant, reject his word and the Torah, to deserve no forgiveness and to be guilty of blasphemy and of an “eternal sin” (\textit{Jub}. 15:34). Circumcision places one

\textsuperscript{19} Hall, “Circumcision,” 1025–31.

\textsuperscript{20} Skarsaune, \textit{In the Shadow of the Temple}, 77.


\textsuperscript{22} Translation by O. S. Wintonmte, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., \textit{The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha}, 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 87. Michael Segal points out that this passage is not directed against uncircumcised people in general, but against those who are not circumcised on the eighth day. Still, the fact that physical circumcision, regardless of when it was done, is not enough to secure one’s position among the “children of the covenant” shows just how rigid the position of the author of \textit{Jubilees} is in terms of adherence to the rite of circumcision. Michael Segal, \textit{The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology, and Theology}, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 236 n. 22.
under the dominion of God; outside that dominion one is susceptible to evil spirits and total destruction. The special “angels of the presence and angels of sanctification,” who function as assistants to God and intermediaries between God and his holy nation, Israel, were created circumcised (v. 27), and only those who are circumcised are blessed and able to be sanctified to participate with these angels in heavenly worship in the presence of God. The number of *Jubilees* manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls is an indication of the importance of this book to the Qumran community. Indeed, that this rigid stance of circumcision was shared by the Qumran community is evinced in several sectarian documents, again stating that only the circumcised belong to the sphere of God and will be saved, while the uncircumcised will be destroyed in the last days (cf. 1QS 5:5; 1QH 18:20; 4Q458; 4Q434). That firm believers in circumcision at times went to extreme lengths to enforce their beliefs can be seen, for example, during the Maccabean revolt, when Mattathias was known to have “circumcised valiantly” uncircumcised Jewish boys (1 Macc 2:46).

Philo is an example of those who defended circumcision in a way that showed more sensibility towards the Greco-Roman culture. He is known for presenting Judaism as the true philosophy in order to make it acceptable to the Hellenistic world, and defends circumcision on the grounds of hygiene and health, ritual cleanliness “as befits the consecrated order,” as a symbol for the circumcision of the heart, and for the

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23 According to *Jubilees*, besides circumcision, these special angels are also given the Sabbath commandment (2:17–21) and possibly the festival of *Shavu'ot* (6:17–18), all of which are central to the covenant motif. Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, 9, 236-39.

enhancement of fertility (Spec. Leg. 1.1–11; cf. Mig. Ab. 89–93). Josephus also defends circumcision in Against Apion, appealing to the practice in other cultures as well. Ironically, though Apion ridicules the rite, he is said to have contracted an ulcer and had to undergo circumcision because of it (Against Apion 2.137). Others found ways of maintaining the practice of circumcision, while at the same time doing their best to hide or conceal it, either by performing an operation called epispasm, in which the foreskin was restored, or by cutting off such a small piece of the foreskin that it would be difficult to notice the cut. This concern to still practice circumcision, though covertly, demonstrates “as much concern for Jewish tradition as [it does] for Greek sensibility.”

In light of this discussion, it seems coherent to say that Paul’s opponents in the Galatian church were a part of those Jews who reacted strongly, almost defiantly, against the pressure in opposition to circumcision in the Greco-Roman world, and that it is more likely that they came from Palestine than from a Jewish community in the Diaspora. Though they now called Jesus their Messiah, they still thought as Jews, connecting inclusion in the covenantal community of God to circumcision. To use the language of E. P. Sanders, circumcision was considered a means of “getting into” the covenant. It was

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26 On the practice of epispasm, see 1 Macc 1:15; cf. 1 Cor 7:18; Joseph. Ant. 12.241; T. Mos. 8.3; m. Abot 3.16; Epiphanius, Mens. 16. Eventually, the Mishnah required “the removal of the entire foreskin for circumcision to be valid (b. Sabb. 137a–b).” Ibid.

27 Again, contra Nanos’ idea that the “influencers” were from the local Jewish community in Galatia. He argues this on the basis that, had they come from elsewhere, the believers in Galatia would have been more suspicious of them. However, if they did in fact have some kind of connection to the church in Jerusalem, as can be inferred by Paul’s defense (2:2–9), the opponents could have easily argued on the basis of that connection, thus securing the trust of the Galatian believers. Nanos, The Irony of Galatians, 317.
this inclusion that guaranteed the fulfillment of the covenant promises to Abraham.\textsuperscript{28} In their view, for Gentiles to accept the gospel was not enough; without circumcision, they would still be under the dominion of evil and of eternal sin. This understanding demonstrates that for Paul’s opponents, circumcision was more than a national or ethical “identity marker.”\textsuperscript{29} It had implications for salvation and even sanctification, since only the circumcised would be sanctified and blessed.

That circumcision also had implications for “staying in” the people of God in Jewish thought, however, has not been much explored. Notably, the sanctification aspect of circumcision is present all throughout Jewish literature of the time, from the Hebrew Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls to writings in the Diaspora and later rabbinic literature. In the Hebrew Bible, the metaphor of the circumcision of the heart is directly connected to sanctification in the sense of participation in God’s work. As Hall points out, in Leviticus, the Israelites are prohibited from eating “from newly planted trees for their fruit is uncircumcised (Lev 19:23–25). This injunction is a specific instance of the command, ‘You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy’ (19:2). Uncircumcised fruit is unsuitable for a people participating in God’s holiness.”\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, this metaphorical circumcision is something that God has promised to do (cf. Deut 30:6), as illustrated by the story of Moses’ uncircumcised lips that were unfit for the work of God. Subsequently in the story, God is the one who provides Moses with the necessary means

\textsuperscript{28} Farley, “Circumcision,” 904–6.


\textsuperscript{30} Hall, “Circumcision,” 1025–31.

The passage of *Jubilees* mentioned above states the dichotomy between the circumcised in the realm of God and the uncircumcised in the realm of destruction. Only the circumcised are considered blessed and worthy to be sanctified for participation in heavenly worship alongside the angels of the presence and the angels of holiness (15:26–34). One of the hymns found among the Dead Sea Scrolls is a hymn of thanksgiving to God, who purified and cleansed the worshipper of sin, and put him into the dominion of God, a dominion that will eventually consume and destroy the sinful, unclean, violent, and uncircumcised men (1QH 14.20). Of the four reasons in favor of circumcision presented by Philo, two of them fall under the category of a changed life in God: priestly sanctification and circumcision of the heart (*Spec. Leg.* 1.1–11). The following passage in Philo also casts light on a similar connection between literal circumcision and the pruning of man’s thoughts, analogous to a notion of sanctification:

I see two circumcisions, one of the male, and the other of the flesh; that of the flesh is by way of the genitals, while that of the male, it seems to me, is by way of the reason. For that which is, one might say, naturally male in us is the mind, whose superfluous growths it is necessary to cut off and through away in order that it may become pure and naked of every evil and passion, and be a priest of God. Now this is what He indicated by the second circumcision, stating (in) the Law that ‘you shall circumcise your hardness of heart,’ which means your hard and rebellious and refractory thoughts, and by cutting off and removing arrogance, you shall make the sovereign part free and unbound (*QG* Gen 17:10).  

Finally, according to the following passage in the Mishnah, Abraham was only considered perfect after his circumcision: “Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] said: great is circumcision, for [notwithstanding] all the commandments that Abraham performed he

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31 Ibid.

was not called complete until he circumcised himself, as it is written, *walk before me, and be perfect* [Genesis 17:1]” (M. Nedarim 3.11).

In all of these instances, there is much more connected to circumcision than simply “getting into,” membership in, or identification of, the covenant people of God. This can be seen both in the metaphorical understanding of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and in Philo,\(^{33}\) as well as in the implications of literal circumcision as seen in *Jubilees*, the Dead Sea Scrolls and in later rabbinic literature. It is through circumcision that one’s thoughts and passions are brought in accordance with the will of God, that one is considered perfect and holy, and thus allowed to participate in heavenly worship. It is not clear whether Paul’s opponents in Galatia held such a well-developed “theology” of circumcision, but Paul clearly understood the theological implications of their claims. It is against these implications that Paul so adamantly seeks to defend the true gospel. It is only through Christ and the work of the Spirit that believers are delivered from the present evil age (cf. 1:4; 2:4; 5:1, 13), that they are adopted as sons and heirs of the promise given to Abraham (cf. 3:14; 4:5–7), and that they can be sanctified from the desires of the flesh (cf. 3:3, 5; 5:13–25). All of this is achieved by means of faith (cf. 2:16, 19–20; 3:2–5, 25–29; 5:5). In other words, life in Christ, or life in the Spirit, is summarized in one word: faith, which is incompatible with the opponents’ “gospel” of circumcision (cf. 2:19–20; 3:2–5; 5:25; 6:8).

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\(^{33}\) Although Philo does put quite an emphasis on the metaphorical meaning of circumcision, which is the shaping and pruning of man’s thoughts and desires, it is still closely connected to physical circumcision. One does not render the other superfluous; rather, one requires the other. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 61–80.
Circumcision in the Greco-Roman World

The Greco-Roman background of circumcision is helpful to understand how the Galatian believers could have reacted to the message of Paul’s opponents. The practice of circumcision was abhorred in Greco-Roman society.\(^{34}\) This strong stance against circumcision was due to a sentiment of repugnance of genital mutilation in general, and to anti-Jewish sentiments derived from political and social interactions between Jews and Romans. The perfection of the male physique was a high beauty standard in Greco-Roman society, and genital mutilation was considered barbaric, both because of the practice itself and because it altered the naturally beautiful male body.\(^{35}\) Jews of course were known for their practice of circumcision (cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 102.13–14; Martial *Epig.* 7.30, 35), and were easily identified as Jews in a society in which public nudity in sports was rather common. After the Jewish war, Roman authorities were even known to purposely inspect the genitals of Jewish men in order to collect the Jewish tax.\(^{36}\) Because circumcision was so integral to Jewish identity and religion, Roman law permitted its practice, though with some limitations. By the second century AD, Roman law would state that the only difference between circumcision and castration was the context in which the rite was performed.\(^{37}\) Since castration and other forms of genital mutilation

\(^{34}\) Bernat, “Circumcision,” 471–74.

\(^{35}\) Troy Martin writes that this negative attitude toward circumcision in the Greco-Roman world was caused in part because of the association of circumcision with male sexual arousal. A circumcised male would appear to be perpetually sexually aroused, which was socially unacceptable. In this context, Martin interprets Paul’s condition “in the flesh” in Galatians 4:14 to refer to Paul’s circumcised state (ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου), which could have provided a temptation for the Galatians to reject him and his message. Galatians 6:13 (ἐν τῇ ἰματέρᾳ σαρκί), on the other hand, would reflect the general Jewish attitude toward circumcision as a mark of pride. Troy W. Martin, “Whose Flesh? What Temptation? (Galatians 4.13–14),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 74 (1999): 87–89.

