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# Going for the Goal of Christian Maturity:

A Biblical and Theological Understanding of God's Goals for His People in the New Testament Era, with Pastoral Applications for Churches in the Twenty-First Century

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# Abstract

The subject of my research is 'Paul's doctrine of Christian maturity', which is approached from an exegetical-theological perspective with the intention of drawing pastoral and contemporary applications. In the course of this research I address four questions, which I have listed below along with respective summaries of the main points.

**1. On the basis of Paul's writings, what is his understanding of God's intended goals for his people in the New Testament era?**

God's goals for his people are intimately related to his goals for the whole cosmos: he will restore everything to a state of perfection in a new creation, in which his people will participate. The concept of 'maturity' is explored by an examination of several Pauline uses of τέλειος, in particular Eph. 4:10-16, Phil. 3:12-16 and Col. 1:27-2:3. The ultimate goal of creation I have labelled 'Future Maturity', but additionally God intends that his people should achieve a level of maturity (which I have designated 'Present Maturity') which can be identified with a mind-set or attitude which results from understanding the narrative of God's plan of redemption. This narrative furnishes the world-view of believers. Christians now live in the eschatological 'last days' in which they not only anticipate the end of this present age, but live lives which are directed and transformed by the Holy Spirit.

**2. In what ways might Paul have defined mature believers in the light of God's intended goals for his people?**

The relationship between maturity and fruitfulness is explored, with a particular focus on Galatians 5:16-26. The Holy Spirit produces fruit in the lives of believers, but always in such a way that believers are responsible agents: there is a 'passive-active' aspect to the mature Christian life. Present Maturity can be gauged both in terms of attitude and accomplishment. It is especially witnessed in the church as a community and is encouraged and developed through the practice of imitation as well as by precept. It is also true that maturity consists in identification with the suffering and dying of Christ so that the perspective on suffering is transformed as compared to the perspective of an unbeliever.

**3. How is this description of Christian maturity expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, especially in Gal. 3:1-18?**

The historical background to Paul's Letter to the Galatians explains why Paul needs to remonstrate with the Galatians, because they have been theologically misled. They need to attain to an accurate understanding of the significance of Christ's death in order to achieve maturity. The gospel Paul preaches is a message, a body of doctrine which needs to be heard, but which also needs to be appropriated by faith. Abraham is set before the Galatians as a pattern of faith for them to follow, not simply because he was circumcised but because he trusted in the promises of God which culminate in the work of Christ. The essential conflict between the law and faith in 3:10-13 is examined carefully. Upon believing the Galatians received the Holy Spirit: this reception of the Spirit, it is argued (in agreement) with J. L. Martyn (2010), is to be co-ordinated with the 'blessing of Abraham' in Gal. 3:14. One vital consequence of this blessing is the inclusion of believing Gentiles with believing Jews as fellow-heirs of God's promise.

**4. What implications does Paul's teaching on Christian maturity have for the twenty-first century Christian community in terms of its worldview and practice?**

The distinction between 'Present Maturity' and 'Future Maturity' is summarised and amplified. There should be, in the church of Jesus Christ, a pastoral necessity to facilitate 'Present Maturity' in believers. This process is discussed in relation to Romans 12:2 in particular, and the 'renewal of the mind' is placed in the context of continually learning and reinforcing believers' present participation in the narrative of redemption. This is carried on by moral and spiritual exhortation which is appropriate to the level of maturity which believers have attained. This ongoing renewal of the mind is examined in connection with N. T. Wright's study of virtue (2010). Additionally, it is seen how 'Present Maturity' joins with the present creation in longing for fulfilment and perfection in 'Future Maturity'. The importance of community and the radical understanding of suffering, in the light of this world-view, are again explored and described.

The apostle Paul, as a pastor, rejoices when he witnesses this Present Maturity, as described and defined in this thesis, in all the churches in which he labours, and the longing and desire of Paul is to be experienced by today's pastors, and indeed all Christians.

# General Abbreviations

*ASV*          *American Standard Version*

*AV*           *Authorised Version*

*BDAG*         *Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich*

*ESV*          *English Standard Version*

*IVP*          *Inter-Varsity Press*

*NICNT*        *New International Commentary on the New Testament*

*NICOT*        *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*

*NIV*          *New International Version (2011)*

*SPCK*         *Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge*

# Acknowledgments

This project was initiated back in April 2013, and so first of all I want to express my profound debt of gratitude to my beloved wife Ruth, and my children Rebecca, Matthew and Daniel, for bearing with me over these four years. During this time we have moved from Shrewsbury to London and the support and encouragement provided by my family has been of inestimable value.

May I also pay tribute to the members of the two churches which I have pastored over this time: firstly the brothers and sisters at Shrewsbury Evangelical Church, and then latterly the brothers and sisters at Grove Chapel, Camberwell, South London. I deeply appreciate the prayerful patience and various means of support which they have provided.

Finally, I want to make known my huge appreciation of my supervisor, Professor John Angus MacLeod, who has functioned not only as my tutor and challenger – in the best sense of that word! – but also a pastor to this pastor. My regular visits up to Edinburgh have been deeply rewarding, stimulating and eagerly-anticipated.

# Introduction

The motivation that underlies this entire research is ultimately a pastoral one. How should Christians, churches, and especially those who lead churches, understand God's purposes for his people, specifically in the western, twenty-first century world?

Before this question can be answered, it will be necessary to demonstrate that it is possible to speak of God's 'purposes', indeed his single, overarching plan. There are a number of reasons why I proceed on this assumption. First, as I will be engaging with the teachings of the apostle Paul throughout this thesis, it is important to show that Paul himself believed in the existence of such a plan. In Eph. 1:9-10 Paul says that God has made known 'the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.' The overriding sense of *oneness* in this passage needs to be noted. There is one 'mystery of his will' (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτου), one 'purpose' (εὐδοκίαν), one 'plan' (οἰκονομίαν) which unites 'all things' (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα) in Christ, both in heaven and on earth.[1] Secondly, I am writing from a Reformed and Confessional tradition which, in common with the apostle Paul, holds that there is a single, universal, predetermined and eternal plan of God.[2] Thirdly, this thesis, though composed of four chapters, is intended to be presented as a coherent, comprehensive whole. I will seek to demonstrate that although there are diverse aspects to God's purposes for his people, these purposes are integrally bound together.

In the course of this thesis I intend to begin by closely examining a number of Pauline texts which specifically address the question of God's purposes for his people (Chapter 1). This will be followed by an attempt to describe those people who might be described as 'mature' in spiritual terms (Chapter 2). Subsequently the focus will narrow specifically to Galatians 3:1-18, which is a key text in relation to understanding the mind-set which accompanies maturity (Chapter 3). It is in this section that the most major exegetical work will be

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[1] This motif of oneness can be seen elsewhere, but especially in Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:14-16, 3:9, 4:3-6).

[2] In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 3, Paragraph 1, 'God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.' http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/

undertaken.  Finally, the findings of the first three questions will be summarised before various implications and applications are drawn out for the contemporary church (Chapter 4).

The four questions which I will address are as follows:

**1. On the basis of Paul's writings, what is his understanding of God's intended goals for his people in the New Testament era?**

**2. In what ways might Paul have defined mature believers in the light of God's intended goals for his people?**

**3. How is this description of Christian maturity expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, especially in Gal. 3:1-18?**

**4. What implications does Paul's teaching on Christian maturity have for the twenty-first century Christian community in terms of its worldview and practice?**

# CHAPTER 1

## On the basis of Paul's writings, what is his understanding of God's intended goals for his people in the New Testament era?

It has become commonplace to speak of 'goal' as a synonym for an objective, a purpose, an end, an outcome which is desired and aimed at. I will therefore speak of 'goal' and 'goals' throughout this work.

In this first chapter I intend to begin by considering how to understand what God's goals are, for the whole cosmos in general and for his own people in particular. By focussing very specifically on a Pauline understanding of God's goals, I will suggest that God's goals for his people consist of their maturity as Christians. I will then seek to identify and examine the Pauline vocabulary which most nearly approximates to the idea of 'goals' with reference to God's people in the New Testament. The use of this vocabulary will then be explored through exegetical treatment of a number of Pauline texts.

The source of my answers to this topic are the writings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament. I proceed on the assumption that the thirteen letters that bear Paul's name, from Romans to Philemon, are of Pauline authorship. Although I begin in Chapter 1 by identifying and exegeting three specific texts (Eph. 4:10-16, Phil. 3:12-16 and Col. 1:27 - 2:3) my broader aim is to describe Paul's consistent and unified world view which is evidenced in his prayers and ethical imperatives as much as in his formal statements of doctrine. The three texts I have chosen, which can be dated towards the end of Paul's ministry, are conspicuously clear statements of God's purposes. Nevertheless, other Pauline passages will be referred to in my treatment of this subject.

The various strands which emerge will then be drawn together and examined in a more systematic fashion. In particular I will seek to describe, and as far as possible define, the world-view which Paul presented in his letters, and which he sought to establish in the churches to which he ministered. There will therefore be times when I speak of 'God's

goals' in an unqualified sense, but the reader should understand that by this expression I intend, largely, *God's goals as the apostle Paul understands and interprets them.*

**1. God's ultimate goal is the restoration of the entire cosmos so that it is again 'very good' and all creation worships him.**

The very first chapter of the Bible describes the progress towards a goal: the unfolding creative activity of God himself.  When God had finished the work of creation he 'saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31).  Up until this point the unfolding creation had been 'good' (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) but only now, after the sixth day, did it warrant the description 'very good.'  What God desires and achieves, therefore, must be completion and his own full satisfaction with the end product.

When we come to the ending of the Book of Psalms we encounter another goal.  The Psalms end with the triumphant note 'Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!' (Psa. 150:6).  This suggests that God's overall goal is the praise of his own glory. Moreover, this encompasses not only the human realm but the entire cosmos.  Then in Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul speaks of God 'making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite *all things* in him, *things in heaven and things on earth*.'  Taking these references together it suggests that God's *purpose* is universal; it transcends the human realm and encompasses the whole created cosmos.

By contrast, proponents of Open Theism, of whom Clark H. Pinnock is a well-known representative, cannot speak of God's plan or purpose without a great deal of qualification, if they can do so at all.  To quote Pinnock himself: '[i]n giving us genuine, that is, libertarian, freedom, God gave up complete control over the decisions that are made and chose to create a world in which humans have significant powers of "say so." *It means that creatures can do things that God does not want them to do*.'[3]  Throughout this thesis I will speak of God's

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[3] Clark H. Pinnock, *Open Theism: "What is this? A new teaching? —and with authority!" (Mk 1:27)*, Ashland Theological Journal 34:0 (NA 2002), 40, emphasis mine.

goals, not as contingent upon the independent will of humankind, but as sovereignly and irresistibly determined.

