

Receiving the Abrahamic Covenant Blessings in Christ: An Exegetical Evaluation of Galatians 3:25-29

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INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to analyze the purpose, theology and application of Galatians 3:25-29. In this text Paul continued his argument against the Judaizing heresy prevalent in Galatia which was corrupting the very content of the gospel. To do this, he explained the Mosaic Law's function prior to Christ's first advent, and the nature and implications of the unity believers share with and in Christ. He intended to demonstrate that Gentile believers inherit the Abrahamic covenant blessings by virtue of their relationship to Christ, and therefore should not be compelled to keep the Mosaic Law on the pretense that such work will secure for them the blessings they already possess by faith. Paul also carefully pointed out that racial, class and gender distinctions have no bearing on one's standing in Christ, and consequently bearing on one's reception of these blessings.

Modern audiences would do well to heed the Apostle on these subjects for he: offers a strong corrective to present improper racial, class and gender divisions; establishes an identification of the church with Old Testament Israel that undermines Dispensational interpretive errors; and reaffirms that the doctrine justification by faith alone is essential to the gospel.

BACKGROUND, AUTHOR AND ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

That Paul wrote Galatians has been questioned only by a minority within liberal criticism [Bauer, and the "Dutch school" (Boice, 421)].

The authenticity of his authorship (Galatians 1:1; 5:2) is accepted not only by conservatives, but also by liberal critics *en masse*.

The greater questions arise concerning the date and audience of the letter. A thorough analysis of these matters being beyond the scope of this paper, it will suffice to say that this writer favors a date prior to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35), and a Southern Galatian audience including the churches of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe which Paul established on his first missionary journey.

More important for the interpretation of this letter is its internal evidence regarding the original audience. Paul identified his readers as Gentile churches (1:16) which he had established (1:8) in Galatia (1:2), having converted them from paganism (4:8-10). Probably, there were Jews among them (3:28) who instigated the Galatians' falling away from the gospel they once had held (1:6). According to Paul's evaluation, the churches had begun selflessly (4:14-15), had been willing to suffer for the gospel (3:4), and had run well (5:7), but were subsequently disturbed by certain men (1:7) who convinced them that salvation could not be had apart from circumcision (5:1-12; 6:11-15). Paul previously had encountered similar Judaizing problems in Peter and Barnabas (2:11-21), and, having triumphed over Peter, felt confident that he could speak authoritatively to the matter.

STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Paul's letter to the Galatians may be broken into five basic subdivisions:

1. **GREETING (1:1-5):** In this section, Paul identified himself as the author, and the Galatian churches as the audience. Despite his harsh words for them and his accusation that they had abandoned the gospel, Paul still referred to them as brethren.

2. **PROBLEM INTRODUCED (1:6-10):** Paul immediately explained his reason for writing: following false teaching, the Galatians had abandoned Christ and forsaken the true gospel.
3. **DEFENSE OF PAUL'S GOSPEL AND PAUL'S AUTHORITY (1:11–2:21):** Paul defended his gospel's authority by claiming its divine origin, and by reminding his audience that the Jerusalem apostles themselves affirmed its accuracy and authority. He defended his own authority, both to preach the gospel and to address the problems of Galatia, by recounting his victory over Peter on this very issue.
4. **PROBLEM EXPLAINED AND CORRECTIVE OFFERED (3:1 – 6:10):** In this portion of the letter's body, Paul restated the problem of turning away from the gospel. He more clearly defined the problem as judaizing (rejecting the sufficiency of faith alone to justify) and relying on the added requirement of circumcision. He responded to this heresy by explaining the antithesis between Law and promise as bases for being in Christ and for receiving the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Because the problem also included specific breakdowns of interpersonal relationships and because the corrective might have been thought to advance antinomianism, the corrective also included specific instructions for godly living and brotherly love.
5. **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION (6:11-18):** This brief section reasserts the argument and corrective in concrete terms: circumcision is worthless; walking by the Spirit fulfills the Law; and Paul has the authority to say so. It ends with a typical final blessing.

STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY OF GALATIANS 3:1–4:7

Galatians 3:1– 4:7 is the subsection of the “problem explained and corrective offered” subdivision in which the text at hand falls. It begins with the Paul’s first direct explanation of the problem: the Galatians believed they were being perfected “by the flesh” (3:3), that is, by rendering obedience to the Law. It is worth noting that Paul equated the means of “being perfected” (ἐπιτελείσθε, verse 3) both with the means of miracle working (verse 5) and of justification (δικαιοῖ, verse 8; δικαιοῦται, verse 11). This suggests that Paul thought faith to be the means of many aspects of salvation and regenerate living.