\(^{36}\) Abusch, “Circumcision and Castration under Roman Law in the Early Empire,” 75–76.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 76.
were considered capital crimes, it is easy to see how Jews would be scorned because of their insistence on circumcision.\textsuperscript{38}

On the other hand, anti-Jewish sentiments were fairly common in Greco-Roman society due to political and social tensions. Bar-Kochva argues that in general, the extremely negative view of Jews by Greek authors appears after the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes and continues to be influenced by events in Judea, such as the foreign policy of the Hasmoneans.\textsuperscript{39} The political aspect can be seen in the writings of Juvenal, in which the practice of Judaism is associated with contempt of the laws of Rome. It is often in such contexts that the rite of circumcision is mentioned in derogatory terms:

Some who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine’s flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practice and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses handed down in his secret tome, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life (Juvenal, \textit{Sat.} 14.96–108).\textsuperscript{40}

Besides the political sphere, an author’s opinion could also be tainted based on his personal interactions with Jews in society. Tacitus, for example, emphasizes the fact that Jews separate themselves from society. This extends to table fellowship, mixed marriages, and circumcision: “The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{39} Bar-Kochva, \textit{The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature}, 517–20.

other hand, they permit all that we abhor. . . . They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other people by this difference” (*Hist. 5.4–5*). 41

Because of the close connection between religion, society, and politics in the Ancient World, and the isolationist tendencies on the part of Jews in regard to Romans, it is plausible that educated Romans would have such negative feelings toward Jews. But all things considered, Jews were still respected and left to themselves. Judaism was considered an ancient, traditional religion, thus receiving respect from both Greeks and Romans. They were allowed to collect the temple tax, and sacrifices to God were made in name of Caesar. Besides, it would be politically unwise to persecute an entire nation. 42

Roman conversions to Judaism, however, was considered a problem, for this had not only religious, but also political and social implications. 43 Tacitus writes:

> Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice [of circumcision], and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children and brothers as of little account (*Hist. 5.4–5*). 44

The problem was not the Jewish religion itself, but that “Rome would suffer the disapproval of the gods if enough Romans turned their backs on them.” 45 Fortunately for Rome, the Jewish food laws, isolation from the Gentiles, and especially circumcision


43 “In antiquity, to become a Jew was never simply a religious action; it was always also a political decision: on his conversion the Gentile became a member of the Jewish ‘ethnos.’” Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 1st ed. (London: SCM Press, 1974), 307.


acted as deterrents for full conversion to Judaism. Gentile converts to Christianity, on the other hand, were not faced with such obstacles. In fact, many of the so-called “God-fearers,” Gentiles committed to Jewish synagogues in the Diaspora, but who had not gone through with full conversion to Judaism, were among the first Gentile converts to Christianity as described in the book of Acts (Acts 10:1–48).

At the same time, however, it was not necessarily easier to become a Christian, only because it did not require circumcision and strict adherence to Mosaic law. Gentile converts to Christianity were required to abandon idolatry and participation in the Emperor cult (cf. Acts 15:20, 29; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 5:1–11; 6:9; 10:7–8, 14; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:5, 31; Col 3:5; Thess 4:3; 1 Pet 4:4; 1 John 5:21), practices which previously affirmed their loyalty to the Roman Empire and to the gods. However, unlike Judaism,

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46 Ibid.

47 Skarsaune, In the Shadow of the Temple, 80–83. Skarsaune also shows the geographical correlation between the distribution of Jewish colonies in the Diaspora and the presence of Christian communities around AD 100–300 as further support that the early Christian missionary movement expanded primarily among synagogues and God-fearers. Nevertheless, there has been some debate regarding the existence of God-fearers and the extent of their interaction with synagogues. On one end of the spectrum, Kraabel has denied their very existence; on the other end, Fredriksen believes that the acceptance of Gentiles was such a “strong and articulated apocalyptic tradition” that the admission of Gentile sympathizers in the synagogue without circumcision was already common and widespread, rather than a novelty of the Christian movement. A middle approach to the existence of God-fearers is to be preferred. D. R. Lacey, “Gentiles,” in Hawthorne, Martin and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 335–39; Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” 552.

48 Barclay, Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews, 15.

49 The precise legal status of Jews in the Roman Empire is debated among scholars. Only pieces of information in legal documents and the testimonies of Philo and Josephus help understand the rights of Jews under the Romans. But from these sources, it can be affirmed that Jews did enjoy religious liberty under the Roman Empire, at least during most of the first century AD. They were allowed to collect and send money to Jerusalem (Cicero, Pro Flacco 28, 67), had the permission to get grain on the next day, if it was distributed on the Sabbath (Philo, Legatio ad Gaium 158), had the right of assembly (Legatio 312–13), and sacrifices offered in the temple on behalf of the emperor was considered suitable proof of loyalty (Legatio 157, 232, 317; Josephus Jewish Wars 2.197), among other things. Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, “Rights of Jews in the Roman World,” in Collins and Harlow, Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism, 1152–53; John M. G. Barclay, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).
Christianity was not a *religio licita*, it was not an ancient religion with old traditions, and it was not associated with an ethnic group. “None of the restraints which prevented the Romans from taking wholesale action against the Jews were at work with regard to the Gentile converts,”50 which meant that they were politically and socially marginalized, vulnerable to hostilities from their families and neighbors and persecution from authorities (cf. Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 1:5–7; Gal 3:4; Phil 1:29; 1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:5; 1 Pet 1:6; 3:13–17; 4:4, 12–19).51

Gentile converts to Christianity were therefore placed in a very difficult position. While their Gentile roots led them to consider circumcision an abhorrence, a mutilation of a perfectly beautiful body, and nearly a capital crime, Gentile converts to Christianity found themselves in an even more ostracized political and social situation than the Jews.52 Under such conditions, it is plausible that any decision in regard to circumcision on the part of the Galatian believers would have been influenced by both theological and social considerations.53 Troy Martin writes that the Galatian believers became convinced that circumcision was a part of the Christian gospel, but because of the strong Gentile aversion to the rite, they had declined to submit to circumcision and were instead


52 “The Galatians were caught betwixt and between, neither part of the synagogue nor of their former pagan religious circles.” Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia*, 361. “To dissociate oneself from the worship of family and community deities would entail a serious disruption in one’s relationships with family, friends, fellow club members, business associates and civic authorities. . . They could not now share in their national and ancestral religious practices, but neither were they members (or even attenders) of the Jewish synagogues although they had the same Scriptures and much the same theology as those synagogues.” John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 58–59.

returning to paganism.\textsuperscript{54} Though he makes an interesting case for this scenario, his argument is based primarily on a specific reading of Galatians 4:8–9, a passage which is ambiguous and subject to different interpretations.\textsuperscript{55} That the Galatians were seriously considering circumcision seems more plausible in light of the nature of the discussion in Galatians as a whole (cf. 1:6; 3:3–6; 4:8–10, 21; 5:1, 4). A possible conversion to Judaism would have been influenced primarily by the theologically attractive arguments from Paul’s opponents, but the opportunity to “belong” to an established socio-political community was undoubtedly attractive.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time, Paul does not leave room for misunderstandings: just because they should not undergo circumcision does not mean that uncircumcision has any value in and of itself. Paul is unequivocal: in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything (Gal 5:6; 6:15).


\textsuperscript{55} Martin understands that Galatians 4:8–9 is key to understanding that the Galatian believers were now turning back to the gods they formerly worshiped. For this reconstruction to work, Martin understands that in Galatians 4:21—5:6 Paul is directly addressing the troublemakers, not the Galatians themselves. There are, however, alternative explanations for Galatians 4:9 in which Paul is rhetorically comparing the acceptance of the law to paganism. “In adopting the Law, the Galatians are, ironically, turning \textit{away from} the God of Israel and Israel’s promised inheritance and blessings.” Das, \textit{Galatians}, 421. This interpretation, strong and astonishing as it is, follows along similar lines as other passages in Galatians (cf. 5:2), is in harmony with Paul’s use of \textit{στοιχεῖα} in 4:3, and does not require the unnatural shift of Paul addressing first the Galatians, then the troublemakers, and finally the Galatians again. See also Moo, \textit{Galatians}, 276–77; Schreiner, \textit{Galatians}, 278–79; J. L. Martyn, \textit{Galatians}, The Anchor Bible Commentary 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 411.

\textsuperscript{56} “By accepting circumcision the Galatians would also regularize their position in relation to the rest of Galatian society. Although Jews may not have been popular, at least the Jewish religion had a long-established pedigree; it was not a suspicious novelty like the Christian movement.” Barclay, \textit{Obeying the Truth}, 60.
Literary Analysis

Paul explicitly addresses the main issue of the epistle—whether or not the Galatian believers should undergo circumcision—for the first time in Galatians 5:2–6.\(^{57}\) This passage is considered by many commentators to be the hortatory conclusion of Paul’s main theological exposition (3:1—5:12).\(^{58}\) In chapter 3, Paul explains in detail that those who have faith are justified and are considered legitimate sons of Abraham (3:7–14), having received the Spirit through faith (3:2, 14). This was the experience of the Galatians, as Paul repeatedly emphasizes their status as sons and heirs (3:26–29; 4:5–7). Because the Galatians were seeking to be “under the law” (4:21), Paul also explains what the role of the law actually is, using the metaphors of children and slaves (3:17–26; 4:1–7), and using the allegory of Hagar and Sarah to explain the two covenants (4:21–31). In 4:31 and 5:1, Paul again emphasizes the Galatians’ status: they had been freed from the slavery of sin through Christ, and are exhorted to stand firm in that freedom. When circumcision is introduced in 5:2–6, it is understood that the acceptance of circumcision is what would jeopardize everything in the Galatians’ experience of faith up until that point.

Several authors consider this pericope to be the rhetorical climax of Galatians because the main point of contention is addressed in such passion and intensity.\(^{59}\) There are a number of connections between Galatians 5:2–12 and Galatians 1:6–10 and 6:12–17, all of them passages that pertain to the main occasion of the epistle and are central for

\(^{57}\) Schreiner, *Galatians*, 310.


understanding the nature of the debate. Furthermore, in 5:2–12 Paul repeats a number of the same themes found in 3:1–6, which some authors believe to be the beginning of Paul’s theological exposition. Whether or not these observations can be considered definite evidence that Galatians 5:2–6 is the climax of the epistle, there is no doubt of its importance for understanding Paul’s argument against circumcision, which is why these verses were chosen for the present discussion.

There are several textual indications that verses 2–6 form a unit. The particle Ἴδε indicates the beginning of the pericope. Verse 2 mentions the antithetical relation between Christ and circumcision, a parallel found also in verse 6, thus bracketing the argument. Although the Nestle-Aland, 28th edition, includes verse 1 as a part of this pericope, most authors agree that it functions as a transitional verse between the previous section (4:21–31) and 5:2–6, restating the main idea of 4:21–31 and serving as the introduction for the ensuing exhortations. For these reasons, for the purpose of the

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61 Parallels between 3:1–6 and 5:2–12: reference to the agitators (3:1; 5:7), the cross (3:1; 5:11); the centrality of faith and the Spirit (3:2, 3, 5, 6; 5:5) in contrast to the law (3:2, 5; 5:2–4), the sufficiency of faith and the Spirit as the means of righteousness (3:6; 5:5). For Moo, these two passages (3:1–6 and 5:2–6) bracket Paul’s main theological argument. Moo, Galatians, 316. Whether Paul begins his main theological exposition in 2:16 or in 3:1, however, is debatable.