My specific aim in this work is to focus attention on Paul's understanding of God's goals for his new covenant people, recognising that they occupy a most prominent place in the revelation of all God's goals according to the Bible. It is important to understand the relationship between 'God's intended goals' in general and those goals which specifically concern his people, because they are intricately woven together. Paul's language of 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15), of the 'new man' (Eph. 2:15), and the 'new self' (Eph. 4:24) is redolent of the climax of Genesis 1, which is a human climax. The old creation culminated in Adam; the new creation culminates not merely in the historical incarnation of the 'last Adam', Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45), nor even in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, but in 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13) to which all God's people must ultimately attain in union with Jesus Christ.

**2. God's goals for his people consist in the realisation of their maturity in Christ.**

As we turn more specifically to the writings of the apostle Paul, it seems helpful to start by asking a question: what is the great longing and yearning of Paul's heart? What is it that exercises, concerns and even distresses him above all else?

Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians is one of the more autobiographical of Paul's writings, where we see him speaking with great honesty and at times vulnerability. After citing a long list of his sufferings, found in 2 Cor. 11:23-27, Paul reaches a climax in verse 28 when he says that 'apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.' Why is Paul anxious for the churches that he and his fellow-labourers have planted and served? In what direction does this anxiety tend? The view which will be explored in this research is that Paul is deeply concerned that these churches attain *maturity*.

If a single text were to be selected which encapsulates this great longing of Paul it might be Ephesians 4:13, which has already been quoted in part: 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *mature manhood*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.' We will come to a more detailed treatment of this verse in due course. However, the presentation of 'mature manhood' as a major goal for the people of

God strongly suggests the possibility that the idea of a 'goal' and the idea of 'maturity' overlap.

The accomplishment of a goal brings satisfaction and joy to the one who desires that goal.  In this light it is significant to observe that Paul's joy is closely linked to the progress in maturity of his fellow believers.  It is comparable to the joy of a father who witnesses maturity in his own children. The comparison between the apostle Paul and an earthly father is implicitly made in some places (1 Cor. 4:14, 2 Cor. 6:13).

In Phil. 1:23-26 Paul speaks of being hard-pressed to choose between remaining in the flesh and being with Christ.  Although on one hand he longs to depart and to be with Christ, he knows that he is called to remain in this world and to minister to the churches under his charge.  This is not a great disappointment for Paul because of his conviction that he 'will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith' (Phil. 1:25).  It is significant that 'progress' and 'joy' are linked together here, even though it is the Philippians' joy, rather than Paul's, which is spoken of.  But any doubts about Paul's own personal joy are removed in the following chapter when he urges the Philippians to 'complete *my* joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (Phil. 2:2).  We therefore see that the joy of the Philippians and Paul's own joy – joy that is grounded in progress in the Christian faith – are inextricably linked.

Conversely it is a useful exercise for us to notice the occasions which led to Paul's grief and dismay.  Paul frequently uses the expression οὐκ οἴδατε, 'do you not know…?'  Strikingly it occurs ten times in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, only twice in the Epistle to the Romans but nowhere else in the Pauline corpus.  There is a remarkable concentration of these occurrences in 1 Cor. 6.[4]  This concentration  is due to the problem of the Corinthians' ignorance with regard to matters of their faith and life.  On Paul's part there appears to be a considerable measure of exasperation; he knows himself to be the spiritual father who has begotten these children and still carries them in his heart, and like an earthly father he is deeply pained by their lack of progress.  Gordon D. Fee, referring to 1 Cor. 3:1, reveals the cause of Paul's vexation:

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[4] Rom. 6:16, 11:2; 1 Cor. 5:6, 6:2, 6:3, 6:9, 6:15, 6:16, 6:19, 9:13, 9:24.

Paul regularly uses the imagery of "children" in a positive sense to reflect his own apostolic relationship with his converts. In such cases the word is always *teknon* ("child"); the word used here (*nēpios*, "baby" or "mere infant") almost always has a pejorative sense, in contrast with being adult, and refers to thinking or behavior that is not fitting.[5]

Paul's 'anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28), then, is expressed through this longing that they might all make progress towards mature adulthood.

**3. The New Testament word τέλειος and its cognates encapsulate the meaning of 'maturity' as the goal which Paul is seeking in God's people.**

So far I have spoken of 'goals' and 'maturity' as concepts which share a certain amount of overlap. But it is now necessary to tighten the vocabulary somewhat and identify a New Testament Greek word or family of cognates which adequately covers both these concepts. The key Greek adjective which serves this purpose is τέλειος.

The entry for τέλειος in the *BDAG* lexicon begins with the definition 'attaining to an end or purpose, complete.' This is subsequently divided into four subsections: (1) 'pert. to meeting the highest standard', (2) 'pert. to being mature, *full-grown, mature, adult*', (3) 'pert. to being a cult initiate, *initiated*', (4) 'pert. to being fully developed in a moral sense'.[6] Of these four, (3) has a generally restricted use in the New Testament and (4) is one aspect covered by Paul in his writings, but (1) and more especially (2) chime resoundingly with Paul's emphases in his letters.

The related words which appear in the New Testament are the adjective τελειότης ,the verb τελειόω , the adverb τελείως, the noun τελείωσις and the verb τελεσφορέω. Each of these carries the basic thrust of completion and perfection. Maturity has been reached and there is nothing lacking. According to W.E.Vine, τελειόω can have the meanings of 'consecrate',

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[5] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 125.
[6] Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, Third Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995.

'finish', 'fulfil' and 'perfect'.  Each of these fall within the semantic range of the concept of a 'goal'.

Within the Pauline corpus, the various forms of τέλειος appear eight times: Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:6, 13:10, 14:20; Eph. 4:13, Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28, 4:12.  In two of these verses (Rom. 12:2 and 1 Cor. 13:10) it is translated 'perfect' in the ESV, but in the other six instances the translation is 'mature'.

Although it would be possible to undertake a systematic review of all the occurrences of τέλειος and its various cognates, we will restrict our attention for the most part to three occurrences in the Pauline corpus, which will be considered within their various contexts. They are Eph. 4:13, Phil. 3:15 and Col. 1:28.

> 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13).

> 'Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you' (Phi. 3:15).

> 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ' (Col. 1:28).

As we look at these passages a number of interrelated themes will emerge, which I hope to synthesise in the sections which follow.

## 4. Exegesis of Eph. 4:10-16

Eph. 4:10-16 should be understood as being descriptive of how Christ brings the whole cosmos to a state of maturity.  It is important to rightly interpret the clause in verse 10: ἵνα πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα.  The ἵνα followed by the subjunctive mood can have, according to Daniel B. Wallace, as many as 'seven basic uses'.[7]  Although Wallace nowhere cites Eph.

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[7] Wallace lists all of these: 'purpose, result, purpose-result, substantival, epexegetical, complementary, and command.' Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 471.

4:10 in his treatment of ἵνα plus the subjunctive, it seems best to categorise this specific usage as a 'Purpose-Result 'Iνα Clause'.[8] That is, there is nothing uncertain about this 'filling'; it inevitably proceeds from Christ's exaltation once that exaltation has taken place. Moreover, this 'filling' is not a process that gradually progresses; rather it is definitively established through Christ's death and resurrection. His physical ascension into heaven accompanies his own declaration in Matt. 28:18 that '[A]ll authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' The 'filling' of all things by Christ is, then, a state of being that has existed since Christ's ascension and must continue to do so throughout the rest of this age.

F. F. Bruce's explanation that 'part of the exaltation conferred by the Son is the sharing by the Son in the Father's ubiquity'[9] seems a somewhat infelicitous use of language, liable to be misunderstood in a Lutheran sense whereby the human nature of Christ might be understood as omnipresent. Peter T. O'Brien provides a clearer interpretation of the import of this 'filling'.

> Christ fills the universe, not in some semi-physical sense, but by his mighty rule over all things, a notion that is paralleled in the Old Testament where filling the universe, in this sense of exercising sovereign rule, is predicated of God: "'Do I not fill heaven and earth?' says the LORD" (Jer. 23:24). Here the idea is transferred to Christ: he fills the universe through the exercise of his lordship over everything.[10]

In 4:12 Paul moves on to the language of 'building' (οἰκοδομὴν). This theme has clear links with the Old Testament temple. That temple symbolised the dwelling-place of God with his people, but when Christ came he spoke of his body as the temple (John 2:21). The New Testament develops this theme of the body of Christ as the temple: Paul understands that the church is 'is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:23). It is not a structure of inert stones, bricks and mortar, but the living body of Christ, the people he has called together. Ultimately, in the new heavens and new earth, there will be no temple separate from the rest of the environment because that entire new creation will constitute the dwelling-place of God (Rev. 21:22). Paul wants the Ephesians to understand their own growth to

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[8] ibid., 473. This use 'indicates *both the intention and its sure accomplishment.*'
[9] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 345.
[10] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar NT Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 296-97.

maturity as participation in this process which culminates in the final age of the new heavens and the new earth.

Herman N. Ridderbos comments that '[t]he thought of the full unfolding and appropriation of what has been given in Christ and thereby of adulthood and maturity emerges very clearly in Ephesians 4:13, where there is mention of the building up of the church.'[11] The idea of a body being 'built up' might conjure up in our minds the image of a gymnasium, with athletes 'building up' their bodies. But this is a contemporary usage and it is most unlikely that Paul had this kind of imagery in mind. In verse 12 οἰκοδομὴν clearly has to do with the building up of a house. Paul sees here God's purpose of developing maturity in God's temple, which is at the same time Christ's body (1 Cor. 3:16, 12:27).

This building up of the *body* underlines the corporate dimension which we find repeatedly in Paul's writings. O'Brien again: 'This destination to which all believers are headed is understood as a corporate entity; it is not described in individual terms, but refers to the totality of believers as the body of Christ.'[12] So, under the figure of a body which has attained mature stature, Paul portrays the functioning body of Christ.

But progress towards maturity is not, of course, an automatic process. Even the normal biological process of maturation from infancy to adulthood, though generally regarded as inevitable, only takes place through the deliberate exercise of means. Hence, in verse 11, Christ's appointed ministers are named: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, whose function it is, under Christ, to bring his body to maturity. In this context, the ministry of the church as represented by these gifted individuals and others is presented to us as an ongoing means which is to continue right up to the attainment of full maturity. 'Those given by Christ as "ministers" (v.11), along with the "saints" (v.12), render their service so that God's people might reach this objective, and they are to continue serving *until* it is attained.'[13]

Wayne Shealy alters the imagery and speaks of the role of the church as a spiritual mother in describing how believers are brought to maturity:

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[11] Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 271.
[12] O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 307.
[13] O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 305.