Paul began to correct the problem by establishing that justification is by faith, not by works of the Law, and that the Law can do nothing but curse man (3:6-12). From these premises, he explained that Christ’s work of redemption provides the basis for faith. That is, because Christ fulfills the Law and receives to himself the Abrahamic covenant blessings, and because the Law cannot provide these blessings, the blessings must come to man only through Christ (3:13-16). Paul added that the Law never had been and never could be the means to such blessings for the simple reason that God did not establish the Law as the means to the blessings (3:17-18). Since the Galatians clearly had trouble understanding the proper use of the Law, Paul not only told them what the Law was not, but also what God intended it to be: it was to rule over his people until the coming of Christ, and to prevent them from keeping the Abrahamic covenant apart from Christ (3:19-24). From all the foregoing, Paul declared that one escapes the Law’s rule and receives the covenant blessings only through union with Christ, who is the only one entitled to such freedom and blessings (3:25-29).

Not being satisfied to conclude his argument with this intellectually convincing case, Paul presented the scheme again in more affective terms. He emphasized that God’s love for his people throughout the redemptive-historical process paralleled a father’s love for his children. Paul insisted that God employed the Law as a good,

necessary and temporary steward over his immature children, but that the Law's usefulness ended when the children reached maturity — which maturity they reached in Christ (4:1-7). Over those who believe, the Law has no claim. Further, it has never been, and will never be, the means of salvation.

EXPOSITION OF GALATIANS 3:25-29

Galatians 3:25

In this verse, the genitive absolute ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς πίστεως (“now that faith has come”) should carry its typical temporal adverbial force, representing the point in time from which οὐκέτι (“no longer”) measures. Thus, faith comes when the rule of the παιδαγωγόν (“pedagogue”) Law ends. New Testament biblical theology has suggested that this “coming of faith” refers to the inauguration of the eschaton in the coming of Christ, to the “whole complex of events related to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ” (George, 272), the time “when the new order and dispensation of salvation became effective” (Ridderbos, *Paul* 198). However, given the immediate context, this reading seems unlikely. Paul said that those who were no longer under the παιδαγωγόν were all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26), indicating that he meant a personal coming to faith, repeatable for each individual, not a once-for-all-time eschatological event. This non-biblical theological reading is strengthened by the fact that Paul established his case on the example of Abraham, who lived long before the inauguration of the eschaton.

The phrase ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν (“under a pedagogue”) presents special problems because its proper interpretation depends to some degree on definition of παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”), which is somewhat difficult to determine. παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) was a household slave who took charge over the master's children after they left their

nurse's care and until such time as they reached maturity. He was apparently charged with training children in manners and morals, but not in scholastic matters — although he did conduct his charges to and from school. He was to keep the children out of trouble and out of harm's way, disciplining them if necessary. Philo wrote that the restraining force of the παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) kept children from sin (Yonge, 360), and Josephus recorded that Cain, when questioned by God as to Abel's whereabouts in Genesis 4:9, responded that he was not his brother's παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) (Thackeray, 27). Quoting Plato, Xenophon, Plutarch and Jewish Midrashim, Longenecker presents a strong case that the παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) was an honorable, qualified man (Longenecker, 146-148). Others, however, speak of the παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) as a worthless slave (Ridderbos, *Commentary* 146).

All these understandings of the function of a παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) have led to many speculations regarding the manner in which the Law governs a man prior to faith. Some of those who see the παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) as a disciplinarian maintain that the Law makes men aware of their need for Christ. Some of those who believe the παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) was a respectable man see the Law as leading men to Christ through typology, progressive training and revelation.

These types of interpretations, however, miss Paul's point. Παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) is simply a metaphor for the Law, and its meaning should be stretched no further than Paul's own use, governed by the point he used it to illustrate. In actuality, Paul used παιδαγωγός (“pedagogue”) to refer to the Law's delegated, temporary authority over those who had not matured, which core meaning every scholar on every side affirms.