62 Das, Galatians, 515–16.


64 The use of the coordinating inferential conjunction οὖν in 5:1, accompanying the two imperatives is indicative of a conclusion or summary of the previous discussion. Martyn believes it functions more as the conclusion to the previous section, pointing out that the imperative verbs in 5:1 are connected to the imperatives in 4:30. Moo, on the other hand, thinks it looks more forward than backward,
present discussion, focus will be given to Galatians 5:2–6. In this section, the passage will be considered in light of its literary and structural features.

Circumcision and the Curse of Keeping the Law

In Galatians 5:2–3 Paul states two consequences of undergoing circumcision: Christ will be of no advantage, and his addressees will be obligated to keep the whole law. However, Paul is not making two separate and uncorrelated statements; the two statements should be interpreted in light of each other, as demonstrated by their parallel structure:

'Ἰδε

a ἔγω Παῦλος λέγω ύμῖν

b ὅτι...

c ἐὰν περιτέμνησθε,

b’ … Χριστὸς ύμᾶς οὐδὲν ὀφελήσει.

a’ μαρτύρομαι δὲ πάλιν παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ

c’ περιπεμνομένῳ

b’’ ὅτι ὀφειλέτης ἐστίν

d ὅλον τὸν νόμον ποιήσαι.

The structure above follows more or less the syntax of the two verses: a and a’ correspond to the main clauses (subject, verb, object); b, b’ and b’’ are the two subordinate ὅτι clauses; and c and c’ refer to circumcision. In both verses, Paul emphasizes his point by beginning the sentence with verbs of speech followed by ὅτι (a +

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since Paul’s exhortation to stand firm in freedom is a fitting introduction to the exhortations in chapter 5. Martyn, Galatians, 468; Moo, Galatians, 319; Das, Galatians, 515; Schreiner, Galatians, 310. See also Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 673.
b; a’ + b’). Twice he addresses those who accept circumcision,\(^65\) first directly referencing his readers (“if you accept circumcision”; c), then by making a more generalized assertion (“every man who accepts circumcision”; c’).\(^66\) Considering these parallels, it follows that the consequences of accepting circumcision affirmed by Paul in both verses are parallel as well (b’ and b’’/d). This parallelism is further supported by the play on words between the noun “advantage” (\(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\); b’) and the verb “to be obligated” (\(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda.\epsilon\tau\eta\zeta\); b’’).\(^67\)

Although Galatians 5:3 is the first time the necessity of keeping the law in connection to circumcision in the epistle is affirmed, the parallel structure between verses 2 and 3 indicates that Paul is simply restating the assertion in verse 2 and expanding on

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\(^{65}\) The use of the emphatic first-person pronoun (\(\epsilon\gamma\omega\ Πα\lambda\alpha\iota\obar\lambdaς\ λ\epsilon\gamma\omega\)) in parallel to Paul’s claim to be a witness to the veracity of the assertion in verse 3 (\(\mu\alpha\rho\alpha\riko\mu\alpha\iota\iota\ δ\epsilon\ π\acute{a}\lambda\iota\nu\)) evinces the strong nature of the claims made in these verses. Although Paul could be appealing to the personal relationship between him and his readers, as argued by Fee, it is more likely in light of the literary structure that he is invoking his apostolic authority in order to forcefully inform the Galatian believers of the consequences of circumcision. Witherington reminds us of the importance of the testimony of witnesses, especially in the case of personal testimonies, in ancient rhetoric and formal legal proceedings. Despite the doubts cast upon Paul’s ministry by his opponents, which he seeks to rectify in the first chapters of the epistle (cf. Gal 1:11–12; 2:7–8), Paul is still so passionate about the truth of the gospel that he places his reputation as an apostle on the line for it. Fee, *Galatians*, 187; Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia*, 365; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 265; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 312; Moo, *Galatians*, 321; Das, *Galatians*, 524; Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 87.

\(^{66}\) “Paul’s choice of \(\alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\rho\omega\zeta\), which can have the generic meaning of ‘person, human being,’ instead of the gender-specific \(\alpha\nu\eta\nu\), ‘male,’ signals the relevance of this issue for more than just the males at Galatia.” Das, *Galatians*, 513.

\(^{67}\) The morphological similarity between \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\) and \(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda.\epsilon\tau\eta\zeta\) is conspicuous. The feasibility that \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\) and \(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\), the verbal form of \(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda.\epsilon\tau\eta\zeta\), are both etymologically derived from the same root, \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\lambda\omega\), has been entertained by linguistic scholars for over a century. It is argued that \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\) is possibly the result of the lengthening of the initial vowel of \(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\), and that both \(\dot{o}\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\) and \(\omega\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega\) are derived from a previous root form. In terms of how their meanings are connected, James Clackson records the differing opinions of Ruijgh and Slings: Ruijgh argues that the meaning “increase, surplus” led to “profit, utility,” which “meant the increase which would be realized, and thus the amount still due,” while Slings argues that the notion of “deficit” derived from “a base meaning ‘that which is needed.’” James Clackson, *The Linguistic Relationship between Armenian and Greek*, Publications of the Philological Society 30 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 156–57; Robert S. P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 2 vols. (Boston: Brill, 2010), 1132–33, 1684. A few commentators note Paul’s play on words, but they do not elaborate on it: Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia*, 368; Das, *Galatians*, 524; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 265.
the consequences of accepting circumcision for special emphasis (πάλιν; cf. Gal 1:8–9; cf. Rom 15:10–12; 1 Cor 3:20; 12:21; Phil 4:4). It is also beside the point to debate whether or not the opponents had informed the Galatian believers that in accepting circumcision they would be obligated to keep the entire law, a debate that takes up considerable space in a number of commentaries. As Barclay points out, Paul is not directly addressing the opponents, and therefore this verse is subject to a range of interpretations. When read in context, Paul’s intention with this assertion goes beyond simply informing his naïve or ignorant readers. It is a part of his theological argument as a whole.

Connected to that debate is the question of how Paul’s assertion regarding the acceptance of circumcision and the obligation to the entire law relates to Judaism in general. For Fredricksen and Nanos, conversion to Judaism was progressive: first, candidates needed to accept the simple requirements of the law, then gradually integrate themselves more and more until they were finally circumcised, thus completing the process of proselytism. According to them, while Paul preached a “Judaizing” message, he opposed the circumcision and full proselytism of Gentiles because the fulfillment of

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68 Moo, Galatians, 322; Das, Galatians, 513, 524; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 368. Contra Morris, who suggests that πάλιν might be a reference to something Paul taught his readers while he was with them in Galatia. Morris, Galatians, 155.

69 Martyn, Galatians, 471; Longenecker, Galatians, 226; Betz, Galatians, 259; Moo, Galatians, 318–19; Moo, Galatians, 322–24; Ronald Y. K. Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 222–23.

70 Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 75, 86.

71 “The breadth of language Paul uses throughout Gal 2:16—4:17 suggests that the agitators were demanding—and the Galatians understood—that submission to the law very broadly conceived was being required.” Moo, Galatians, 323.

God’s promises in the new eschatological age inaugurated by Christ required Jews and Gentiles to remain ethnically distinct.\(^7\) This implies that Jewish Christians continued being under the obligation of keeping the entire Mosaic law,\(^7\) while Gentiles were not thus required. Sanders, on the other hand, argues that the usual policy of gradualism in Judaism was to first require some of the main commandments such as circumcision, food and holy days. Only after accepting circumcision would the converts be required to live “according to a new set of rules for daily living,”\(^7\) since circumcision meant embracing the Jewish way of life and all that came with membership in the covenant people of God.\(^7\) In this case, Paul strongly opposes circumcision because it implies that the gospel is exclusive to ethnic Israel, and anything that could be considered a sign of such ethnocentrism no longer has a place in the new era of Christ.\(^7\) Sanders and Dunn accuse the idea that circumcision leads to an obligation of keeping the whole Mosaic law of being a misrepresentation and distortion of Judaism; instead, circumcision only implied the adoption of a Jewish way of life.\(^7\) While Dunn is correct in saying that the corporate dimension of circumcision should not be neglected, and that Paul is adamant about

\(^7\) Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” 125. See the discussion on the “Paul within Judaism” approach in the literature survey.

\(^7\) Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 109.

\(^7\) Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 29.

\(^7\) Dunn, “‘Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, But…’,” 319–20.


confronting the implication of an ethnically exclusive gospel (cf. Gal 3:28–29), Paul’s discussion goes beyond membership. Longenecker, for example, has demonstrated through a wide range of extra-biblical Jewish texts that “a doctrine of the necessity of doing all the law was not absent in early or formative Judaism,” a legalistic mentality that Paul opposed.

Witherington understands verse 3 on the basis of covenant theology: the acceptance of circumcision would mean embracing the Mosaic covenant, thus implying that the new covenant in Christ, which the Galatian believers were a part of, was nullified. In nullifying the covenant with Christ, however, the believers would also lose the benefits of that covenant and would therefore be held accountable for keeping the Mosaic law in its entirety, or else experience the “oath curse, the judgment of God on covenant breakers.” This seems closer to the argument Paul is trying to make.

Still, Paul’s declaration that by undergoing circumcision the Galatians would lose their benefits in Christ needs to be further qualified. It is not conversion to Judaism or the Mosaic law in itself that Paul opposes, but the implications that accompanied the decision of the Galatian believers to become circumcised in that specific context. The addressees had heard Paul’s preaching of the gospel, that Christ died to deliver us from the present evil age (1:3–4; 3:1; 4:13), they had received the gospel message and were baptized (3:27; 4:14), they had received the Spirit and experienced miracles through the Spirit

79 Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 265–67.
80 Moo, Galatians, 322–24.
81 Longenecker, Galatians, 227; Morris, Galatians, 155; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 368; Betz, Galatians, 259–60.
and are called adopted sons of Christ, offspring of Abraham and heirs of
the promise by Paul (3:26–29; 4:5–6). But these were not all of the “benefits” brought by
Christ; he had also come to provide freedom from the curse of the law (3:13; cf. 2:4; 4:5;
5:1, 13), a freedom which Paul now exhorts his readers to stand firm in (5:1).83 If the
Galatians accepted circumcision, they would be renouncing their freedom and going back
to a state of slavery. Paul connects the acceptance of circumcision to slavery both in
Galatians 2:3–5 and in 5:1–2: in these two passages, it is implied that there was pressure
from “false brothers” to circumcise Titus, just as there was pressure from the opponents
to circumcise the Galatian believers, and this is considered “submitting again to a yoke of
slavery” (5:1). Paul writes that the law imprisoned everyone under sin (3:22–23),
precisely because in attempting to keep the law, the sinful human nature is revealed (cf.
4:23; 5:16–21, 24; 6:8). Reliance on works of the law is a curse because the obligation to
keep everything in it (3:10, 13; 4:3–5) confirms one’s sinful human nature, thus sealing
one’s condemnation.84 Christ had come to provide freedom from this condemnation for
all who by faith believe in him (3:13–26; 4:3–6). It is therefore clear that Paul writes
from the “already in” perspective, in which the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work
in the lives of the Galatian believers. But in accepting circumcision, they would be
forfeiting this benefit in Christ and would be left with nothing but the obligation of

83 The exhortation to “stand firm” (στήκετε) is used in Paul for those who are already believers (1
Cor 16:13; Phil 1:27; 4:1; 1 Thess 3:8; 2 Thess 2:15). Even if the opponents did not consider the Galatians
to be fully accepted by Christ, this exhortation would not make sense if Paul did not consider his readers to
be believers. This is further evidence that Paul is treating the threat of circumcision, not merely as an issue
of entry into the people of God, or as law-keeping for justification, but connected to their ongoing lives in
Christ as believers.