She is the repository of the Christian faith in that access to salvation comes about through the gospel that has been entrusted to her. She is the repository of the Holy Spirit who unceasingly labors to deliver her children to the life of the Spirit.[14]

Whilst the figure of a mother may be helpful for illustrative purposes, Paul in Eph. 4 does not speak of the church under this metaphor – though of course he will speak of the church as a 'bride' in Eph. 5. Shealy's emphasis on the motherhood of the church seems primarily calculated to defend Cyprian's dictum, 'If one is to have God for Father, he must first have the Church for mother'.[15] At a purely ontological level, every believer belongs to the church and so it is inconsistent to speak of the church as a 'mother' to believers. But, *contra* Shealy, I would emphasise that the actor here is not the church but Christ himself, ruling and equipping his people *through the ministries he has appointed within the church*.

What does 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' look like? To some extent this question will be answered in Chapter 2, but we can see from Ephesians 4:14-16 that it is observed in the exercise of stable and well-grounded minds, in the ability to discern what is deceitful, in bold and truthful speech, and in the ongoing exercise of love. O'Brien comments on the thrust of τέλειον in verse 13:

The adjective has the sense of "mature" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Heb. 5:14) rather than "perfect", and focusses on the mature adult person in contrast with the infants of v.14 who are immature and unstable, like a storm-tossed boat blown in all directions by the winds of false teaching.

It is one of the key characteristics in children that they are very easily distracted. Their moods, interests and attention spans are liable to very rapid fluctuation, while mature adults are not so easily swayed. The great goal of the New Testament church is that 'the *whole*

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[14] Wayne Shealy, *The Church as Bride and Mother: Two Neglected Theological Metaphors*, Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry 02:2 (Spring 2012), 26. I believe that whilst Shealy may be justified in speaking of the church as 'the repository of the Christian faith' he overstates his point in going on to claim that she is also 'the repository of the Holy Spirit'. This is a restrictive view of the manifold presence and work of the Spirit, probably betraying a strong sense of allegiance to Cyprian's understanding of the church.
[15] Cyprian, Letter 74.7.2, in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 47*, eds. Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, trans, and annot. by G. W. Clarke, vol. 4 [Letters 67-82] (New York: Newman, 1989), 74.

body, joined and held *together* by *every* joint with which it is equipped, when *each* part is working properly' (Eph. 4:16) should grow up into the full stature of Christ.  I have emphasised certain words in order to underline the comprehensive, universal and inclusive membership and engagement of every part of Christ's body.

In God's purposes, the goal of this process is the perfection which Thomas R. Schreiner equates with the fulness of Christ:  'The church is to be the "perfect man" (*andra teleion*), and this "perfect man" is nothing less than "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)'.[16]  F.F.Bruce concurs: 'The glorified Christ provides the standard at which his people are to aim: the corporate Christ cannot be content to fall short of the perfection of the personal Christ.'[17]

In Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, especially, this aim and desire is all-pervasive.  God, says Paul, 'chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him' (Eph. 1:4).  God's purpose in the whole church is none other than that they should be 'built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit' (Eph. 2:22).  Paul exhorts the Ephesians to be 'imitators of God, as beloved children' (Eph. 5:1), and Christ himself fills the church that 'he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:27).

The goal that Paul sets before the church is expressed in terms of holiness and perfection commensurate with the holiness and perfection of God himself.  Such terms are not given simply in order to motivate believers, but as an accurate description of believers' destination.

## 5. Exegesis of Phil. 3:12-16

We must notice the extremely important tension within this passage.  Paul is able to say both that he is 'not … already perfect' (3:12; Οὐχ … ἤδη τετελείωμαι) whilst evidently numbering himself among 'those of us who are mature' (3:15; Ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι).  It is important that we arrive at a synthesis to this apparent paradox.

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[16] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 34.
[17] F.F.Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 350-51.

This passage is significant for our purposes because it contains the single usage (in the ESV) of the word 'goal' (σκοπὸν) which we find in the New Testament.  Here Paul, as in a number of other places in his writings, is using the imagery of a race (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2, 5:7; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8).  For him the 'goal' is the finishing line, and the consequence of reaching that goal is the 'prize' (βραβεῖον) which he will receive.  It has been persuasively suggested that the reference to an 'upward call' (τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως) does not have in view heaven but instead refers to the manner in which the victor of the race ascends to the judges' seat in order to receive his prize.[18]

For any athlete the key element to the successful completion of a race is persistent and undivided focus.  Paul is saying that the race of the Christian life needs continual effort.  Whilst the second part of verse 12 reveals his assurance: 'because Christ has made me his own', that does not excuse him from striving to keep on running.  This can be explored a little further.  When Paul speaks of 'forgetting what is behind' he renounces all the confidence in himself in which he once trusted, which he describes in 3:4-6.  His confidence is now in the Christ who has made Paul his own.  But this confidence does not lead to passivity, but causes him to 'press on' (διώκω, 3:12, 14) and to 'strain forward' (ἐπεκτεινόμενος, 3:13), which conveys the idea of 'stretching'.  We might say that Paul was 'straining every sinew' in his running of the Christian race.

David A. deSilva suggests that Paul's statement at the beginning of 3:12, Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον, emphasizes the present non-possession of this goal, as does the second phrase, ἤ ἤδη τετελείωμαι.[19]  He continues: 'Paul amplifies his warning about the presumption of an automatic attainment of the resurrection from the dead'.[20]  There is a clear tension here: Christ has taken hold of Paul in such a way that his security is not in doubt – that Paul possesses such security can be evidenced from this Epistle to the Philippians (1:6, 21; 3:20-21) – but the full realization of the 'goal' will not be known until Paul has crossed the finishing-line.  A secure and inevitable attainment of the goal is, therefore, to be

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[18] J.F. Collange, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Philippiens* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1973) 118; William Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians & Philemon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981), 174; Dan Lioy, *The Faith Journey Of Paul: An Exegetical Analysis Of Philippians 3:1-14*,  Conspectus 07:1 (Mar 2009), 95-96.
[19] David A. deSilva, *'No Confidence in the Flesh': The Meaning and Function of Philippians 3:2-21*.  Trinity Journal 15:1 (Spring 1994) 48.
[20] idem.

distinguished from an automatic attainment of it, the distinction being that 'automatic attainment' overlooks the necessity of means.

Richard D. Patterson provides a helpful summary:

> In saying that he had not "already been perfected" ... Paul points out that he has not achieved his ultimate personal goal of spiritual perfection. That still lay ahead as he grew in Christ in his earthly walk and ultimately when he reached the final state. He has already mentioned that he was certain that this would be the case for the Philippian Christians: "I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). Doubtless he shared the same expectation for himself. Paul clearly teaches elsewhere (e.g., Gal. 6:9; Eph. 4:15) that accepting Christ as Savior is not the total picture. For the believer's spiritual maturity is a process that continues on until the final righteousness that comes with the reality of Heaven and eternal life in the presence of Christ.[21]

There are those who would disagree with Patterson's avowal that Paul was certain that the Philippians would reach 'spiritual perfection'. John F. Hart, like Patterson, refers to Phil. 1:6 where Paul writes 'I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.' Hart argues that '[n]othing in the details surrounding Phil 1:6 or in the terms of the verse itself can be adduced to substantiate the claim that sanctification is guaranteed to the Christian.'[22] Whilst Hart may be right in highlighting the exhortatory character of this passage, this thrust ought not to be emphasised to the extent that Paul's being 'sure' or 'persuaded' (πεποιθὼς, Phil. 1:6) means something less than certainty.

Paul's tone in 3:15 implies that he is not the only one running the race, but that every believer runs the same race. He is urging the Philippians to run as he himself runs. His great desire is that they should run with a steady aim so as to finish the race. We see a similar exhortation in 1 Cor. 9:24: 'Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the

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[21] Richard D. Patterson, *Christians as Athletes*, https://bible.org/article/christians-athletes, 2012.

[22] John F. Hart, *Does Philippians 1:6 Guarantee Progressive Sanctification? Part 2*, Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society (Autumn 1996), 59.

prize? So run that you may obtain it.' So, although many will cross the line, the attitude needed for the race is the same as if the runner was aiming to win.[23]

3:15, in particular, demonstrates that maturity has to do with the way believers think (φρονῶμεν … φρονεῖτε). There is perhaps a subtle hint of godly intolerance in this verse: if there are views among the Philippians which run counter to Paul's words, these will in time be corrected by God himself. So what we have here is the necessary mind-set of a mature (τέλειοι) believer. Paul is saying in effect, 'if you want to be mature, think and act as I do.' Indeed this is what he goes on to say immediately in 3:17: 'Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.'

So whilst Paul, running the race during his present life, is not yet 'perfect' in terms of having crossed the finishing-line, it is possible and indeed right for him to speak of being 'mature' as to his thinking. I will use the term 'Future Maturity' to speak of the perfection that believers will one day know after they have crossed the finishing-line; this state of being is as yet unattainable. I will also employ the term 'Present Maturity' to denote the maturity of thinking which Paul regards as requisite for believers in this present age, along with the conduct which results from that thinking.

It should not be thought, however, that Present Maturity and Future Maturity are separate or unrelated categories. Rather, Future Maturity is that towards which Present Maturity is orientated. More specifically, in Present Maturity the mind of the believer is to function in a mature way even though the body of the believer, and the cosmos in which he lives, falls short of that final, fulfilled maturity. Therefore, although I will quite often specify maturity as being either 'Present' or 'Future', I will on other occasions speak of 'maturity' without a qualifying adjective, indicating that a broader category is intended.

**6. Exegesis of Col. 1:27-2:3**

What, therefore, is to be the focus of the believers' race, and the content of their thinking? Paul's words are expressed in a context in which the Colossians are in danger of bartering

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[23] Lioy, *The Faith Journey of Paul*, 95: 'The great difference between races in a sporting event and the race Christians are running in is that a sporting event has only one winner. In the case of the Christian life, all who finish the race win (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 12:1).'

God's own great, unique and saving mystery – 'Christ in you' (1:27) – for other products which may seem more immediately enticing but which are decidedly inferior. The type of 'mystery' that the Colossians were in danger of being fascinated by – whether it was some incipient form of Gnosticism, a cult that had arisen from within Judaism, or something quite different from either of these – was having a divisive effect in the community.[24] More significantly, it drew their attention away from Jesus Christ and the personal, relational knowledge of him that Paul was urging. Christ himself is the mystery that Paul has set before the Colossians.

It is helpful for us to examine Col. 1:28 carefully in order to discover the means employed in order to bring believers to maturity. In particular, the verbs which Paul uses in this verse are worthy of our examination.

Paul says first of all that 'we proclaim' (καταγγέλλομεν) Christ. Peter T. O'Brien explains. 'The first verb "proclaim" (καταγγέλλω) is a weighty one occurring only in Acts and Paul … becoming almost a technical term for missionary preaching since it was normally used of the gospel itself or some element in it.'[25] The great 'element' of Paul's gospel is, of course, Jesus Christ himself. The way in which the relative pronoun ὃν is brought to the beginning of the verse emphasises the Christ-centredness of Paul's evangelical preaching.