Paul accentuated this core meaning with temporally weighted words like πρὸ (“before”), μέλλουσιν (“about to be”) and οὐκέτι (“no

longer”) (Galatians 3:23-25), and with the metaphor of the son who is treated like an heir until he comes of age (Galatians 4:1-7). These temporal words also indicate that εἰς in the phrase εἰς Χριστόν (“until Christ”) (Galatians 3:24) ought to be read with a temporal force as “until” (contra Calvin, *Institutes* 308 and 391).¹

Thus, Paul’s use of the metaphor does not directly imply any particular modern use of the Law beyond its having authority to condemn the unregenerate until such time as they come to faith. This use is consistent with other Pauline treatments of the Law (compare Romans 7:6).

Galatians 3:26

Paul shifted from first person plural in verse 25 to second person plural in verse 26, and Betz has argued on this basis that Paul moved from an exclusive “we” in 2:15–3:25 to an exclusive “you” in 3:26ff., very consciously shifting from a discussion of the Jew’s relationship to the Law to the Gentiles’ relationship to the Law (Betz, 185). While this is possible grammatically, common sense must rule against the reading because it completely destroys the flow of Paul’s argument. First, it fails to account for the apparently explanatory use of γὰρ in verse 26. The supposed radical change in subject leaves no foregoing material to be explained, verse 26 no longer being predicated upon verse 25. Betz’s tries to counter this reading, suggesting γὰρ carries an inferential force and indicates that the Gentile’s condition is the consequence of the Jews’ condition, but even this use of γὰρ doesn’t make sense of the passage in context.

¹For Further support of a temporal interpretation, see: Betz, 178; Boice, 467; Bruce, *Commentary* 183; George, 267; Longenecker, 149.

The move from first to second person is better explained as a relatively unimportant variation as Paul moved between an inclusive “we” (“you and I”) and a representational “you” (the Galatians) with which he wholly identified. If any subtle inference is felt, it may be that Paul prodded his readers toward self-evaluation, encouraging a greater internalization of his foregoing argument — but even this suggestion stretches toward over-exegesis.² Taking the “we” as inclusive, the γὰρ indicates an explanation: if they were no longer under a παιδαγωγόν (“pedagogue”), then they had come into their sonship proper (compare George, 273). They were no longer to be treated as slaves (such was the status of a son who was under a παιδαγωγόν [“pedagogue”]), but were to be treated as heirs, just as Paul described in Galatians 4:1-7.

Betz asserts that the title “sons of God” was generally reserved for Jews (Betz, 185-186), but here Paul applied the title to Gentiles as well. This implies that Paul calculated his argument to refute the Judaizers by insisting that the descendants of Abraham are those who claim that status by faith alone. Interestingly, the two appearances of the phrase “son of God” earlier in the letter refer to Christ himself — this alludes to another important point discussed below under the treatment of ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“in Christ Jesus”).

Perhaps the most significant declaration in this verse, both for modern believers and for Paul’s argument, is the statement that believers are sons of God “through faith, in Christ Jesus.” Paul consistently used the first prepositional phrase διὰ τῆς πίστεως (“through faith”), as well as its anarthrous counterpart (διὰ πίστεως [“through faith”]), to refer to the means by which something was accomplished. In this case, he unqualifiedly asserted that becoming sons of God, just as justification, depends solely upon faith in Christ apart from works of the Law (compare Galatians 3:9-11).

²Consider, for instance, the similar shift in Galatians 4:6 where the first and second person forms seem to refer to the same group of people.

The prepositional phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“in Christ Jesus”) has traditionally been understood to indicate the object or location of the aforementioned faith (Luther, 339; Calvin, *Commentary* 110). Even though the grammar allows this, the phrase should be seen instead as a second independent qualification of “sons of God,” meaning “sons of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul almost always uses the genitive, not the dative, after πίστειως to express the object or location of faith, but ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“in Christ Jesus”) is dative.

This conclusion accords precisely with Paul’s usage elsewhere in Galatians. In the phrases διὰ πίστειως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“through faith in Jesus Christ”) and πίστειως Χριστοῦ (“faith in Christ”) in 2:16, the genitive forms Ἰησοῦ Χριστου (“Jesus Christ”) and Χριστου (“Christ”) express the object of faith. This is also the case in 3:22 (πίστειως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [“faith in Jesus Christ”]). On the other hand, in 2:4, 3:14 and 3:28, even the genitive form ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“in Christ Jesus”) refers to the believer’s relationship to or union with Christ. Bruce affirms that this use of the preposition ἐν (“in”) plus the dative Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“Christ Jesus”) “is closely akin to, if not identical with, the Johannine insistence on mutual ‘abiding,’ illustrated by the parable of the vine and the branches (Jn. 15:4-10)” (Bruce, *Commentary* 184).