84 Das, Galatians, 522–23; Martyn, Galatians, 471; Fee, Galatians, 188; Moo, Galatians, 318–19.
keeping the law, thus returning to a state of slavery (5:1–3; cf. 4:3–9).

It is not clear whether the “Galatians’ desire to be circumcised reflects a desire to be under the law as a whole.” But based on Paul’s argument, a debt to the law as a whole was clearly one of the implications of circumcision. As was discussed in the historical background section, in Judaism, circumcision was also considered a means of bringing one’s thoughts and passions in accordance with the will of God. Only in a circumcised state was one considered perfect and holy. It is possible that Paul’s opponents had convinced the Galatians that they would achieve such a righteous, sanctified status before God only through circumcision. However, undergoing circumcision for these reasons not only suggested that “Christ’s death did not accomplish what Paul says it did accomplish,” it would also put the Galatians under the obligation of keeping the entire law in order to be sanctified. But regardless of the precise content of the opponents’ message, or of the exact reasoning behind the Galatians’ intentions, Paul does not approach the topic merely from the perspective of a “ritual of entry”.

85 It is important to mention that the Galatians were formerly pagans. The acceptance of circumcision and the Mosaic law was a novelty for them. Still, because they were considering this possibility, Paul must explain in detail to them the role of the law in the plan of salvation (3:10—4:7). The former state of slavery that they were in was pagan worship and idolatry (cf. 4:8), but in accepting circumcision and the law was to “go back” to a state of slavery, but this time it is the slavery and condemnation of the law that Paul is talking about. Martyn, Galatians, 370–73; Moo, Galatians, 276–77; Schreiner, Galatians, 278–79.

86 Schreiner, Galatians, 312–13.


88 Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 367; Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 222; Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 229–30.

89 Das, Galatians, 524–25. Note also the following quotation by Francis B. Watson: “Paul opposes circumcision because it is the rite of entry into the Jewish people, and for that reason alone” (original emphasis). Francis B. Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 130.
the Galatians were already “in Christ” (3:26–29; cf. 4:6–7). Rather, the acceptance of circumcision would jeopardize their continuing sanctifying growth in the Spirit, and they would instead be going backwards (5:7; cf. 2:2; 1 Cor 9:24–26; Phil 2:16; Heb 12:1).

You Have Been Severed from Christ

Galatians 5:4 reinforces Paul’s argument in the previous verses. The phrase “to keep the whole law” from verse 3 is parallel to “to be justified by the law”, thus complementing the previous statements:

\[ \delta\lambda\nu \tau\omicron\nu \nu\omicron\mu\omicron\nu \pi\omicron\iota\sigma\varsigma \delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\mu\omicron\omicron\sigma\theta\epsilon \]

Again, the parallelism indicates that Paul’s assertions cannot be understood out of context. The issue is not the law in general, as if keeping the law essentially means legalism and an endeavor to be justified by the law,\(^90\) as has often been argued by proponents of the traditional Protestant interpretation of Galatians. Neither is verse 3 a polemic statement about Judaism, nor an impartial reminder of the obligations of the Mosaic covenant, as implied by Sanders and Dunn.\(^91\) Instead, the parallel structure indicates that the acceptance of circumcision in this specific context was in fact an attempt\(^92\) of righteousness by the law, which by implication meant forfeiting the benefits

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\(^92\) Most commentators agree that the verb δικαίωσθε should be understood as a conative present in this context, therefore expressing something that is being attempted. As Moo says, this is the only syntactical interpretation that makes sense of Paul’s argument concerning the inability of the law to justify (2:21; 3:11, 21). While Dunn agrees that the present verb has a conative force, there is little evidence in Galatians that “even the beginning of such an attempt (present tense) marks a decisive breach with Christ (aorist tense).” This specific point will be discussed more in depth in the syntactical analysis. Moo, *Galatians*, 326; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 267. See also Das, *Galatians*, 525–26; Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 223; Martyn, *Galatians*, 471.
in Christ (v. 2) and being obliged to keep the whole law. The fact that Paul writes to his readers from an already “in” perspective (2:4; 3:13, 26–29; 4:5–6, 14; 5:1, 13) suggests that the attempt of being righteous by the law might actually be a reference to sanctification by the law, and reflects a misconception of the role of the law in relation to Christ—not only on how one is saved (cf. 3:17—4:7), but also in regard to growing in righteousness in the sphere of Christ (cf. 5:14—6:10). Although one of the implications of undergoing circumcision was that righteousness was only possible within the realm of Judaism, thus limiting Christ, in the words of Dunn, to a “purely Jewish messiah,” the structural observations highlight that Paul is also discussing the broader theological concepts of human works and the role of the law for sanctification within the sphere of Christ.

93 “Pursuing the law is wrong also, or even mainly, because the pursuit of the law as a means of justification involves an attempt to find security with God by means of human effort, a ‘doing’ of the law (cf. v. 2) that, with whatever attitude it is pursued, introduces into the divine-human relationship a nexus of obligation that is incompatible with the nature of our gracious God.” Moo, Galatians, 327. “When he [Paul] is thinking of the Jewish-Christian churches in Judea, he finds no problem in their continuing Law observance, for he is confident that they attribute their salvation to Christ, not to their being observant. . . Thus, in mixed churches, such as the one in Antioch, the formerly Jewish members can continue to keep the Law only when Law observance has become for them a matter of no consequence. . . As soon as one attaches to Law observance some degree of salvific potency, one has violated the gospel of Christ, thus severing oneself from him (cf. Rom 7:2). Luther was right to use in this regard the expression solus Christus.” Martyn, Galatians, 471. See also Longenecker, Galatians, 226; Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 230–31; Betz, Galatians, 261; Morris, Galatians, 155; Das, Galatians, 524–25.

94 Martyn chooses to translate the δικαιο- root as “to rectify/rectification” precisely because this translation does not impose limitations to understanding the concept as either a forensic act of pardon (justification) or as moral norms (righteousness). Rather, Martyn’s translation emphasizes that the concept refers broadly to “God’s making right what has gone wrong.” Although the translation “rectification” has not been adopted in this thesis, Martyn’s observation is helpful for recognizing that δικαιοσύνη (v. 5) in this pericope need not refer to forensic justification. In fact, the eschatological nature of verse 5 requires an alternative explanation, as will be discussed in the syntactical analysis. Martyn, Galatians, 250.

95 Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 268.

96 Hence Moo is correct in affirming that “the Reformers were right to find in Paul’s condemnation of circumcision and the law certain broader anthropological and theological implications. Though obviously focused in Galatians on a particular issue having to do with first-century Judaism, Paul’s
In verse 4, the consequences of seeking righteousness through the law by undergoing circumcision are presented in a chiastic structure:

\[ \text{a κατηργήθητε} \]

\[ \text{b ἀπὸ Χριστοῦ,} \]

\[ \text{c οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε,} \]

\[ \text{b' τῆς χάριτος} \]

\[ \text{a' ἐξεπέσατε.} \]

Here, the parallel between the two aorist verbs (a and a’) shows the dangerous consequences of upholding such a banner of righteousness by the law (c) through the acceptance of circumcision: it puts the believer outside the realm of Christ, where the benefits of his grace have no reach (b and b’, both genitives of separation). If the believer denies what Christ is offering to accomplish through the Spirit in his or her life (sanctification) by relying on his or her own effort, there is nothing else that Christ can do for that person, since this by implication “fundamentally denies the meaning of grace”.  

Moo notes that the verb καταργέω along with the preposition ἀπό is used in Paul’s analogy in Romans 7:1–6 regarding the transfer from one binding relationship to another. By accepting circumcision and seeking to grow in righteousness through means other than faith, the believers would be cutting themselves off from the covenant relationship with Christ, removing themselves from the sphere in which Christ and his

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97 Ibid.

grace operate. These consequences are parallel to Paul’s statement in verse 2 that Christ will have no further benefit for them. In line with the general tone of the pericope, the aorist verbs could be understood as proleptic, or as ingressive, evincing once more that Paul is addressing the issue from the perspective of believers already in the domain of Christ’s grace.

The Shared Experience of the Spirit

The switch from the second-person plural “you” (vv. 2–4) to the first-person plural “we” (v. 5) is an important textual hint to the shared experience of the Spirit between Paul and his readers. The use of the nominative personal pronoun ἡμεῖς is for emphasis and exaggerates the contrast between the intention of the readers of accepting circumcision and its consequences (vv. 2–4), and the reality in the realm of Christ (vv. 5–6). There are three ways to interpret this shift in pronouns: 1) Paul could be distinguishing “we,” Paul and other Jewish Christians, from “you,” Gentile Galatians; 2) he could be emphasizing the contrast between true Christians and those seeking

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100 The proleptic aorist is the “‘rhetorical transfer’ of a future event as though it were past.” Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 562–64; Das, *Galatians*, 525; Moo, *Galatians*, 326.

101 The ingressive aorist emphasizes the beginning of an action. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 558–59. In this case, Paul would be stressing that their deviation from the true gospel has already begun to have consequences. Still, this does not mean that Paul considers them to have fully strayed and fallen from grace.


righteousness by the law;\textsuperscript{105} or 3) the “we” could be inclusive, referring to both Paul and his readers.\textsuperscript{106}

There are, however, a few caveats with the first two interpretations. Although Paul does make ethnic distinctions elsewhere in the epistle (cf. 2:14–15; 4:3–9), it is not clear from the specific context of Galatians 5:2–6 that Paul is arguing on the basis of ethnic diversity.\textsuperscript{107} Likewise, the second interpretation would require a strong dissimilarity between Paul, a true believer, and his readers.