He then speaks of 'warning' (νουθετοῦντες) and 'teaching' (διδάσκοντες). These two verbs, taken together, suggest urgency and intensiveness. Whilst English words with Greek lineage may not carry the exact force which they originally possessed, the ideas conveyed by the words 'nouthetic' and 'didactic' underscore the way in which, for Paul, ministering Christ was a rigorous activity. The ideas of admonition, warning and careful, painstaking instruction, are clearly present.

In Col. 1:28 τέλειον has a very clear eschatological force in that Paul says 'we may present everyone mature in Christ'. But what should we understand about the timing and nature of this 'presentation'? To return to our discussion in the previous section, is it Present Maturity

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[24] F. F. Bruce gives substantial attention to the possibility of both Jewish and pagan mysteries in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 25-36.
[25] Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon:* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 87.

or Future Maturity that is under the spotlight here? F. F. Bruce exercises caution in relation
to this question. 'The presentation of everyone "perfect" or fully grown in Christ is *probably*
envisaged as taking place at his *parousia*.'[26] O'Brien states with greater clarity that the
presentation of 'every man perfect in Christ Jesus' has to do with the Parousia.[27] The idea of
presenting (παραστήσωμεν) certainly suggests an audience with Christ himself, a conclusion
strengthened by Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20: 'For what is our hope or joy or
crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory
and joy.' This points to Future Maturity, so that the exercise of Present Maturity necessitates
keeping the goal of Future Maturity in view.

The idea that those who are responsible for the oversight of believers will be held
accountable for their work on the day of judgement is taught in the New Testament (1 Cor.
3:12-15 and, outside the Pauline corpus, Jas. 3:1). But, more conclusively, the verb translated
'present', παρίστημι, is seen in contexts which are overwhelmingly eschatological (2 Cor.
4:14, 11:2; Eph. 5:27 and Col. 1:22 – notice the proximity of this final verse to the present
text). Those Christians who are called to the hands-on business of discipleship – pastors,
teachers, preachers, evangelists – answer to the 'we' of Colossians 1:28.

Certainly, as we have already seen in the Ephesian context, the pastors and teachers of God's
flock are to be actively engaged in the process of bringing believers to maturity. In Col. 1:29
we see a classic Pauline coordination of the divine and human aspects of this work. 'For this
I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.' The theme of
ongoing spiritual striving continues on into the second chapter. For Paul it is a matter of
agonizing labour – ἡλίκον ἀγῶνα (2:1) – but he engages in this, in a pastoral capacity,
because the prospect before him is so glorious.

Paul's vision for the church is wholly inclusive. Bruce comments: 'The repetition of
"everyone" is emphatic. There is no part of Christian teaching that is to be reserved for a
spiritual elite. All the truth of God is for all the people of God.'[28]

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[26] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 1984), 87, emphasis mine.
[27] O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 89.
[28] Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 87.

Paul's vision of the church is of a corporate, active body of people. Christ himself rules them and his power is an indispensable means by which his people manifest Present Maturity, but this in no way contradicts the equal necessity of believers endeavouring to reach that goal. Moreover, this endeavour is carried out by the Christian community in a spirit of interdependence: each member should be concerned about the maturity of every other (Rom. 15:5, 14; 1 Cor. 12:25).

**7. Paul understands Present Maturity in terms of a world-view, defined by the narrative of redemption, culminating in the events of the new covenant, in which God's people participate.**

Having undertaken an initial review of these three texts and observed the direction of Paul's pastoral concerns for these churches, expressed in letters which are by their very nature occasional – that is, their content is determined by time- and space-specific circumstances – I am in a position to address more directly a fundamental issue: the world-view by which Paul operates. We have already seen, especially in Phil. 3:12-16, that Present Maturity is evidenced by the way God's people think. What orientation of heart and mind does Paul want to see in all the churches which he knows and loves?

My understanding is that Paul's world-view is formed by the narrative of God's redemptive plan which encompasses the history of Israel and has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Paul's passion for the churches is that their own world-view should be formed by their understanding of their own participation in this redemption narrative.

Every human being, every community, every society and every nation has been shaped by its culture – though presently we witness the melting-pot of many cultures being mixed together in various parts of the world. My point is that cultures have usually been expressed through their narratives, or myths, if we take 'myth' in the more contemporary sense of a collection of stories which explain the significance of their history and their customs. N.T. Wright has written extensively on the subject of narratives and the great importance of narrative in Paul's thought.[29]

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[29] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts I and II* (London: SPCK, 2013) and especially in Chapter 7: 'The Plot, the Plan and the Storied Worldview', 456-537. Wright explores at great length the key narratives that informed the mind-sets of the Jewish, Hellenistic and Roman worlds.

Wright's concludes and crystallises his expansive explanation of what he terms the 'Messiah-narrative' in his discussion of Phil. 2:6-11.  He relates it to three worldview narratives: 'the narrative of Israel', 'the narrative of Adam', and 'the story of God and the cosmos'.[30]  Subsequently he suggests that what he calls the 'story of the church'

> is less of a worldview element for Paul, and more of an actual argument, coming as it does on the surface of his letters rather than being embedded down below.  He *assumes* the narratives of God and the world, of Israel and of Jesus; he *expounds* the narrative of the church.  Worldviews are what you look *through*; but the church is what Paul regularly looks *at*.[31]

The people of God, therefore, are to be in possession of mind-sets that have arisen from their familiarity with 'the narratives of God and the world, of Israel and of Jesus'.  This mental apparatus then enables them to fix their attention on 'the narrative of the church'.[32]

Not all scholars are convinced by Wright's approach.  Mark A. Seifrid wonders whether 'the drive for a *unified* and *comprehensive* narrative of redemptive-history – in which God's footsteps may be traced – imposes an alien framework on the Scriptures.'[33]  Seifrid criticises Wright's work in particular, arguing that Wright tends to overstate the influence of believers in bringing about God's redemptive purposes for the world, and correspondingly diminishing the unique magnitude and centrality of Christ's work:

> The forgiveness of sins becomes the mere means of implementing God's larger purpose. Jesus is no longer properly the fulfillment of the story of Scripture, but merely the agent who furthers that story.  Consequently, Wright's scheme bears a tendency – one might, perhaps, call it Eutychian – to reduce Christ's humanity and deity to a unity in the manifestation of the divine image.[34]

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[30] ibid., 534.
[31] ibid., 536, emphasis original.
[32] At times it appears unclear whether Wright intends his readers to understand that there is one metanarrative or a collection of component narratives.  His penultimate statement in the chapter, under discussion, however, seems to bear out the rightness of the former conclusion: 'The world view has found its narrative'. ibid., 537.
[33] Mark A. Seifrid, *Story-Lines of Scripture and Footsteps in the Sea*, Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 12:4 (Winter 2008), 89, emphasis original.
[34] ibid., 97.  Seifrid goes on to say that '[t]he most serious problem, however, with Wright's unified understanding of righteousness is that it overlooks the corruption of the human heart that perverts all our works.

R. Albert Mohler, by contrast, is not simply content to use the vocabulary of metanarrative; he sees the rejection of metanarrative as a major assault upon the nature of truth. Seifrid argues that metanarrative could be a product of philosophical modernity;[35] Mohler understands that *post*modernism, specifically the postmodernism of Jean Francois Leotard, is the saboteur of the metanarrative.[36] He then goes on to make the claim

> that Christianity is meaningless apart from the gospel, which is a meta-narrative, indeed the meta-narrative of meta-narratives. The Christian gospel is the great meta-narrative of redemption. Beginning with creation by the sovereign, omnipotent God, it continues through the fall of humanity into sin and the redemption of sinners through the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, and promises a dual eternal destiny for all humanity—glory with God forever for the redeemed and everlasting punishment for the unredeemed. This message is irreducibly a meta-narrative. We do not preach the gospel as one narrative among many true narratives, or as merely our narrative alongside the authentic narratives of others.[37]

At various places in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, summaries of God's historical dealings with his people are provided, usually in the form of an address to an assembly.[38] This underlines Mohler's point that these are 'authentic narratives' which are to be embedded with the psyche of God's people.[39] This understanding of metanarrative, I submit, is not inconsistent with Wright's explanation that the Biblical-historical narrative(s) furnish the necessary mind-set with which believers can view the narrative of the church.

We have already touched on the way in which comprehensive narratives of Scripture overlook the radical nature of evil. Wright's program is no exception' (ibid., 101). Whilst I share Seifrid's misgivings in relation to aspects of Wright's theology of sin (and of justification), I am not persuaded that 'comprehensive narratives of Scripture' *necessarily* 'overlook the radical nature of evil'.

[35] Seifrid wonders 'whether redemptive-historical interpretation together with all attempts at a comprehensive narrative of Scripture do not fall prey to the quest of the Enlightenment for a unified, comprehensive knowledge of the world, discernible, readable, and bound up with the ideal of the progress.' ibid., 89.

[36] R. Albert Mohler, *What is Truth? Truth and Contemporary Culture*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 48:1 (March 2005), 67.

[37] idem.

[38] See for example Deut. 1:6-3:29, Josh. 24:1-13, 1 Sam. 12:6-12, Neh. 9:6-38, Acts 7:2-53. All of these public addresses take place at significant junctures in the history of redemption and challenge the hearers to consider, and respond to, the covenantal requirements laid upon them. It could be maintained, of course, that the entire book of Deuteronomy has this purpose, but it is only the first three chapters that rehearse Israel's history up to that point.

[39] This understanding of metanarrative, I submit, is not inconsistent with Wright's explanation that the Biblical-historical narrative(s) furnish the necessary mind-set by which believers view the narrative of the church in their own experience.

It is apparent from Paul's writings that he – like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Nehemiah and Stephen – expects his readers to place themselves within the great narrative of God's saving plan.[40] So in 1 Cor. 1:30 Paul says that Christ 'became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption'. Why does Paul climax with 'redemption'? What is the significance of 'redemption' in Paul's thinking? I suggest it could well be that Paul intends the Corinthians to think of 'redemption' as *the* great and defining story of God's people, the story of deliverance. He desires that they should enter the biblical world-view, expressed in the OT events and narratives, in which he, Paul lived and moved, the implication today being that modern readers are to do the same if they are to benefit from Paul's writings.[41]

Now Paul desires that his readers should know that this redemption narrative has reached its consummation in the great events of the new covenant – the coming of the Son of God and of the Spirit of God – and that Gentiles as well as Jews may now be full participators in that narrative. It is in Christ Jesus that the blessing of Abraham has come to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:14). In Chapter 3 we will examine more closely what this 'blessing of Abraham' means, but for the time being it is sufficient to note that Paul longs for all the churches to grow in the knowledge and enjoyment of that blessing. The New Testament church, in Corinth and elsewhere, are those 'on whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11).