Thus, Paul’s argument in verses 25 and 26 is that before coming to faith, man is under the authority of the Law, but having come to faith, man is released from the Law and comes into his full sonship through his newfound union with Christ.

Galatians 3:27

This verse contains Paul’s only mention of baptism in the letter, and has been interpreted in terms of sacramentology by numerous theologians. It is clear that Paul said that everyone who has been baptized into Christ has clothed himself with Christ, but the meanings

of “baptized into Christ” and “clothed with Christ” are rather vague. Burton defines the latter phrase by claiming that ἐνεδύσασθε (“clothed”) with the personal object Χριστὸν (“Christ”) “signifies ‘to take on the character or standing’ of the person referred to, ‘to become,’ or ‘to become as’” (Burton, 204). Ridderbos, in turn, understands the entire verse to refer to Christ’s federal headship: “the baptized person is added to Christ as His own, is reckoned to His account, shares in His benefits” (Ridderbos, *Commentary* 148). From a more mystical position, Luther argues from this verse that “baptism is a thing of great force and efficacy” (Luther, 341), teaching that baptism is the means both of regeneration and of “putting on Christ,” that is, of justification.

While all these views may be theologically sound, none of them rightly interprets this verse. Paul was not so much emphasizing his sacramentology, but his soteriology. George rightly negates Luther’s position by reminding the reader that Paul would not have said, “My opponents were wrong in trying to circumcise you. What you really need is to be baptized!” (George, 277). Ridderbos and Burton, in turn, err by denying that this verse portrays the organic elements of unity with Christ.

The real significance of this verse comes out most clearly when one evaluates it in its literary context, taking note of the rhetorical force of its constituent parts. The postpositive γὰρ (“for”) introduces verse 27 as an explanatory phrase paralleling verse 26. The verses may be compared as follows:

Verse	Subject	Means to Resultant State	Resultant State
26	Πάντες ("all")	διὰ τῆς πίστεως ("through faith")	υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ("you are sons of God in Christ Jesus")
27	ὅσοι ("as many")	εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε ("you were baptized into Christ")	Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε ("you have clothed yourselves with Christ")

As can be seen through this parallelism, to put on Christ is to share in the benefits of his sonship through unity with him. Because these resultant states are synonymous, the means to each must be one and the same. Thus, for Paul and the Galatians, baptism symbolizes coming to faith. "Baptism is recalled as the concrete moment in their own life in which they for their part confirmed, recognized, and accepted their investing with Christ from above, their ontic relationship to him" (George, 277). What he stated in verse 26 Paul reiterated here: all those who have come to faith in Christ have been united to him organically.

The use of baptismal imagery was probably intended to remind the Galatians of their own baptisms, the liturgy of which may well have contained elements similar to those in Paul's argument. As a visual image, the rhetorical force of baptism would have been quite compelling. Certainly everyone could remember seeing all types of people baptized. This must have helped prepare the Galatians for the assertions in verse 28, for they all knew that faith and incorporation into Christ were sacramentally expressed by Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female alike.

Galatians 3:28

This verse presents exegetical problems because it contains a textual uncertainty. There are at least five variants of the b verset: εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are one [masculine] in Christ”); ἓν ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are one [neuter] in Christ”); ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are in Christ”); ἐστε ἐν [ἐν] Χριστοῦ (“you are in Christ” [“you are one {neuter} in Christ”]; and ἐστε Χριστοῦ (“you are in/of Christ”). Although ἐστε Χριστοῦ (“you are in/of Christ”) is attested in \mathfrak{P}^{46} and (Alexandrinus), and ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are in Christ”) by the original hand of \mathfrak{N} (Sinaiticus), only εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are one [masculine] in Christ”) is attested in Alexandrian, Western and Byzantine text types. Though not found as early as \mathfrak{P}^{46} , Clement show familiarity with εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are one [masculine] in Christ”) in the 3rd century. This reading also seems more likely to have given rise to the others, either through parablepsis, harmonization or simplification. For these reasons, this paper concurs with the decision of the UBS 4th edition and the Nestle-Aland 27th edition in following the reading εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ (“you are one [masculine] in Christ”).