Instead, there are two arguments that speak in favor of the third interpretation that the “we” in verse 5 is inclusive and refers to both Paul and his readers.\textsuperscript{108} First, there is little evidence in the epistle itself that Paul ever considers his readers as being already outside the realm of Christ (cf. 3:26, 28; 4:6). The only passage in the epistle that could support such a reading would be 5:4, if the aorist verbs were read as gnomic,\textsuperscript{109} thus

\begin{itemize}
  \item[105] Morris, Galatians, 156; Martyn, Galatians, 472; Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 224.
  \item[106] Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 418; Fee, Galatians, 186.
  \item[107] Das points out that Galatians 5:6 would make no sense “had Paul just distinguished ‘we’ (5:5) circumcised Jewish Christians from ‘you’ uncircumcised gentile Galatians (5:2–4).” Das, Galatians, 526–27.
  \item[108] The first-person plural in the epistle does not always refer to a group distinct from the addressees. In the first two chapters, where Paul talks about his personal experience, the first-person plural refers mainly to those who preached the gospel to the Galatians, namely Paul and Barnabas (2:9), and possibly others who are with him (1:2; cf. 1:8–9; 2:4–5, 15). But when Paul begins the exposition of his theological argument, the first-person plural then refers to both the author and the readers in a generic manner, which becomes especially clear in the exhortative passages (inclusive “we”: 3:13–14, 23–25; 4:3–6; 5:1; inclusive “we” with hortatory subjunctive: 5:25–26; 6:9–10). The shift from the exclusive to the inclusive “we” is done with subtlety. Galatians 2:15 seems to still be exclusive, since it is concluding Paul’s argument in his confrontation with Peter, but the first-person plural in verses 16–17 could be argued both ways: either as the conclusion of Paul’s personal account (exclusive “we”), or as the beginning of his theological argument (inclusive “we”). In favor of this second view, the “I” in verses 18–21 do not seem to be a direct reference to Paul himself, but rather a generalized statement. Either way, the transition between personal account and theological argument, exclusive and inclusive “we,” is achieved in a very polished style. In the case of 5:5, both the usage in the theological argument of the epistle as a whole and the immediate context seem to speak for an inclusive “we” (cf. 4:31; 5:1, 25). See Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, 391–92; Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 418; Fee, Galatians, 186.
  \item[109] Moo, Galatians, 325; Schreiner, Galatians, 314.
\end{itemize}
implying that any attempt of righteousness by the law automatically leads to a state of separation from Christ and his grace. This, however, does not correspond to the appealing nature of the epistle as a whole, where Paul constantly exhorts his readers to remain in the freedom of Christ’s grace (cf. Gal 3:28; 4:8–9; 5:1–2), and does not fit with the tone of conditionality and possible consequence found in verses 2–4.\textsuperscript{110}

Secondly, elsewhere in the epistle Paul refers to a number of shared experiences between him and his readers: the former captivity under the law, the redemption from that captivity through justification by faith in Christ (3:13, 23–25), the adoption as sons (4:5, 31), and the receiving of the Spirit (4:6). The Galatians would have identified with the reference to “faith” and the “Spirit” in 5:5 as well, which alludes to those shared experiences.\textsuperscript{111} This should be the point in their experience of faith that Paul and his readers stand together—by faith relying on the sanctifying work of the Spirit in their lives. In emphasizing the spiritual bond between himself and the Galatians, Paul is exhorting and appealing to his readers to continue relying on the sanctifying work of the Spirit by faith.

Neither Circumcision, nor Uncircumcision

Finally, Galatians 5:6 concludes the argument of the pericope. Here, Paul explains why (explanatory γάρ) the Galatians would forfeit their benefits in Christ (vv. 2–4) and why they should by faith, through the Spirit, await the hope of righteousness (v. 5). The

\textsuperscript{110} Refer to the two previous sections in regard to the parallelism between the statements found in those three verses, and to the syntactical analysis in regard to conditionality in Galatians 5:2–4.

\textsuperscript{111} Das, \textit{Galatians}, 526–27. See also Dunn’s explanation regarding the “bond of shared experience” between Paul and the Galatians, which includes especially faith in Christ and the experience of the Spirit: Dunn, \textit{The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians}, 52–63; Dunn, \textit{The Epistle to the Galatians}, 269.
Galatians should not be circumcised because it means nothing in Christ. Rather, in the realm of Christ, the only thing that has value is “faith working through love.” This is a general assertion regarding reality in the sphere of Christ.\(^{112}\) The verse can be structured as follows:

\[ \text{a} \text{ ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ} \]
\[ \text{b} \text{ οὐτε περιτομή} \]
\[ \text{a’} \text{ τι ἰσχύει} \]
\[ \text{b’} \text{ οὐτε ἀκροβυστία} \]
\[ \text{b’’} \text{ ἄλλα πίστις} \]
\[ \text{c δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη.} \]

The locative prepositional clause “in Christ Jesus” (a) indicates that the issue is what “counts” in the realm of Christ (a’), again emphasizing the already “in” perspective. The three nominatives “circumcision,” “uncircumcision,” and “faith” (b, b’, b’’) form the compound subject of the phrase. All three nouns are preceded by a conjunction that clarifies their relation to the verb. The two negative correlative conjunctions οὐτε (b and b’) indicate that neither of the analogical terms circumcision and uncircumcision have any value in the realm of Christ. This has been taken to mean that Paul announces “the dawn of the cosmos . . . that lies beyond religious differentiations,”\(^{113}\) or that Paul thus

\(^{112}\) The verb ἰσχύω in verse 6 in this case is understood as a gnomic present, since Paul is discussing what is valid in the realm of Christ in terms of a general, timeless fact. The verb can be translated as “to have meaning,” “to be valid,” or “to be in force,” and is, according to Dunn, “power language.” See “ἰσχύω,” in Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 484; Fee, *Galatians*, 191; Morris, *Galatians*, 157; Moo, *Galatians*, 329–30; Das, *Galatians*, 530; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 271.

\(^{113}\) Martyn, *Galatians*, 472.
establishes a new religion. These are extreme claims that reflect the older, traditional Protestant view that Paul rejects everything Jewish, when in fact Paul never ceased being a Jew and never completely breaks with his former heritage, as has been extensively argued by scholars such as Paula Fredriksen and Mark Nanos. Furthermore, a complete rejection of Judaism does not explain why Paul also says uncircumcision has no value (cf. 1 Cor 7:18–20). On the other hand, while Paul would agree that ethnic identity and social status does not count for anything with God (Gal 3:28–29; cf. Col 3:11), to interpret Paul’s statement “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” merely on socio-ethnic terms, which appears to be the tendency in Dunn’s New Perspective approach, is to evade the deeper soteriological reasons behind his argument.

The inclination to interpret Paul solely on socio-ethnic terms can be avoided when the broader meanings of circumcision in first-century Judaism are considered. As has been discussed in the historical background section, circumcision not only indicated inclusion in the people of God, but also had implications for salvation and sanctification. It is a deeply theological issue that led to such strong theological statements in verses 2–4, which also corroborates Moo’s assertion that Paul’s stance on circumcision is “contextually determined:”

He is unalterably opposed to requiring Gentiles to be circumcised in order to qualify them for full membership in the people of God. He has nothing against circumcision of Jews when it is not a matter of requirement for salvation; he is therefore quite happy for Timothy, whose Jewish mother qualified him as a Jew, to be circumcised (Acts 16:1–3). Nor would Paul have any quarrel with the modern practice of circumcising male babies for (debated) health reasons. . . . It is not the physical act as

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such that Paul opposes; it is its ritual significance within the first-century Jewish context that is the issue.\textsuperscript{117}

Considering the social and political ramifications of religion in the first century AD, the acceptance of circumcision would naturally affect the socio-political status of those involved.\textsuperscript{118} But that is not Paul’s primary concern. For him, the acceptance of circumcision in Galatia is a theological issue with soteriological implications. The ritual of circumcision and its implications do not have any soteriological relevance in Christ, nor does remaining uncircumcised change one’s status before God in any way.\textsuperscript{119}

In contrast, the only thing that has value in the realm of Christ is faith—note the contrastive conjunction ἀλλά accompanying the noun πίστις (b’’), which is antithetical to circumcision and uncircumcision. As Fung notes, this emphasizes the “all-sufficiency of faith over against the total inefficacy of circumcision (and uncircumcision).”\textsuperscript{120} Paul, however, qualifies “faith”: it is “faith working through love” that has value. As has been discussed, Paul’s assertion here is in regard to the realm of Christ—what has and what has no value for sanctification in Christ’s sphere of operation. A structural comparison between Galatians 5:6 and 6:15 further validates this point:\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{117} Moo, \textit{Galatians}, 322. “The apostle himself was circumcised and he accepted circumcision for the sons of Jewish believers (Acts 21:20–24), though he regarded the rite as in itself unimportant (cf. verse 6). But when it was made a demand on Gentile converts to Christianity, that was quite another thing.” Morris, \textit{Galatians}, 154.

\textsuperscript{118} See discussion on the historical background of circumcision.

\textsuperscript{119} Morris, \textit{Galatians}, 157–58; Fee, \textit{Galatians}, 191; Moo, \textit{Galatians}, 330; Fung, \textit{The Epistle to the Galatians}, 228.

\textsuperscript{120} Fung, \textit{The Epistle to the Galatians}, 228.

\textsuperscript{121} 1 Corinthians 7:19 is also comparable to Galatians 5:6 and 6:15: “For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God” (ESV). The context of 1 Corinthians 7 makes it clear that Paul does not preach the complete termination of the rite of circumcision; rather, “each should remain in the condition in which he was called,” whether circumcised or uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:17–20). The rite itself has no value whatsoever in Christ, just as social hierarchy,
In both texts, circumcision is mentioned first, then uncircumcision, both of which are accompanied by negative correlative conjunctions. The third element in both passages is introduced by the conjunction ἀλλὰ. The fact that “faith working through love” is parallel to “new creation” demonstrates that the issue in Galatians 5:6 is the new realm in Christ, not entrance into it (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:13–16; 4:21–24; Col 1:15). The dynamic faith in verse 6 presupposes justification, and justification bears fruit in such a faith. Once again, “faith working through love” confirms that the law has become alive in the believer, thus showing that in this new creation, the Spirit is active in the life of the believer.

Summary

A literary analysis of Galatians 5:2–6 demonstrates that Paul is discussing more than merely legalism, Judaism itself, or ethnicity issues. At the same time, recognizing the different parallelisms in the pericope evinces that Paul’s declarations regarding circumcision and the law are contextually determined. The Galatians were already believers, and it is from that perspective that Paul reasons with them regarding their status, or ethnicity has no value for one’s standing before God (1 Cor 7:21–24; cf. Gal 3:28–29; Col 3:11). See Martyn, Galatians, 471–74.

122 Although Moo recognizes that “in Christ” refers to new creation, he maintains that “the faith that expresses itself, working itself out in acts of love, is the faith that is valid, or counts, for justification.” Moo, Galatians, 330–31.

123 Martyn, Galatians, 474. For a more in-depth discussion on the meaning of “faith working through love,” see the syntactical analysis.
desire to be circumcised. For that, he appeals to their shared experience of justification and the reception of the Spirit, exhorting them to stay in the realm of grace. Circumcision itself is not the issue; in fact, in other contexts, Paul is not opposed to it, as long as no salvific or religious value in terms of redemption from sin is attributed to it. But in this context, this does not seem to be the case. Paul’s arguments do have broader theological implications regarding the role of the law, the extent of God’s grace, and the consequences of relying on means other than faith for sanctification, which can apply to other contexts and situations. Similarly, such theological debates do have socio-political ramifications, considering the interrelation between religion, ethnicity and politics in the first century AD. But, in this specific context, even the general, universal statement in 5:6 regarding what has value in Christ is a theological statement directed to the realm of grace and the new creation. For the Galatian believers to consider circumcision in order to receive some kind of soteriological benefit would in reality be a denial of their experience of faith. They would be forfeiting their benefits in Christ and ran the risk of being severed from the realm of grace. For those who are in Christ, faith is still the only thing that matters for sanctification.