This great narrative of redemption therefore belongs to every member of Christ's church and to every congregation. Not only does this narrative belong to them, it *defines* them. The congregations to which Paul writes, through largely composed of Gentiles, are caught up in the great story of redemption that had centred, for long centuries, on the people of Israel. In

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[40] For example Paul, in addressing a largely Gentile readership in Corinth, does not hesitate to speak of the Israelites as 'our fathers' (1 Cor. 10:1) in a fashion which includes the Corinthians. Wright gives this point particular emphasis: 'I propose, and shall now argue, that Paul's worldview had a strongly implicit and frequently explicit narrative.' Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts I and II*, 461.

[41] The narrative of redemption is broadcast loud and clear in the life-experience of the people of Israel. They were once slaves in Egypt, under the cruel bondage of Pharaoh. But God brought them out of Egypt, and to himself. God redeemed them to himself, to be his very own people, and that he should be their God (Exod. 6:7). This was the defining narrative of Israel's history and Israel's identity. The narrative of redemption is broadcast in a more individual fashion in the story of Ruth the Moabitess. As well as being a beautiful love story it is, above all, a story of redemption. A widowed and childless Gentile in a time of famine becomes the happy mother of children and the ancestor of King David, brought into this new state through Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 4:14).

the first three chapters of his Epistle to the Ephesians, especially, Paul gazes with wonder upon this mystery: that 'that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (Eph. 3:6).

The necessary mind-set in which Present Maturity is to be nurtured includes the capacity to step outside one's immediate environment and context, one which may be defined by such things as physical constraints or suffering, by family ties, by cultural expectations or national identity, and to identify oneself with the people of God in every age, a people defined by God's great narrative of redemption. The general trends in present society towards globalism and, at a local level, cultural fragmentation mean that the need for Christians to recapture an identifying and unifying narrative – the Biblical story of redemption from Eden to the New Jerusalem – is especially urgent.

**8. God's goals for his people are realised in the church, the community of God's people.**

The great narrative of redemption is, of course, the narrative of a *people*: in the Old Testament, from Genesis 12 onwards, the people descended from Abraham.  It therefore should come as no surprise that the goals which Paul cites are invariably given in the context of the people as a group, rather than the individual.  F. F. Bruce makes the point: 'Over against all those who tried to intellectualize the Christian faith, speaking of knowledge as if it were an end in itself, Paul emphasises that the revelation of God cannot be properly known apart from the cultivation of brotherly love within the community.'[42]

Thomas R. Schreiner's comments not only reveal a grasp of certain contemporary attitudes towards the church, but are grounded in the theme of narrative that I have sought to emphasise: 'Paul was not a Western individualist who indulged in a privatized Christianity. Nor did he conceive of the church as an embarrassment or a necessary evil.  The church enshrined God's plan for history, revealing to all creation the wisdom and depth of God's saving plan.'[43]

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[42] Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 91.
[43] Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 338-39.

If the church in Corinth did not consist of 'Western individualists', to use Schreiner's phrase, they were certainly sectarians possessed of a party spirit. Fee summarises the correction that they so urgently needed to hear. 'Everything is God's – the church, its ministry, Paul, Apollos – everything. Therefore, it is absolutely not permissible to say "I belong to Paul," since the only legitimate "slogan" is "we all belong to God."'[44] Not only that, but Paul will seek to enrich the Corinthians' sense of unified ownership and participation when he comes to 1 Cor. 3:21-21: 'all things are yours … all are yours.'

Stanley J. Grenz recognizes the importance of community and the way in which it is the indispensable setting in which Christian faith, obedience and maturity can be nurtured.

> [T]he focus on community encapsules the biblical message, it stands at the heart of the theological heritage of the church, and it speaks to the aspirations and the sensed needs of people in our world today. In short, as we realize that we are created for community, we are in a position to connect Christian belief with Christian living.[45]

Christian discipleship, as understood by Paul, is thoroughly inclusive insofar as *every member* is encouraged to press on towards maturity. Considerations of gender, nationality, socio-economic circumstances, and education (or the lack of it) – issues that would have been no less divisive in the New Testament world than they are today – are not considered to present a barrier in terms of growing to full maturity.

**9. God's goals for his people should be understood within an eschatological framework in which his redeemed people live in the 'last days' and await the final consummation of God's purposes for the whole creation.**

The discussion which follows is necessary because it enables us to view the time-structures within which God's goals are worked out. The place of Christian believers within the narrative of redemption needs to be located within a specific time-frame.

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[44] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 134.
[45] Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 23.

In our treatment of various Pauline texts so far we have already used the term 'eschatological' on two occasions.  But at this point we need to clarify the definition of the words 'eschatology' and 'eschatological'.  Only by so doing can we demonstrate that God's goals for his people in the New Testament straddle the two realms of the future and the present.

'Eschatology' is accurately defined as 'the doctrine of the last things' and in certain circles these 'last things' may commonly be associated with events that lie in the future – both Paul's future and ours – such things as the return of Christ, the resurrection of the body and the day of judgement.  But although the exact phrase 'last things' is not found in the New Testament, there are several verses that speak of the 'last days', beginning with Acts 2:17 and the Day of Pentecost.[46]  These 'last days' are not to be understood as belonging exclusively to the future, whether from our vantage point or the apostles'.  The events of Pentecost publicly inaugurate the whole epoch that can justifiably be called the 'last days'.  Viewed through this lens, every Christian believer since Pentecost participates in eschatological reality.  Gordon D. Fee gives a classic explanation of Paul's eschatology:

> [Paul] is thoroughly eschatological, but not simply awaiting the end.  For him it means that the future (Christ's return and reign) has been determined by the past (Christ's death and resurrection) and that that certain future (guaranteed by the gift of the Spirit) determines the present.[47]

In this paragraph we can see something of the interplay between the present and the future – and, for that matter, the past – which Paul's understanding necessitated.  Paul's gaze was set in a forward direction: the great events of the gospel, especially the resurrection of Jesus, were programmatic for the way in which Paul thought, spoke and lived, and must be so for the whole church.  N. T. Wright makes a similar point when he explains that 'Paul sees that in Jesus Christ the long-awaited age to come has already begun.  And that is where Christians must consciously choose to live.'[48]

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[46] It should be acknowledged that the Greek phrase τα ἔσχατα appears four times in the NT: in Matt. 12:45, Luke 11:26 and 2 Peter 2:20 it is translated 'last state' in the ESV; in Rev. 2:19 it is rendered 'latter works'.
[47] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 157.
[48] N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010), 131.

And yet, Paul and every other believer must still live in this present life, in a fallen world, in a body that still shows weakness, and with the necessity of daily confession of sin. Hence James D. G. Dunn speaks of 'the eschatological tension' as 'such an inescapable feature of the process of salvation, of which Paul was all too conscious'.[49] N. T. Wright grounds this 'eschatological tension' in his discussion about narrative: 'Paul's specific contribution to this overarching narrative is to insist that the "coming age" has already been inaugurated (though not yet completed) through Jesus.'[50]

What are the implications for believers? Wright continues: 'The "present age" is continuing, but followers of the Messiah must no longer conform to it.'[51] Fee puts it very succinctly indeed: 'What Paul is trying to do above all else is to get the Corinthians to enter his orbit, to see things from his eschatological perspective.'[52]

To take an example, Paul's comment in 1 Cor. 7:31 that 'the present form of this world is passing away', given in the context of counsel about marriage, is a snapshot into the world-view within which he operates and which he desires that the Corinthians might share. Paul is not forbidding marriage or even discouraging the practice. He has a higher purpose for his readers: he wants them to appreciate that this present world of marriage and family is not eternal, and that believers should consider the entirety of their lives and their decisions about such matters as marriage and family from this 'eschatological perspective'.

In any kind of maturation process there are two necessary components: (1) an end or destination which is the final goal itself; and (2) a means by which that end is reached. Any teacher or trainer will say to his charges 'This is what you are aiming for, and this is how you are to get there.' Moreover, there is often a strong correspondence between the anticipated destination and the means employed to reach that destination. So a student will prepare himself for the final examination by attempting numerous past papers, while a cast will rehearse their play repeatedly, taking part in dress rehearsals, before the final performances. But in the case of the student, he has not, in any sense, 'qualified' until he has taken and

[49] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 629.
[50] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts I and II*, 477.
[51] ibid., 478.
[52] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 157. This expression of Fee's encapsulates the heart of my thesis in its pastoral, pedagogical thrust.

passed all his final examinations. He remains an 'undergraduate', or in some similar category, until the results are made known.

When we come to the subject of Christian maturity, and specifically in Paul's thought, the order is altered substantially because of the status that Christians *already have* in Jesus Christ. For this reason the Pauline formula is invariably 'Live according to what you have become' (e.g. Rom. 6:1-11, Gal. 2:20, Phil. 2:5, Col. 3:3-4) instead of 'Live so that you will become what you will one day be.'

One helpful way of viewing this Pauline mode of thinking is in terms of the two grammatical moods of the *indicative* (what a Christian is in Christ) and the *imperative* (what a Christian should do), with the imperative arising directly out of the indicative. So states Dunn: '[T]here has been widespread agreement that Paul's ethics can be summed up under the rubric *indicative* and *imperative*.'[53] Ridderbos agrees with Dunn. 'Now as regards the relationship to each other of these two different ways of speaking, it is immediately clear that the imperative rests on the indicative and that this order is not reversible.'[54]

When an individual becomes a believer, and is baptised into the fellowship of the church of Jesus Christ, the most radical change has taken place. The Christian has a new relationship with God in Jesus Christ, and new relationships with Christians who are his or her brothers and sisters. He or she has new responsibilities, new obligations, that affect the whole of life (e.g. Rom. 12:9-21, Gal. 5:22-26; Col. 3:5-15). This happens as a result of the recreating power of the Holy Spirit: Ridderbos again: '[i]t is precisely the Spirit who is the great Inaugurator and the gift of the new aeon that has appeared with Christ.'[55]

The last days, then, are the 'new aeon', the age in which the Holy Spirit has been given to the people of God. The giving of the Holy Spirit is a necessary means whereby God's people evidence the Present Maturity that Paul is seeking in them.

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[53] Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 628.
[54] Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 254.
[55] ibid., 215.