That believers are one in Christ forms the basis of Paul’s insistence that racial, economic and gender distinctions do not apply in Christ. Again contrary to Ridderbos, this “oneness” is not merely a unit of representation by which God reckons all believers under the headship of Christ. Paul did not deny that Christ’s blessings come to believers because of Christ’s headship over them, but he demonstrated that this headship is not reckoned simply representatively and forensically. The context suggests a repetition of the idea of being “in Christ” from verse 26, the same idea Paul expressed so directly in Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” He spoke here of an organic relationship, of John’s mutual “abiding.” Believers are reckoned under Christ’s headship because they are organically integrated into him. Believers’ oneness with each other derives from the fact that they all participate in Christ.

On the ground of this unity, Paul denied certain human distinctions in Christ. Note that he did not say that such distinctions should no longer hinder interpersonal, social and corporate relationships with one another, but merely that they no longer bear on the inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant blessings, including justification: “In Christ, that is, in the matter of salvation they are nothing” (Luther, 341). Paul subordinated to this his proposition that, because unity in Christ eliminates the Law as a means for obtaining the covenant blessings, unity ought to prevent Judaizers from compelling Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the Law. Paul attempted to make clear that, whereas the Gentiles were once “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12), their unity with Christ destroyed the barring effect of the Jew-Gentile distinction and admitted them to the blessings (compare Colossians 3:11). The same reasoning applies to slaves and women, who did not receive from the father the inheritance reserved for the sons (Galatians 4:1-7). Because all those in Christ are treated as Christ himself, and because Christ is the Son of God, even women and slaves are treated as God’s Son, becoming heirs to the covenant blessings.³

³Some have argued that the shift from the correlative οὐδὲ (“nor”) to the connective καὶ (“and”) between “male” and “female” places the male-female distinction in a different class from Jew-Gentile and free-slave, understanding some altered type of argument in this pair. Similarly, arguments have been made from the neuter forms of “male” and “female” that Paul referred to “maleness and femaleness,” and not to “male and female.” Some have even suggested an androgynous Christ (Betz, 195-200). However, such readings fail to construe οὐκ ἔστι ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ (“there is neither male nor female”) in a manner consistent with Paul’s argument. The point is that men have no advantage over women, nor do women over men, in obtaining covenant blessings or in being united to Christ. The androgyny argument has the further weakness that the Greek literally says “there *is not* maleness and femaleness,” while androgyny requires that “there *is both* maleness and femaleness.”

Of course, this list of distinctions negated in Christ is not exhaustive, but probably hints at particularly problematic valuations in Galatia. In fact, this specific formulation may have been directed toward the Judaizers, as it parallels a common Jewish prayer in which men thanked God that they were not born Gentile, slave or female (see Bruce, *Commentary* 187). Paul answered this pride by explaining that Christ empowered the traditional underclass by uniting himself to them, giving them the status and covenant blessings that were rightfully Christ's alone. Since the blessings cannot be inherited by anyone but Christ himself, the one seeking the blessings must be united to Christ by faith.

By this reading, verse 28 continues the idea of verses 26 and 27 that believers are sons of God, that they have clothed themselves with Christ, and it makes clear that all believers stand on equal footing before God. Paul did not deny that the distinctions listed in 28a continue to apply where society and normal human relationships are concerned. He knew that believers do not cease to be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, and least of all do they cease to be male or female.

Still, he did not hesitate to encourage love for one another on the basis of this unity (Galatians 5:6) — an application beyond the original force of verse 28. At the same time, however, he understood this love to fulfill the Law (Galatians 5:14). He did not abolish proper distinctions established by the Law — he simply denied their merit with regard to the covenant blessings. Therefore, protestations that this verse legitimates homosexuality clearly overstep the bounds of Paul's intentions, as well as the bounds of its broader implications.

More difficult to evaluate in light of this verse is Bruce's question: "If in ordinary life existence in Christ is manifested openly in church fellowship, then, if a Gentile may exercise spiritual leadership in church as freely as a Jew, or a slave as freely as a citizen, why not a woman as freely as a man?" (Bruce, *Commentary* 190). If one understands spiritual leadership in church to be a covenant blessing, he may be

inclined to allow female spiritual leaders over men in church. If, instead, one thinks male spiritual leadership is legally mandated, he may suggest that unity in Christ provides women with the love necessary to submit joyfully to exclusively male spiritual leadership.

Further complicating the issue, one must ask the related question, “Even if circumcision (a legal mandate) was of no value in obtaining covenant blessings like justification, would Paul have encouraged it as an act of love?” In Galatians, the answer was clearly “no” (Galatians 6:15). If Paul did not always encourage adherence to legal mandates, might he have allowed female spiritual leadership in church even if male spiritual leadership were legally mandated?