**Syntactical Analysis**

This section will explore several syntactical elements of the text that support the understanding that in Galatians 5:2–6 Paul is discussing the ongoing life of the believer, which is identified by the Spirit and by faith. Rather than including a separate section for a discussion on particular keywords, linguistical analyses of different terms will be incorporated to the argument as needed.
Conditionality

Paul’s claim that circumcision would lead to the Galatians losing their benefits in Christ is conditional. The use of ἐάν followed by a subjunctive verb is an indicator of the third-class condition in which the author is describing a hypothetical situation and pointing to the likely future outcome of following through with the protasis. The likelihood of the apodosis is supported by the use of the predictive future verb ὧψαλήσει. The use of such conditional language indicates that the Galatian believers had not yet gone through with circumcision. It was the acceptance of circumcision, however, that initiated most of the discussion in Galatians (cf. Gal 2:12) and that brought out such passionate statements by Paul in this pericope. The verb περιτέμνω in verse 2 should most likely be interpreted as a permissive middle, considering the use of the middle participle of the same verb in verse 3. This analysis stresses the compliance of the subject to pressure coming from elsewhere (1:6; 2:3; 4:9–10). Although the subject does not perform the action, the emphasis on the permissive middle is on the “consent, toleration, or permission of the action.” Therefore, by interpreting the middle participle as permissive, it is understood that Paul puts the responsibility entirely on the readers—they had been taught the true gospel, they had experienced the transformative

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127 Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 264.


129 Although Schreiner is correct in saying that whether the verb is understood as middle or passive, the general meaning of the passage does not change, Paul’s rhetoric loses its force if the verb is analyzed as a passive. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 313.
work of the Spirit, and they have the responsibility of remaining faithful to it, regardless of outside influence.

Considering the parallelism between verses 2 and 3, as discussed in the literary analysis, the assertion that those who accept circumcision are obligated to keep the whole law (v. 3) carries the same notion of conditionality and probability. The verb ἐστίν should in this context be understood as a futuristic present, again pointing to the future results of undergoing circumcision. It could be argued that the present tense of the verb along with the reference to “every man” indicates that Paul is stating a general principle—that every time and in every situation that one undergoes circumcision one is obligated to keep the whole law. However, the parallelism between verses 2 and 3 reinforces the need to understand Paul’s statement within its immediate context: when circumcision is “voluntarily undertaken as a legal obligation,” when one views it as a prerequisite for receiving of benefits in Christ, Paul objects to the rite.

This notion of conditionality and future consequences is relevant especially for understanding verse 4. The subordinated clause οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε functions as the subject of both κατηργήθητε and ἔξεπεσατε. On the basis of the parallelism between verses 2–4, explored in length in the literary analysis, “you who would be justified by the

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130 That Paul is making a generalized statement in verse 3 is implied by a number of commentators, such as Betz, Galatians, 259–60; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 368; Morris, Galatians, 155; Longenecker, Galatians, 226–27; Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 265–67; Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 222–23; Moo, Galatians, 322.

131 “Circumcision as a minor surgical operation is neither here nor there, but circumcision voluntarily undertaken as a legal obligation carries with it a further obligation—nothing less than the obligation to keep the whole law. He who submits to circumcision as a legal requirement, necessary for salvation, accepts thereby the principle of salvation by law-keeping, and salvation by law-keeping implies salvation by keeping the whole law.” Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 230.
law” has the same conditional sense as verses 2 and 3. In other words, accepting circumcision is akin to attempting righteousness by the law, which carries the future consequences of being severed from Christ and the realm of grace. This is further supported by the syntax of the verbs: any syntactical analysis other than a conative present—something that is being attempted—for the verb δικαιοσύνη “would contradict the whole point of Galatians” as a heartfelt appeal for the readers not to deviate from the truth and would challenge Paul’s statements that the law does not justify (cf. 1:6–7; 3:11; 5:1, 7). As has been mentioned in the literary analysis, however, the fact that Paul writes to his readers from an already “in” perspective suggests that this attempt of being righteous by the law in verse 4 might actually reflect a misconception of the role of the law in regard to growing in righteousness in the sphere of Christ, i.e., sanctification by the law (cf. 5:14—6:10). In keeping with the appealing nature of the epistle as a whole, where Paul exhorts his readers to remember that they stand in the freedom of God’s grace (cf. Gal 3:28; 4:8–9; 5:1), and with the conditionality in Galatians 5:2–3, the proleptic aorist for the two verbs κατηργήθητε and ἐξεπέσατε is to be preferred, therefore indicating that such a stubborn insistence on an alternative gospel will eventually lead to a separation from Christ and his grace.

132 Moo, Galatians, 325–26; Martyn, Galatians, 471.

133 Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, 434–35; Moo, Galatians, 326.

134 See the discussion in the Eschatological Righteousness section.

135 Moo, Galatians, 326; Das, Galatians, 525. Contra Dunn, who writes that “even the beginning of such an attempt (present tense) marks a decisive breach with Christ (aorist tense).” Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 267–68. The ingressive aorist is also a possibility, in which case Paul would be stressing that their deviation from the true gospel has already begun to have consequences. In line with the general tone of the epistle, however, it seems that the proleptic is the more natural choice.
This focus on conditionality in Galatians 5:2–6 therefore indicates that Paul discusses circumcision in the context of a continuing experience in Christ, rather than in relation to how one becomes a believer in the first place. Paul’s language indicates that his readers are in real danger of losing their status of “children of promise” (4:29; cf. 3:29). But other than reading the aorist verbs in 5:4 as gnomic,¹³⁶ there is nothing in the epistle to support the notion that an attempt of circumcision on the part of the Galatians has already put them outside the realm of grace. The issue is not the justification of the sinner before God¹³⁷; it is whether there is anything one can do to promote one’s already existing relationship with God. According to Paul, there is nothing one can contribute, because the continuing experience of the believer in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit require just as much faith as to become a believer.¹³⁸

“In Christ Jesus”

The discussion in Galatians 5:2–6 is about what has validity in the realm of Christ (Gal 5:6). The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (v. 6) is distinctly Pauline, occurring outside of Paul only in the epistle of 1 Peter. Paul generally uses it in three different contexts: the redemptive act that happened “in Christ,” as a reference to believers being “in Christ,”

¹³⁶ Schreiner, Galatians, 314.

¹³⁷ Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 231.

¹³⁸ See Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” 1–10; Longenecker, Galatians, 226. Although Schreiner does not defend this position extensively in his commentary, and even contradicts himself in the footnote (see literature survey), his comment on Galatians 3:1–5 is suitable to the point we are trying to make: “Paul, however, believed that the Galatians were Christians because they had already received the Spirit. Hence, he frames the matter in terms of progress in the Christian life. . . Thus he describes their desire to be circumcised as a misguided attempt to make progress in the Christian life on the basis of the flesh instead of the Spirit. We see here as well that the Christian life follows the same course whether the issue is justification or sanctification. . . Both justification and sanctification are due to the Spirit’s work and are the result of faith.” Schreiner, Galatians, 184–85.
and as actions which believers do “in Christ.” There is insufficient evidence in the text to affirm that this is a reference to the importance of “vital fellowship” and an “energizing relationship” with Christ. Rather, Paul is emphasizing the believers’ new identity and status after having accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. In this new reality, rituals and statuses which were deemed of value in society, or in religious thought outside of Christ, are powerless, ineffective, and indifferent to one’s standing before God.

The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ “denotes transfer of lordship and existential participation in the new reality brought about by Christ.” At the heart of this experience is the death and resurrection of Christ, and the indwelling of Christ in the believer (Gal 2:19–20), and not the beginning of one’s relation with Christ. To be “in Christ” has corporate—the believer is included into the body of Christ—and ethical implications: “in Christ” the Spirit can work in the life of the believer, transforming

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140 Morris, Galatians, 157; Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 272.

141 Barclay writes that when believers are said to be ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, this emphasizes their transformed lies and marks “a clear contrast with believers’ former mode of existence. It indicates a transfer from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from sin to righteousness.” Barclay, “Christ in You”, 110–11; Mark A. Seifrid, “In Christ,” in Hawthorne, Martin and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 433–36.

142 Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 270–71; Martyn, Galatians, 472.

143 Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 400.

144 “The sense of being bound up with Christ focused on two soteriological moments of particular significance. One was the event of Christ’s death and resurrection. The other was the beginning of that event’s impact on individual lives. The condition of ‘in Christ’ was brought about by being brought ‘into Christ’ and sustained by being ‘with Christ’.” Ibid., 410.
inherently evil inclinations to “an obedience enabled and enhanced by grace” (3:1–5, 14; cf. 1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1).145

The two genitives of separation in verse 4, “from Christ” and “from grace,” again give evidence that the acceptance of circumcision would jeopardize precisely this indwelling of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the Galatian believers. Rather than “falling into law-keeping”146 as the consequence of circumcision, it is the pursuit of doing the law, introducing a “nexus of obligation”147 into the divine-human relationship, which is incompatible with grace. In other words, it is not only the context of the passage and the parallelism of the text that indicates that Paul writes from an already “in” perspective, as discussed in the literary analysis. The distinctly Pauline terminology of being “in Christ” and the danger of being severed from the realm of Christ, as emphasizes by the syntax, once again emphasizes that Paul’s discussion goes beyond ethnicity or membership in the people of God, as has been argued by proponents of the New Perspective and the Paul within Judaism approaches. Neither is the focus on merely individual forensic justification, as the traditional Lutheran approach would argue. Instead, in the context of Galatians, Paul opposes circumcision because it leads to separation from the realm of Christ and his grace,148 where Christ has no advantage and the Spirit has no jurisdiction.

145 Dunn points out that there is such an overlap between Christ and the Spirit that “the dividing line between experience of Spirit and experience of Christ has become impossible to define in clear-cut terms. At best we may speak of Christ as the context and the Spirit as the power.” Ibid., 407–11.

146 Fee, *Galatians*, 188–89.


Through the Spirit, by Faith, We Wait

The verb ἀπεκδέχομαι is consistently used in the NT in reference to eschatological anticipation (cf. Rom 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor 1:7; Phil 3:20). Interpreting the verb as a progressive intensive present—an ongoing, intensified action (“we are eagerly awaiting”)—is consistent with other NT passages in which the verb appears. A parallel passage worth mentioning is Romans 8:19–25, where ἀπεκδέχομαι occurs three times (vv. 18, 23, 25). The creation and the believers (“we,” v. 23) are both waiting for the final eschatological redemption, and this expectation for the fulfillment of an unseen promise is called hope (ἐλπίς; v. 20, 24, 25). The difference between creation and the believers, however, is that the believers have already experienced the “firstfruits of the Spirit” (v. 23), meaning that they have had a foretaste of the coming glory. The Spirit qualifies the state of expectancy of the believers until the eschatological hour, and “helps us in our weakness” (v. 26). Likewise, in Galatians 5:5, while the end goal is the future “hope of righteousness,” the emphasis is on the state of expectancy—eagerly waiting “through the Spirit, by faith.”