**10. God's goals are realised in these last days as his people strive to live godly and obedient lives by the enabling of the Holy Spirit.**

With the coming of the Holy Spirit in these 'last days', the Christian is a 'spiritual person' and his life is now to be spent in a 'spiritual' manner. This means that he is to govern and regulate his life according to the Spirit: according to the will of God as revealed in his Word. He is to 'walk by the Spirit', to consciously conduct his life in a way that pleases God. Lest this be understood merely at individual level, Grenz's comments in terms of both community and narrative are necessary and helpful:

> [T]he Spirit's goal is not merely that we might gain knowledge of these events as facts of ancient history. Rather, he seeks to draw us into the story. He wants us to see our lives – to organize the seemingly disorganized, pointless events of our existence – in the light of what God has done for us in Christ. Through the recounting of the narrative, the Spirit draws our present into Christ's past.[56]

We can return to the unsatisfactory condition of the church in Corinth. Why does Paul continually berate their immaturity and their unspiritual behaviour (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-4; 4:6-8; 5:1-2; 6:1-8; 11:17-22)? Might it be that these people have not received the Holy Spirit? Fee speedily disposes of such an argument:

> Paul, of course, does not mean to say that they do not have the Spirit. They do; and that's the problem, because they are thinking and behaving otherwise. The argument has considerable bite, therefore, because his ultimate point is: "Stop it! People of the Spirit must stop behaving the way you are."[57]

Neither is it the case that Paul tolerates or excuses immaturity on the basis that a congregation might be newly-founded, or that its members might be of limited intellectual ability. He looks for, and expects to find, a clear level of maturity from the time of inception.

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[56] Grenz, *Created for Community*, 170.
[57] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 123.

It comes back once more to 'eschatological tension'. This tension is exhibited in Col. 2:10: 'and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.' The Greek verb for 'filled' is the perfect passive participle πεπληρωμένοι, translated as 'complete' in some other English versions (AV, NKJV) or 'made complete' (NAS). But the idea of 'completion' should not be confused with the 'maturity' or 'perfection' of τέλειος. It is not that present believers have already been brought to completion, but that having Christ in them – his fulness which was discussed in the earlier treatment of Eph. 4:10-18 – they are all thoroughly equipped to live the Christian life.[58]

Given that Christians depend upon the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit in order to 'join the narrative', how, we might ask, is Present Maturity to be engendered in terms of human means? From the clear contexts of the passages we considered earlier, we can deduce that it begins with the intellect. Hence Paul urges the Corinthians: 'Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature' (1 Cor. 14:20). At the same time it is very clear in all of Paul's dealings with the Corinthians, in particular, that he desires *behavioural* transformation. Nevertheless, antecedent to behavioural transformation is intellectual transformation, what Paul described in Romans 12:2 as 'the renewal of your mind.' For Paul himself, the most fundamental truth about his identity was that he belonged to Jesus Christ as his servant, and on this basis he urged imitation of himself, just as he sought to imitate Jesus (1 Cor. 4:6, 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:16; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9).

Fee summarises Paul's dealings with the Corinthians:

> Paul addresses, in response to reports (1:11; 5:1; 1:18) or to their letter (cf. 7:1), at least eleven different, somewhat disparate concerns, ten of which are behavioral; only chap. 15 is theological as such, and even there he concludes both major sections with ethical warnings and imperatives (vv.33-34, 58). But in every case his greater concern is the theological stance behind the behaviour.[59]

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[58] Peter speaks to the same effect in 2 Peter 1:3: 'His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.'
[59] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 5.

Subsequently, Fee puts it more simply: '[i]n the most straightforward terms possible, 'belief and behaviour concur.'[60]

A straightforward reading through Chapter 4 of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, especially verses 8 to 13, reveals the widest contrast between the attitude of the Corinthians, and that of Paul and his companions. At first glance it appears to be a contrast in terms of life and circumstances, but at the root of it is a contrast in attitude or mind-set.

In terms of the language of maturity, it might be possible to characterise the Corinthians as 'precocious'. They think, speak and live like those who think they have already 'arrived'. We can observe this in the 'alreadys' of verse 8. 'Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich!' It might look as though they are already reclining at the table in the kingdom of heaven, as if they have already reached their destination by some short cut having simply by-passed the narrow way which Paul and his companions are treading. Paul and those who are with him look very different. In 1 Cor. 4:9 Paul uses the imagery of a Roman theatre where the Roman crowd gathers with its lust for violence and bloodshed. The apostles are Exhibit A, or perhaps Exhibit Z, being saved until last. The question might be asked: how can it possibly be that the Corinthians on the one hand, and Paul on the other, are disciples of the same Jesus?

The answer is that Paul is here bringing to a head some of the themes he has been dealing with throughout the letter so far: the vocabulary of 'fools', 'wise', 'weak', 'strong' and 'honour' from the first two chapters. The Corinthians insist on appearing wise, strong and honoured now, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world. They cannot entertain the possibility of appearing foolish, weak and dishonoured. Paul and his companions are an embarrassment to them, like the poor and uncouth relatives they would rather not have too much to do with.

This brings us back to our earlier discussion about eschatology. Like many Christians subsequently, the church in Corinth were guilty of over-developing aspects of their eschatology. But in doing so they were ignoring a vitally important strand of Christian living and were consequently under-developed in other respects. They were precocious as to the

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[60] ibid., 130.

end, but regressive as to the means, creating a disturbing imbalance and lack of proportionality.

**11. God's goals for his people include suffering which is not to be despised but understood as part of their identification with Christ, demonstrating that they are participators in the narrative of redemption.**

In particular, the Corinthians were forgetting that Christians in this present life are called to suffer in the same way as Jesus did before they enter into the full experience and enjoyment of the life which God has promised them. The prospect of believers being persecuted, stoned, imprisoned, and perhaps martyred was one which they would have viewed as shameful – hence the need for Paul to radically counter this view by boasting in his sufferings, as he does at great length in 2 Cor. 10-11.

For Paul, it was part and parcel of Christian discipleship that God would employ suffering in order to bring his people to maturity. But this suffering was to be understood as a necessary aspect of fellowship with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:29). To enter 'Paul's orbit', as Fee puts it, means accepting and even embracing suffering as part of our identification with Christ. It is often remarked that all four Gospel accounts include what might seem a disproportionate quantity of material describing the suffering and death of Jesus. The same emphasis on suffering is present in the Book of Acts.

Brian J. Tabb identifies 'five theses concerning God's unfolding plan for salvation and spreading through suffering.'[61] I list these here:

> Thesis 1. Jesus' suffering and vindication are the surprising means by which God accomplishes his promised plan of salvation.[62]
> Thesis 2. Believers' suffering serves a strategic missional purpose in light of God's inaugurated-not-yet-consummated kingdom.[63]

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[61] Brian J. Tabb, *Salvation, Spreading, And Suffering: God's Unfolding Plan In Luke-Acts*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 58:1 (March 2015), 43.
[62] ibid., 50.
[63] ibid., 51.

Thesis 3. Suffering validates the legitimacy of the church and especially its leaders, who suffer like Jesus in fulfillment of his predictions.[64]

Thesis 4. Suffering fundamentally expresses the world's brokenness from sin and Satanic oppression.[65]

Thesis 5. Believers should respond to suffering through concerted prayer, bold witness, and joyful, confident hope.[66]

Of these five, it is Theses 1 and 3 which relate most closely to my present argument. This is because they both express continuity between Jesus' suffering and the suffering of his disciples. Tabb, in commenting on Acts 4-5, notes that

> the suffering of the apostles and their community identifies them with Jesus, who suffered and was vindicated according to God's plan. It is noteworthy that the apostles endure beating (δέρω), as their master did (5:40; cf. Luke 22:63). The Christian community interprets the threats against Peter and John (4:17, 21, 29) as an extension or continuation of the opposition Jesus faced (4:27-28).[67]

Tabb then goes on to show that 'Saul's calling to suffer for Jesus' name (Acts 9:16) and his initial experiences of persecution (9:23, 29) confirm the genuineness of his conversion in the eyes of the persecuted church.'[68]

Paul's understanding of his own suffering can be gleaned from an examination of Col. 1:24: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' The idea that Paul's sufferings made up in some way for any lack of meritorious efficacy on the part of Christ's afflictions must, of course, be rejected, as F. F. Bruce clearly explains:

> The present context rules out any suggestion that the reconciliation effected by the death of Christ needs to be supplemented. Paul and his fellow-preachers, having themselves received the peace which was made "through the blood of his cross," now

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[64] ibid., 54.
[65] ibid., 57.
[66] ibid., 59.
[67] ibid., 55.
[68] ibid., 56.

fulfil their ministry by presenting that peace for acceptance by others.  But in the fulfilment of that ministry they are exposed to sufferings for Christ's sake, and these sufferings are their share in the afflictions of Christ.[69]

By means of suffering as Christ suffered, believers enter into the narrative of redemption in the most tangibly evident fashion.  They find themselves to be participants, not onlookers, in the unfolding history of Christ's body.  But their balanced and informed eschatological world-view, communicated to them by the Holy Spirit, through apostolic teaching, enables them to expect this, accept it and even, as Paul does, to welcome it as God's necessary preparation during this present age, in anticipation of the age to come when all suffering will be over.

**Summary of Chapter 1**

- God has a 'goal' for the whole creation whereby it will be restored to perfection, and God's people participate in that goal.
- The apostle Paul speaks of 'maturity' in believers as a present goal to which they should attain, that maturity consisting supremely of a Biblical mind-set whereby believers understand their place in the narrative of redemption.
- This maturity I have designated as 'Present Maturity' which should be distinguished from 'Future Maturity'.  The latter will only be realised in the age to come, in a fully restored creation from which sin has been banished.
- The narrative of redemption has now reached the 'last days' in which believers await the final consummation of God's goals for his entire creation.
- In the meantime, then, believers are to live lives which are directed by the Holy Spirit as they give attention to the apostles' teaching.
- Their identification with the narrative of redemption means that they are prepared to accept suffering.

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[69] Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 83.

# CHAPTER 2

# In what ways might Paul have defined mature believers in the light of God's intended goals for his people?

If the aim in Chapter 1 was to consider Paul's understanding of God's intended goals for his people, the aim in Chapter 2 is to investigate how these goals find observable expression in the lives of believers. There is bound to be a considerable amount of overlap with Chapter 1, but the intended difference is that there will be a deliberate 'close-up examination' of the characteristics of mature believers, that is, believers who exhibit Present Maturity.[70]

I will begin with a thematic study of Galatians 5:16-26, a key passage which links together the concepts of 'maturity' and 'fruitfulness'. After certain observations which follow on from this treatment, I will then move on to consider how believers should exhibit mature conduct in the context of the church community. This necessarily has an important bearing on human relationships, so I will investigate how the theme of imitation pervades Paul's writings. Paul's example and experiences, which are so closely interwoven with his doctrine, will then guide further investigation, especially his handling of conflict – both actual and potential – in the church, and his distinctive understanding of his own suffering.