Before reaching a conclusion, one must also consider 1 Timothy 2:12, in which the same Paul maintained, “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.” Perhaps the safest route in application remains to accept verse 28a without limitation in one’s conceptions of covenant blessings and church unity, and to apply it as a general principle to all other instances, taking particular care to apply it to instances of race, class and gender. Of course, should sound exegesis of other passages demonstrate conclusions contrary to those reached by one’s conception of this general principle, one ought to reevaluate his conception of the general principle.

Galatians 3:29

The phrase εἰ δὲ ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ (“if you are of Christ”) repeats the semantic force of the foregoing ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“you are one in Christ Jesus”). That is, “of Christ” in verse 29 means exactly the same thing as “in Christ” in verse 28 (Betz, 201; George, 292; Lightfoot, 150-151). “Those who are ἐν Χριστῷ [“in Christ”] are also Christ’s (Χριστοῦ), not only in the sense that they belong to Christ or

follow Christ . . . but even more in the sense that they participate in him by the Spirit” (Bruce, *Commentary* 190).

Here Paul reasserted that only those who are organically united to Christ receive the Abrahamic covenant blessings. His argument is simple: all those who are of Christ are Abraham’s seed (σπέρμα). The significance of this vocabulary should not be missed, as it reinforces that being “in Christ” is an organic union. Previously, Paul had stated that Abraham’s seed (σπέρμα) was Christ (Galatians 3:16), but here he said that all those who believe are this singular seed. Those who are in Christ may rightly be assessed as being Christ himself for purposes of bestowing covenant blessings like justification.

Thus, when Paul called believers “heirs according to promise,” he did not mean that each believer receives an individual inheritance because he claims Christ’s covenant keeping. Rather, Paul meant that all believers share in Christ’s one inheritance. Reading back from this point, it becomes evident that Paul presupposed that believers do not have their own individual sonships, but that they share in the one sonship of Christ. While Paul is comfortable calling them “sons of God” in casual language, implying a multiplicity of sonships, the care he takes in Galatians to guard the nature of being “in Christ” confirms that he assumes these to be derivative sonships predicated on Christ’s own sonship.

The proper interpretation of this verse wreaks havoc on Dispensational doctrine, which holds that the New Testament Church does not supplant Old Testament Israel as the covenant people of God.⁴ Dispensationalism relies on the teaching that God’s plan for Israel differs distinctly from God’s plan for the church. This theolog

⁴“To suggest, as amillenarians do, that Gentile believers inherit the national promises given to the believing Jewish remnant — that the church thus supplants Israel or is the “new Israel” — is to read into these verses what is not there” (Walvoord, 600).

contradicts Paul's doctrine that Christ is the only legitimate heir to the Abrahamic inheritance (Galatians 3:16), that man can only receive these blessings in Christ, and that there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ. In so doing, it constructs an artificial distinction between "Abraham's seed" and "Israel" which the Jews themselves would not have recognized.⁵ "They reckoned no distinction higher than to belong to the race of Abraham" (Calvin, *Commentary* 112). The most reasonable interpretation of verse 29, and of the whole passage, is that Christ alone has inherited all the promises made to Israel, and all the blessings of keeping God's covenant. Believers partake of these blessings only by virtue of their union with Christ — a fact which should silence Judaizers and legalists permanently.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this passage, Paul has demonstrated repeatedly that the only means of procuring justification and other covenant blessings is faith in Christ, and that the mechanism through which faith brings about these benefits is organic incorporation into Christ. Contrary to the Judaizers who would have had the Galatians seek righteousness through works of the Law, Paul condemned the works of Law to this end, asserting that the Law has power only to condemn and imprison. Faith, according to Paul, releases believers from the constraints of the Law, regardless of their ethnicity, class or gender, and frees them to live by the Spirit. Obvious applications of this teaching are avoiding legalism and esteeming the brethren as members of Christ, but the greatest application has been summarized well by Longenecker:

⁵For instance, the final lines of the Magnificat read, "He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his offspring forever" (Luke 1:54-55). See also the long discourse on this topic in John 8:31-59 in which the Jews claim to be σπέρμα ἁβραάμ ("Abraham's seed").

“Being ‘in Christ’ is the essence of Christian proclamation and experience. One may discuss legalism, nomism, and even justification by faith, but without treating the ‘in Christ’ motif we miss the heart of the Christian message. . . And so the focus of Christians seeking to live out their commitments in a truly biblical fashion should be on being ‘in Christ,’ without reverting to some nomistic experience” (Longenecker, 159).

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