The adverbial dative of means πνεύματι and the genitive of means ἐκ πίστεως explain the manner in which “we” wait for the hope of righteousness. In Galatians, the


151 The similarity of vocabulary between Romans 8 and Galatians 5:2–6 is striking: ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, νόμος, πνεῦμα, δικαίωμα, δικαιοσύνη, ὁφειλέτης, ἀπεκδέχομαι, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη. See also Das, Galatians, 527–28.

152 According to Wallace, all instances of πνεύματι are most likely datives of means. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, 166; Das, Galatians, 527–28.
terms πνεῦμα and πίστις appear in two different contexts: in 3:2 and 3:14, Paul explicitly mentions the receiving of the Spirit through faith, similar to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:1–4). In 3:3 and in 3:5, Paul refers to the transformative work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. It is through faith, and not through the law (or circumcision), that the Spirit is both received and active in the life of the believer. As Fung mentions, the Spirit stands in contrast to the flesh, while “by faith” is antithetical to “by way of the law.” In this sense, “faith” stands for reliance on God as opposed to human merit, and “Spirit” stands for something that is achieved through divine power. Galatians 3:2 (now being perfected), 3:5 (works miracles) and 5:5 (eagerly wait) all refer to the present life of the Galatian believers—it is the Spirit who gives evidence of the “already but not yet” reality that Christ’s sacrifice was effective, and indeed it is the Spirit who is the fulfillment of God’s promise (3:13–14; cf. Rom 8:23), and also gives us assurance of “the final outcome of our justification, to be

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153 This is a case in which the historical events parallel what happens in the believer’s life: the cross made it possible for the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, just as justification by faith makes it possible for the believer to receive the Spirit and its fruits. Dunn also points out that the experience in the Spirit recapitulates the story of Christ: The Spirit “came in response to faith exercised in the crucified Christ (3.1–2); and it reproduced the same spirit of sonship in the believer (4.5–7). It is this last feature which enables us to give a little more definition to the experience of the Spirit as understood by Paul and other very early Christians: not just as experience of surging emotions (cf. Rom. 5.1; 1 Thess. 1.6), or of charismatic empowering (as in Gal. 3.5),... but as experience patterned on Christ’s (cf. 4.19) and as conforming to Christ’s sonship (4.6–7). It is precisely as the Spirit of the Son (4.6) that Paul expected the Spirit to be known and acknowledged within the churches.” Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 61–62. This is contra Martyn, who relates the experience of the Spirit to one of “assurance of God’s sustaining care,” and Betz, who describes the experience of the Spirit as ecstatic and irrational. Martyn, Galatians, 472; Betz, Galatians, 29.

154 Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 232.


156 Morris, Galatians, 156–57; Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 418; Betz, Galatians, 262.

157 Fee, Galatians, 8–9.
realized with the return of Christ.”

Therefore, Paul appeals to “the reality of their initial and ongoing experience” of faith and the Spirit, pointing out that circumcision could add nothing to this experience. As Dunn says,

In elaborating the Christ side of the antithesis with circumcision Paul makes a double emphasis on two givens—as we might say, the objective fact of the cross, and the subjective fact of their experience of believing, and receiving grace and the Spirit. . . . For anything more to be required as fundamental without which participation in covenant blessing would not be recognized, was to deny their own experience as well as to nullify the cross.

A survey of the verb ἀπεκδέχομαι and the two adverbial phrases in Galatians 5:5 therefore give clear evidence that Paul is emphasizing the present state of expectancy of the believers, which is qualified as “through the Spirit, by faith.” Though there are no serious objections to this interpretation, the centrality of the Spirit in this passage, which has ramifications for the tone of the entire pericope, is often not emphasized enough. While the outlook is future, the emphasis is on the present. True believers by faith surrender completely to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in their lives, looking forward with assurance to the consummation of their faith (cf. Heb 11:1).

Eschatological Justification

The concept of righteousness and justification in Paul is at the heart of many scholarly debates in Pauline studies, and naturally raises the question of how δικαιοσύνη is used specifically in Galatians 5:5. The noun δικαιοσύνη in connection to the verb ἀπεκδέχομαι, consistently used in the NT in reference to eschatological expectation,

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158 Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 417–18.

159 Dunn, “‘Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, But . . . ,” 326–27.

160 Ibid., 327.
appears to imply a future justification, which seems surprising in Galatians. Therefore, “the hope of righteousness” in verse 5 needs to be analyzed more closely.

The relationship between the head noun ἐλπίδα and the genitive δικαιοσύνη naturally affects the interpretation of Galatians 5:5. If δικαιοσύνη is understood as a subjective genitive, it would refer to the present justification by faith which points believers forward to hope. In favor of this interpretation, Fung argues that Paul uses the term δικαιοσύνη for past justification, and σωτηρία for the future. However, both the noun σωτηρία and the verb σῴζω are used to refer to both the past and the future (cf. Rom 1:16; 5:9–10; 8:24; 1 Cor 1:21; 5:5; Eph 2:8), and is at times used interchangeably with δικαιοσύνη (cf. Rom 10:10, 13). Also, although Paul does use the noun ἐλπίς on its own (cf. Rom 12:12; 15:4, 13; 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 4:13), when ἐλπίς is followed by a genitive, as in Galatians 5:5, the genitive is usually objective, describing the content of hope (cf. Rom 5:2; 1 Cor 9:10; Eph 1:18; 4:4; Col 1:23, 27; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8; Tit 1:2; 3:7).

Most commentators interpret δικαιοσύνη in 5:5 as an objective genitive, meaning righteousness is the future object of hope, an interpretation that is not inconsistent with the notion of δικαιοσύνη elsewhere in Paul. Since humans are sinners, and fail to live up to the standards of the law, the law is deficient in providing humans with

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161 “In a letter in which Paul has polemically and consistently said that the human scene . . . has already been changed by God’s rectifying deed in Christ’s advent and death, it is a surprise to hear him speak with emphasis of hope, the only instance of this term in the letter. And it is a double surprise to hear him refer to rectification as a future event.” Martyn, Galatians, 472.

162 Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians, 224–26; Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 419.


164 Moo, Galatians, 328–29.
righteousness and life (Gal 3:21; cf. Rom 3:20), which is why justification by faith is so central (Gal 2:16; cf. Rom 3:21–24): by faith in Christ, God is the one who imputes righteousness in us, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or human merit. What is not emphasized much by most interpreters of Galatians, however, is that δικαιοσύνη is not limited to the forensic act of justification. Justification by faith in Christ puts the believer in the realm of Christ, which opens the way for the sanctifying work of the Spirit (cf. Rom 6:1–7; 8:1–2; Gal 2:16–21; 3:21–29).  

165 Humans are dependent on the justifying power of Christ, both in reference to the point and time of conversion and to the process of becoming righteous through the work of the Spirit (cf. Rom 5:12–21; Gal 5:17–23). In other words, “δικαιοσύνη can denote both the righteousness which acquits and the living power which breaks the bondage of sin,” which demonstrates the close connection between justification and sanctification.  

166 But while believers can be called righteous because they were justified by Christ and are experiencing the work of the Spirit in their lives, this process of sanctification will not be complete until the eschatological deliverance in the last judgment (cf. Rom 8:18–23), which is how δικαιοσύνη can also be used as the eschatological object of hope in Galatians 5:5 (cf. Gal 5:21; 6:7–10).  

167 “God’s deed of rectification—accomplished in Christ—is still finding its concrete form in the daily life of the church, as the church expands into the whole of the world.” Martyn, Galatians, 478–79. Justification and sanctification are often so closely connected in Paul that some authors even argue that they are one and the same. This is a theological discussion that is beyond the scope of this thesis. For the definition of justification and sanctification used in this thesis, and a list of authors who argue that justification and sanctification are the same, see the introduction.  

168 Das, Galatians, 528–29.
refers to the second coming of Christ and to the eschatological promise of eternal life (cf. Col 1:5; 1 Thess 5:8; Tit 2:13; 3:7), the day in which “the Lord, the righteous judge,” will award believers with the “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim 4:8).

This is evidence that, contrary to Sanders, justification/righteousness-terminology in Paul is more than merely a “transfer term” that indicates “getting in” to the body of saved. Furthermore, if the context of Galatians 5:2–6 indicates that the discussion is not primarily about justification in terms of “getting into” the people of God, then the “attempt of being righteous” (δικαιωμαι) in verse 4 needs to be reevaluated as well. Even though righteousness in verse 5 has a future eschatological outlook, Paul’s main concern is with the present, and indicates that the Galatians’ attempt to righteousness (v. 4) might actually be a reference to their attempting sanctification on their own terms through circumcision. In support of this possibility is the evidence provided in the historical background regarding the broader theological implications of circumcision in the first century AD. Whether or not the “theology” of circumcision of Paul’s opponents or the understanding of the Galatian believers regarding the significance of the rite was so well-

169 “Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies maintenance of status among the group of the elect; in Paul it is a transfer term. In Judaism, that is, commitment to the covenant puts one ‘in’, while obedience (righteousness) subsequently keeps one in. In Paul’s usage, ‘be made righteous’ (‘be justified’) is a term indicating getting in, not staying in the body of the saved. Thus when Paul says that one cannot be made righteous by works of law, he means that one cannot, by works of law, ‘transfer to the body of the saved’. When Judaism said that one is righteous who obeys the law, the meaning is that one thereby stays in the covenant.” Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 544.

170 Based on the eschatological overtones in verse 5, a few commentators consider the entire pericope to have an eschatological outlook. Schreiner and Moo interpret the future verb ὑφελήσει (v. 2) to mean that Christ will be of no advantage to the Galatians in the final judgment. However, the future tense is merely the apodosis of the conditional construction. While seeking an alternative gospel certainly has consequences for the future judgment (cf. 6:8), Das rightly points out that Paul’s main concern is with the present maintenance of the believers in the realm of grace and membership in the people of God. Similarly, Witherington suggests that “Paul has the final judgment in mind” in verse 4, but again, Paul’s main concern is with the present, and the primary intention of the Galatians in undergoing circumcision seems to be in the present as well (cf. 3:2–5). Schreiner, Galatians, 313; Moo, Galatians, 321; Das, Galatians, 523; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 369.
developed is difficult to ascertain; still, Paul clearly understood the theological implications of their claims and counters them with this broad exposition of righteousness, the role of the Spirit, and faith in the realm of Christ.

While the outlook is future, Paul’s main emphasis and concern is in the present. Faith is not only the means of “entering a relationship with God, but also of maintaining that relationship and of confirming that relationship on the day of judgment.” Seeking circumcision to contribute to this process of sanctification will prove to be defective. As Das says,

Since Paul has the future realities and benefits in view, the implication is that one can indeed fall “from grace” (5.4). God’s grace does not yet endow the individual with an irreversible benefit. Paul’s warning is earnest. The future hope is not yet fully realized and can be jeopardized by the foolish actions of any who would seek justification by the Law. . . . The Spirit remains the empowering agent who guarantees for the believer those future blessings of justification.