## 1. Maturity is manifested by the fruit of the Spirit.

My intention in Chapter 3 will be to focus on the text of Gal. 3:1-18, but I come to a preliminary treatment of Gal. 5:16-26 in order to explore the relationship between the vocabulary of 'maturity' and that of a closely-related concept, 'fruitfulness'.

Fruitfulness occurs at the end of the growing season. Whilst a modern English understanding of 'fruit' is generally confined to the harvested products of flowering plants, the Biblical concept covers considerably wider ground. For example Deut. 28:4 speaks of 'the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle.' In each case, fruit is the

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[70] Where the noun 'maturity' or the adjective 'mature' are used without a qualifying prefix, I generally intend the present rather than the future sense.

eagerly-anticipated final result of a long process of development, and fruit brings satisfaction to those who have been awaiting it. A definition of this kind contains considerable overlap with that of 'maturity'. Paul's language of fruitfulness in Gal. 5:22-23 has been linked to the Isaianic theme of fertility and abundance in the new creation, and specifically to Isaiah 57:15-19. Greg Beale makes the observation that:

> Isa. 57:15-19 and Gal 5:22 are the only two places in the entire Greek tradition of both testaments where the combination of the words "Spirit," "fruit," "joy," "peace," and "patience" can be found (i.e., πνεῦμα, καρπός, χαρά [though verb form in LXX], ειρήνη, μακροθυμία, respectively). The concept of the *Spirit* creating "spiritual fruit" in an *eschatological era* is an idea peculiar to Isaiah in all of the OT and peculiar to Galatians 5 in the NT.[71]

Paul's desire for fruitfulness is evident from a number of NT texts apart from Gal. 5:22-23 (e.g. Rom. 6:22, 15:8-12; Eph. 5:9; Phil. 1:11, 4:17; Col. 1:6, 10). As Paul refers climactically to the 'new creation' towards the conclusion of Galatians (6:15) we are entitled to look for new-creation motifs in this letter. The fruit of the Spirit is not simply present existential realities but, akin to the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:9-14), signifies eschatological realities. So, for example, Robert Reymond writes in this context that peace is 'not to be construed simply as emotional tranquility but as the terminological description of the salvation state encompassing the whole man.'[72]

The manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in believers, then, should be the exhibition of new-creation realities in the lives of those who are, already, 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus we see again the presence of the *indicative*: believers are already 'new creation'; and the *imperative*: believers are urged to manifest the fruitfulness of 'new creation'.

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[71] Greg K. Beale, *The Old Testament Background of Paul's Reference to "the Fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22*, Bulletin for Biblical Research 15:1 (NA 2005), 26, emphasis mine.
[72] Robert L. Reymond, *Paul, Missionary Theologian: A Survey of his Missionary Labours and Theology* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 415.

**2. Maturity is produced by the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, with the co-operation of believers.**

Because this is 'the fruit of the Spirit', then the Holy Spirit is operative in believers in order to manifest this maturity. Gal. 5:16-26 is written with the clear understanding, which Paul has been labouring to demonstrate earlier in the letter, that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Galatians' lives is a given assumption. So the instruction in 5:16 to 'walk by the Spirit' (πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε) implies the possession of the Spirit. Paul has already laboured to demonstrate to the Galatians that their reception of the Spirit is coincident with their faith and salvation (3:1-5). But the function of the Spirit is not merely ontological, it is dynamic. As Fung comments, '[t]o "walk by the Spirit" means to be under the constant, moment-by-moment direction, control, and guidance of the Spirit.'[73]

No less equally implied in these verses is the clear, diametric opposition between the flesh and the Spirit, stated emphatically in the first part of 5:17: 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other'. There is some debate, however, as to what the last part of 5:17 means: 'to keep you from doing the things you want to do' (ἵνα μὴ ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε). The ESV translation, cited in the previous sentence, follows the majority of English translations in terms of its general force: 'so that ye cannot do the things that ye would' (AV); 'that ye may not do the things that ye would' (ASV); 'to prevent you from doing what you would' (RSV). However, the 2011 NIV gives a more palpable emphasis to the subjunctive form of θέλητε, translating this clause as 'so that you are not to do whatever you want'.[74] The stress here is on consideration and decision rather than straightforward possibility or capability. Those indwelt and controlled by the Spirit are to be governed by the consciousness that they *ought* not to do whatever they want; they are to reckon with the existence of the Spirit-flesh conflict and choose the way of the Spirit. This last sentence summarises the essential meaning of 'walk by the Spirit' (5:16).

What is the precise nature of the choice that Paul is urging the Galatians to make? Walter B. Russell III identifies 'flesh' and 'Spirit' in Galatians in terms of communities. He writes:

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[73] Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 249.
[74] It could be argued that the ASV with its 'may' is headed in the right direction regarding recognition of the subjunctive.

> *[S]arx* and *pneuma* have become theological abbreviations in Paul's argument that represent the two competing identities of the people of God in Galatia. The "flesh community" (Judaizers) is a community identified with the Mosaic law era and is therefore a community identified and characterized by a person bodily in his or her frailty and transitoriness and not indwelt by God's Spirit. This community is representative of a person before or apart from Christ's liberating death, burial and resurrection. By contrast the "Spirit community" is a community identified and characterized by a person bodily aided and enabled by God's presence and also bodily liberated from sin's dominion, a person experiencing the full liberation of Jesus' death and resurrection. Such persons are experiencing the freedom that Christ set them free to experience' (Gal. 5:1).[75]

Russell's stress on 'community' is a necessary corrective in an individualistic age, but one possible problem with his analysis is its tendency to externalise a conflict which has an essentially internal dimension. There is a danger that Russell could be understood, almost in a Pelagian sense, to be equating the temptation of the 'flesh' with the imitation of individuals who set a wrong example (in this case, reliance upon observance of certain aspects of the Mosaic law). Although Paul's argument in Galatians is addressed to the community, his teaching is to be carefully understood and digested by each individual; this remains as true today as it did when the letter was first received by the Galatians.

So then, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to produce the maturity which is evidenced in the fruit of the Spirit, but that should never be taken to mean that believers are inactive vessels, simply waiting to be filled by the Spirit. The imperative exhortation to believers to 'walk by the Spirit' (5:16) is completely consistent with, and follows from, the possession and the power of the Spirit in believers.

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[75] Walter B. Russell III, *Does The Christian Have "Flesh" In Gal 5:13-26?,* Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36:2 (Jun 1993), 186-87.

**3. Maturity is opposed to the status of being 'under law', law being understood as the old covenant law, which can never produce maturity.**

If there is a right way of attaining maturity in the Christian life; that is, by the Holy Spirit, then there are also wrong ways of seeking to do so. Paul is concerned that the Galatians do not find themselves 'under the law' (Gal. 5:18). Although a more careful and detailed treatment of Paul's view of the law in Galatians will follow in Chapter 3, there is a certain amount of necessary discussion that should take place here.

Why does Paul bring in the subject of the law at this particular point? Paul has written a great deal about 'the law', specifically the law given through Moses at Sinai, in the earlier chapters of Galatians (3:10-12, 17-22; 4:21-25). His great burden is to deliver the Galatians from the attempt to be justified by keeping this law; as long as they seek to do so they will be emptying the saving, justifying power of Christ's cross of its effect (Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:11; 5:4).

The immediate context of Gal. 5:18 is substantially communicated in the previous verse,: 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.' Fung calls this 'the fierce battle between the flesh and the Spirit.'[76] Here is the issue: how is anyone to conquer the desires of the flesh and follow the desires of the Spirit? Paul's initial response here is that the believer should be 'led by the Spirit.' But the passive form of ἄγεσθε should not lead us to the conclusion that this 'being led' is itself a passive affair. Rather, Fung speaks of 'a kind of "passive-active" action – actively obeying the prior leading of the Spirit.'[77] He continues: '[w]e can see from this that the work of the Spirit in the believer's life does not set the believer free from the warfare between the flesh and the Spirit.'[78]

If believers went into a kind of 'automatic pilot' setting in this regard and had the attitude of 'letting go and letting the Spirit take control' there would be no need for an exhortation such as Phil. 2:12-13: 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' This passage certainly teaches

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[76] Fung, *Galatians*, 251.
[77] idem.
[78] idem.

that God himself is dynamically at work in his people, but it does not excuse believers from making an effort; on the contrary, it is a typically Pauline exhortation for Christians to strive towards the goal of maturity.  We have already noted Paul's language of 'straining forward' and 'press on' in Phil. 3:13-14, and how he links this attitude with maturity in Phil. 3:15: 'Let those of us who are mature (τέλειοι) think this way' (Phil. 3:15).

So what does this have to do with the law?  It is striking that Paul brings the law back into his discussion at 5:18.  Given his context, he might have been expected to say 'But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the *flesh*.'  It is the flesh-Spirit opposition, not the law-Spirit opposition, which he has been stressing.  Yet he says 'law' instead of 'flesh'.  Why is this?  When we turn to Paul's more extensive treatment of the subjects of the law, the flesh and the Spirit in Rom. 7-8, his theological argument becomes more apparent:

'For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death' (Rom. 7:5).

'But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead' (Rom. 7:8).

'For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do' (Rom. 8:2-3).

The point is that the law has no power to restrain the flesh, but rather the law arouses and aggravates 'sinful passions', stirring them up rather than subduing them.  Paul's emphasis is on the weakness and failure of the 'flesh' to actively bring forth righteousness.  The law, in collision with 'sinful passions', only serves to accentuate them.  But where the law fails, the Spirit succeeds.  John Murray is clear in his comments on Rom. 8:2:

> The word "law" is used in this connection as a regulating and actuating power as well as a legislating authority.  In view, therefore, of this contrast "the law of the Spirit of life" should be understood as the regulating and actuating power of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of life.  It is eminently appropriate that the Holy Spirit should be designated

as the Spirit of life because the power he exercises is unto life as distinguished from the power of sin which is unto death.[79]

Christian maturity, as we have suggested, is the accomplishment of the goals which God has assigned for his New Testament people. What is the dynamic, the energy that leads to maturity? It is emphatically not the law, understood as the old covenant law enunciated through Moses. It is, as Murray rightly states, 'the regulating and actuating power of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of life'. By using this vocabulary, Murray seeks to do justice to the νόμος Paul speaks of in Rom. 8:2, carefully distinguishing this use of νόμος from its old covenant sense. In a similar vein Paul writes about being ἔννομος Χριστοῦ in 1 Cor. 9:21, and τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Gal. 6:2.

The life of the Spirit necessarily results in 'keep in step with the Spirit' (Gal. 5:25). The juxtaposition of living and walking is a clear illustration of the 'passive-active' principle which Fung has explained. To say that believers are not 'under law' does not imply that exhortations to holy and righteous living have no place in the life of believers.