Once again, a deeper analysis of the text reveals the broader scope of Paul’s argument. Narrow, generic definitions of righteousness such as the one proposed by Sanders do not do justice to the unique context of the passage. Just as circumcision had such broad implications in the socio-religious first-century context, Paul understands that Christ’s work in the life of the believer is all-encompassing. The believers were justified by faith, and it is by faith that the sanctifying power of the Spirit, restoring righteousness to the sinful human heart, can work in their lives until they are confirmed before God in the final judgment. This is the reason Paul is adamant about the Galatians staying faithful to their experience—there is no better assurance of the final fulfillment of God’s promise.

171 Moo, Galatians, 329; Martyn, Galatians, 478–79.
172 Das, Galatians, 528–29. See also Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 276; Morris, Galatians, 156–57; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 369–70; Betz, Galatians, 262.
than the present miraculous transformation the Spirit had already accomplished in their lives (cf. Gal 3:2–6).

**Faith Working through Love**

The act of surrendering to the work of the Spirit while waiting for the complete and final fulfillment of God’s promises (v. 5) should be the attitude of true believers, because “faith working through love” is the only thing that has any value whatsoever in Christ (explanatory γάρ; v. 6). When taken at face value, the meaning of “faith working through love,” however, is somewhat unclear. Although the basic meaning of the verb ἐνεργέω as “to work” is considerably straightforward, a deeper analysis of its usage lends strong support to the understanding that Paul is referring to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Though in the seven occurrences of ἐνεργέω in the Septuagint the verb is not used with any special emphasis, in Hellenistic literature and in Philo it is predominantly used to describe “cosmic forces at work in man or the world around,” while the NT uses it “almost exclusively for the work of divine or demonic powers.”

Paul mostly uses the verb to designate divine action in the life of the believer (1 Cor 12:6, 11; Eph 3:20; Phil 2:13; Col 1:29; 1 Thess 2:13), a usage that is followed also in the epistle of Galatians (Gal 2:8; 3:5). It therefore seems coherent to

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173 The verb ἰσχύω in verse 6 should be understood as a gnomic present, since Paul is discussing what is valid in the realm of Christ in terms of a general, timeless fact.


175 Paul also uses the verb to refer to the deceiving work of the devil, or to the corruptive work of sinful passions (Rom 7:5; 2 Cor 4:12; Eph 2:2; 2 Thess 2:7).

176 Although the participle could be either a middle or a passive voice, in virtually all other NT passages there is strong support for the middle. Furthermore, the middle voice is consistently used in Greek literature and in the NT with an impersonal subject, as is the case in Galatians 5:6, where πίστις is the
understand that the use of the verb ἐνεργέω in Galatians 5:6 is also hinting at divine work in the life of the believer.  

Love, of course, is identified as the fruit of the Spirit (5:22). But it is not only a fruit of the Spirit; it is the fulfillment of the law itself (5:13–14), and it is in community that love is expressed to the fullest. Without the work of the Spirit, the natural sinfulness of man only leads to dissension, strife and division (cf. 5:15, 20, 26), as evidenced in the episode of Peter withdrawing from the table of the uncircumcised believers (2:12–14). Creating a distinction between the circumcised and uncircumcised, whether in terms of ethnic or religious advantage, has no relevance whatsoever in Christ. But the believer who truly submits in faith to Christ will experience the sanctifying work of the Spirit, which in turn will express itself in love and service among the followers of Christ (5:13–14, 22–23, 26), ultimately building bridges between people instead of walls (cf. Gal 3:26–28).

Although most authors recognize that “faith working through love” refers to the fruit of the Spirit, a result of the transformative work of the Spirit in the life of the 

impersonal subject of the participle ἐνεργούμενη (Diodorus of Sicily, 13.85.2; Hermetica, 12.11; Rom 7:5; 2 Cor 1:6; 4:12; Eph 3:20; Col 1:29; 1 Thess 2:7, 13; Jas 5:16). Moo, Galatians, 330.

177 Das, Galatians, 530–32; Fee, Galatians, 191.

178 Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 419–20; Martyn, Galatians, 474; Betz, Galatians, 33; Luther, Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4, 129; Morris, Galatians, 158.

179 “Faith gives evidence of itself in how an individual acts toward others. Love expresses itself in a community.” Das, Galatians, 532; Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul, 332–33; Witherington III, Grace in Galatia, 370; Dunn, “‘Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, But…’,” 332–33

180 Das, Galatians, 532. Martin argues that the Galatian controversy is all about holiness. For Paul, it is faith in Jesus and the possession of the Spirit that are the distinguishing marks of holiness in the people of God, not circumcision. The fruit of the Spirit is the mark of purity in the people of God. Martin does not extend his discussion to sanctification. Troy W. Martin, “Circumcision in Galatia and the Holiness of God’s Ecclesiæ,” in Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament, ed. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 231–32
believer, not much is written in regard to how this influences the understanding of the pericope as a whole. In the present context, the explanatory γὰρ indicates that verse 6 explains all of Paul’s previous statements.\textsuperscript{181} If (un)circumcision is irrelevant because the only thing that matters in the realm of Christ is faith in the sanctifying work of the Spirit and its fruit in the life of the believer, this should shed direct light on why Paul opposes circumcision in verses 2 and 3 and justify Paul’s ensuing statements in verses 4 and 5: the Galatians’ inclination toward circumcision would jeopardize the maintenance of their sanctifying experience in Christ.

Summary

A syntactical analysis of Galatians 5:2–6 again demonstrates the broader scope of Paul’s theology. The conditionality present in verses 2–4 indicates that the consequences of circumcision are spelled out in terms of jeopardizing the Galatians’ present experience in the realm of Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ), rather than in relation to how they enter the people of God, which supports the findings in the literary analysis. A syntactical analysis of the text, however, goes one step further to emphasize Paul’s focus on sanctification. Paul argues that in seeking circumcision, the Galatians would be attempting to grow in righteousness through means other than faith, which would threaten their status as already legitimate sons of God and heirs to the promise. Instead, true believers await knowing that faith in God and the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the present is what gives evidence of the reality of the cross, and assurance of the realization of the eschatological promise of final redemption. There is also sufficient evidence to affirm

\textsuperscript{181} Morris, \textit{Galatians}, 157
that righteousness/justification terminology in Paul is broader than forensic justification, confirming that Paul’s concern in Galatians goes beyond how one “gets into” the people of God. Finally, the phrase “faith working through love” is a clear reference to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Sanctification is the divine work in the sinful human heart that expresses itself in community. When Christ lives in us, the life we live by faith is expressed in love to our neighbor (cf. Gal 2:20; 5:14). Whether one is circumcised or not is irrelevant, because this “faith working through love” is the only thing that has any power and validity in the realm of Christ.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

There is no question that the issue of circumcision is directly relevant to the interpretation of Galatians. The question to be answered is why Paul is so opposed to the rite. Following the developments in Pauline studies, from the traditional Protestant interpretations of Paul to more recent approaches, this question has been resolved in different ways, having a direct impact on the interpretation of Paul’s theology. What this thesis has sought to demonstrate, however, is that when it comes to circumcision and the argument of Galatians, there is more involved than what has commonly been emphasized by Pauline scholars. Jewish sources from the Second Temple period reveal that historically circumcision was more than a rite connected to “getting into,” membership in, or identification of, the covenant people of God. Circumcision was also linked to the subjection of thoughts and passions to the will of God, ideals of perfection and holiness, and participation in heavenly worship. A similar conclusion can be reached through an exegetical study of Galatians 5:2–6, where circumcision is directly addressed as the pressing issue of the epistle for the first time. Paul’s concern in this passage is not about how non-believers can be saved, but about how believers can maintain their relationship with God and continue to grow in him—i.e., sanctification. He addresses the topic of circumcision from the perspective of those who are “in Christ Jesus,” and even appeals to his shared experience of faith with his readers to support his arguments. Unfortunately, the few scholars who emphasize the fact that Paul seeks to encourage his audience to
continue their journey of faith fail to make the link between that particular aspect of Paul’s theology and circumcision, since they only view circumcision as an ethnic boundary marker in the first century AD.

Paul responds to the concern of maintaining one’s experience in Christ by presenting a “life-hermeneutic,” in the words of Barclay, that governs the life of believers.¹ Rather than being identified through rites, physical differences, community membership, or ethnicity, the Christian should be known by his or her total surrender to God by faith, a surrender to the sanctifying work of the Spirit that bears fruit in the life of the believer and expresses itself in the community. The two elements therefore that determine the new life of true believers in the present are faith and the Spirit (Gal 5:5). It is through sanctification—the progressive work of the Spirit in reversing the works of the flesh in the sinful human nature, a work which bears the fruit of the Spirit—that believers receive evidence of the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice and assurance of their final eschatological redemption. But there is nothing the believer can do to catalyze the work of the Spirit, which is why the experience of the believer is identified by faith in the power of God from start to finish. As Paul writes, if the believer is led by the Spirit, he or she will bear the fruit of the Spirit, and the law will be fulfilled through loving one’s neighbor as oneself (Gal 5:14, 18, 22–26).

When Paul’s argument is therefore understood within context, respecting the literary evidences in the text, it becomes clear that Paul’s primary concern is theology. The parallelism in Galatians 5:2–4, for example, demonstrates that Paul is not making a generalized, neutral statement about Judaism in verse 3, but is instead continuing his

¹ Barclay, Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews, 28.
theological discussion. Likewise, Paul’s seemingly severe stance on circumcision is determined by the context: it is not circumcision in and of itself that he opposes, but the implication that circumcision has soteriological benefits (Gal 5:6). There is a rising tendency in Pauline scholarship to study the socio-political interactions of Jews and Gentiles and to read Paul’s arguments in light of these circumstances. Although such studies are undeniably enriching to NT studies as a whole, Paul is still primarily concerned in fulfilling his calling to reveal the power of the gospel to the nations. It is true that the older traditional Protestant reading of Paul was often generalized and abstract, with little or no regard to the specific historical context of the communities he addressed. But some of the newer interpretations of Paul often go to the other extreme, such as in the case of Nanos’ argument that Paul resists the circumcision of Gentiles because they were called to be faithful to God in a position of social marginalization. Such interpretations lead to misapprehensions of Paul’s theology. Paul’s primary concern is with the salvation of individual sinners. The correlated life-hermeneutic that should govern the life of the believer—primarily a transformation of the self through the sanctifying work of the Spirit—then has secondary implications for social and communal interactions, as was most likely the case of Gentile converts to Christianity, who found themselves in an irregular situation within the broader community. Still, even in a non-ideal socio-political status, the life-hermeneutic of “faith working through love” should be the mark of the believer. In the words of Christ, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 ESV).

2 See the discussion on the “Paul within Judaism” approach in the literary survey.


Yun, Yong-Pil. “Justification as the Work of the Holy Spirit and Its Relation to Other Spiritual Realities in Galatians and Romans.” Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005.