James R. Congdon, in an article which is otherwise unobjectionable, concludes with the observation that believers 'have been *given the chance* to live a new life with Christ in the power of His resurrection.'[80] This is a very unfortunate use of language and it dramatically underplays the imperatives that Paul employs, not only in Rom. 6:2, 12-15, but also throughout Eph. 4:17-5:21, paralleled in Col. 3:5-17.

**4. Maturity among believers is observed in their communal relations, as they function as the body of Christ**

It is much more in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament to focus on 'mature believers' in community rather than a 'mature believer' in isolation. The obvious fact that most of Paul's letters are addressed to churches, rather than individuals, underlines this point. Even when Paul writes to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, he addresses them within the context

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[79] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans, Volume One, Chapters I-VIII*: The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 276.

[80] James R. Congdon, *The New Realm And Rules Of The Christian Life: Romans 6:1-14*, Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society (Autumn 2013), 63, emphasis mine.

of their local Christian communities.[81]  So when we ask how 'mature believers' might be defined, we are justified in observing how these believers behave, first of all, in the corporate context of the church.  Whilst in the twenty-first century western world there may be an intuitive tendency to look at a believer's individual 'walk with the Lord' – for example his daily habits of prayer and Bible reading – we struggle to gain specific guidelines in these areas from the writings of Paul.

It is quite clear that Paul himself was no 'lone ranger'.  Paul's writings abound with references to his fellow-workers.  This is not only the case in the final greetings which he gives in Rom. 16:1-23 and Col. 4:7-17, but such references are interspersed throughout his writings (e.g. 1 Cor. 16:10-19; Phil. 2:19-30, 4:3; Phmn. 23, 24). In chronological terms the final Biblical chapter of Paul's writings is probably 2 Tim. 4, where he makes mention of sixteen individuals by name, individuals who have caused him joy, sorrow or intense longing.  Though he was an apostle, Paul treasured the fellowship of all God's saints.

The fact that the church is a community, and a community for which '[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28), underlines the diversity of the one church.  Mature believers are able to accept and indeed welcome the co-existence of unity and diversity within the church of God.  When Paul imagines the foot, the ear, the eye and the head articulating complaints about their respective positions in the body (1 Cor. 12:12-17), he does so in order to illustrate the futility and destructiveness of any member of Christ being animated by a spirit of inferiority, superiority or indeed competition.

Peter T. O'Brien helpfully analyses the unity-diversity of the body of Christ and in doing so demonstrates that there is no tension, much less conflict, when the body functions according to God's plan:

> At first sight it might seem that this diversity is at odds with the overarching unity of
> which the apostle has just spoken.  But the diversity contributes to the unity of the

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[81] So Paul tells Timothy to continue his ministry in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), gives him directions with regard to public worship (1 Tim. 2:1-12) and office in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-13).  He evidently addresses Timothy in the context of the people he is labouring among in 1 Tim. 4:12-5:7.  A similar pattern is seen in the case of Titus who is serving in Crete (Tit. 1:5) and among the Cretans (Tit. 1:12-14).  The brief letter to Philemon begins with a greeting which includes 'the church in your house' (Phmn. 2).

body, since Christ's giving different gifts to each is for the purpose of enriching the whole, so that all are prepared for full maturity when they meet their Lord.[82]

It is devoted service to Christ as the exalted king and head over the church that enables God's people to serve him in their different capacities. In relation to Ephesians 4:13,[83] O'Brien comments that '[h]aving achieved dominion over all the powers through his victorious ascent, he sovereignly distributes gifts to the members of his body.'[84] The gifts of the Spirit which Paul deals with in 1 Cor. 12 and 14 should not be seen as abilities or talents, nor in any sense as merely latent or potential. They are actual, concrete, functions of service, ordered and commanded by Christ as the head of the church, that build up his body.

What is more, the gifts have a clear eschatological function in terms of the ultimate maturity of the body: '[t]he verb employed here (καταντήσωμεν) is used figuratively and means to "attain or arrive at a particular state", with the focus on the end point.'[85] O'Brien goes on to spell this out clearly. 'Significantly, Christian growth or progress does not occur in isolation, for Paul's language here envisages God's people *collectively (we all)* as en route to this vital destination.'[86] This corporate way of thinking is an essential ingredient in the whole consideration of Christian maturity.

## 5. Maturity can be witnessed in terms of both accomplishment and attitude.

In Chapter 1 we saw that in some contexts τέλειος can be translated as 'perfect' as well as 'mature'. One's intuitive concept of 'perfection', whether or not it is affected by Wesleyan or subsequent traditions, may well tend in the direction of moral or ethical flawlessness. That is one of the dangers inherent in relying on a English word like 'perfection' with a semantic range which may differ quite considerably from what Paul intends with the word τέλειος. Ridderbos agrees when he writes:

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[82] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar NT Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 286.
[83] The Greek text of Eph. 4:13: μέχρι καταντήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ἑνότητα τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον, εἰς μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ.
[84] O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 297.
[85] ibid., 305.
[86] idem.

as regards the concept "perfect," one must be very much on his guard against an exclusively moral interpretation and in general against the idea of a quantitative state of moral perfection flawless in all its parts. The perfection of believers refers above all to the totalitarian character of the fullness of the redemption in Christ.[87]

He continues: 'Thus he is "perfect" who inwardly and in the manifestation of his life has appropriated the content of the Christian faith in the right way.'[88]

Against a 'quantitative' mind-set which might be inclined to ask 'How well have I done? Have I reached a high enough level?' an alternative 'qualitative' mentality would instead ask 'What should I do as a Christian in this situation?' The Christian believer, in terms of his righteous standing before God, is justified on the basis of Christ's completed work. He knows that Christ has attained the level of moral perfection on the believer's behalf. But when attention is drawn to the matter of day-to-day living, believers are constantly required to 'discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom. 12:2).

We might ask whether it is true that for Paul the question is not only a matter of, as some might say, 'where believers are at'. Is it also true that he is concerned about the spiritual direction in which they are heading? We have seen that he wants the Philippians to share in his own motivation in which, 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 3:14). The quest for maturity is carried forward by, as Ridderbos explains, 'faith in the power and faithfulness of God (1 Thess. 5:24), not the moral result reached in the church.' It is this 'that makes him hold up blamelessness and spotlessness before the church as mandate and final goal, in the midst of all the present temptations and imperfections.'[89]

In this context David K. Clark identifies two different modes of thinking, consideration of which is pertinent to the present discussion. One is 'bounded set thinking' in which, for example, a person belongs to a certain category or group because he holds certain beliefs or practises certain types of behaviour. The second is 'centered set thinking' in which, on the

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[87] Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 270.
[88] ibid., 271.
[89] ibid., 272.

other hand, the key consideration is how a person is moving relative to some defined centre.[90] Reflection on these two modes of thinking, and the tension between them, may be a useful exercise in a variety of pastoral contexts. For example, are elders quite happy with church members so long as they 'tick the boxes', submitting to the church constitution and behaving merely acceptably; or are they more carefully observing the spiritual trajectory that the people's lives are taking? What is more significant: where people have got to, or the direction in which they are currently heading?

A thorough reading of the Pauline literature would suggest that it is a case of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. It is apparent that Paul is concerned both with actual conduct and with spiritual motivation and attitude. This is because conduct will always be determined by attitudes. When Paul is at his most scathing with the Corinthians, for example in the matter of the immoral brother (1 Cor. 5) and then especially in the question of lawsuits (1 Cor. 6:1-8), he is evidently dismayed at what has actually taken place in the past. But it is also clear that he berates them because of their wilful ignorance. Their actions have been at fault because their understanding is at fault; and their understanding is at fault because they are unwilling to be taught and unwilling to submit to Paul's apostolic authority.

In summary, the Christian life is to be lived out in the light of the goals towards which the church is heading. As was explained in Chapter 1, eschatology must govern the world-view, or the mind-set, of God's people. Present maturity in the church is evidenced by conduct which is shaped by the Biblical-eschatological world-view which has been discussed thus far. It was in the case of the Corinthians, in particular, that this maturity was conspicuously lacking. More will be said on the effect of such an eschatological mind-set in the following section.

**6. Maturity is evidenced in an eschatological world-view which comprehends past, present and future.**

As the Christian message spreads, the world-view underpinning Christian maturity will necessarily interact with, and often come into collision with, competing world-views. A missionary movement, by its very definition, is continually encountering and breaking into

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[90] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Crossway, 2003), 223.

new cultural situations. A specific culture might be widely regarded as the product of a noble and sophisticated civilization, as in the case of Corinth and other Greek cities of classical antiquity. But sophistication in earthly terms is entirely different to Christian maturity.

In 1 Cor. 6:1-6 Paul takes up the matter of believers in Corinth taking one another to court. He is horrified that this practice is going on: the very occurrence of lawsuits is 'already a defeat for you' (6:7). For Paul it is a matter of intense shame that the Corinthians are hanging out their dirty linen for the unbelieving world to see; and it is his desire that they would rather be defrauded and endure personal loss, in the self-denying spirit of Christ himself, than contend with one another. But the basis of Paul's argument, which underlies his dismay, is his eschatological perspective on the church. Although the lawsuits may directly concern only two individuals, Gordon D. Fee understands that 'the failure of the two men is primarily a failure of the church to be the church.'[91]

It is remarkable how frequently Paul applies the designation 'the church of God' to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:2, 10:32, 11:22, 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1), the only other NT occurrences being in Gal. 1:13 and Acts 20:28 (where Paul does not speak directly but Luke quotes Paul's words). The Corinthians were, at a fundamental level, more concerned to be 'of Corinth' than they were to be 'of God'. Paul's rebuke in 1 Cor. 6:1-6 identifies (1) the Corinthians' blindness in relation to their future state and consequently (2) their failure to apply eschatological realities to their present conduct. As we have already noted, the oft-repeated formula 'do you not know' (οὐκ οἴδατε), is concentrated in 1 Cor. 6 (6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19). Fee goes on to comment:

> In light of these eschatological realities, matters of everyday life are trivial, and the pagan courts who concern themselves with such trivialities are themselves trivialized. Such people have no standing at all with the people of God. The absurdity of the Corinthian position is that the saints will someday judge the world before whom they are now appearing and asking for a judgment. Not only does such an action give the lie to who they are as the people of God, but it is done in the presence of unbelievers, the very people to whom the church is to be God's alternative.[92]

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[91] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 230.
[92] idem.

Paul, of course, had no hesitation in appealing to Roman courts when a matter of Roman law was being contested (Acts 16:37-39; 25:10-12). But when it came to disputes within the church community, the considerations became very different. It was not the incompetence of the (unbelieving) judges that concerned Paul, as the NIV translation of 6:4 might seem to suggest, but the fact that they had 'no standing in the church' (6:4). The reference to these judges and courts as 'the unrighteous' (6:1) is not a comment on their personal morality; rather, being outside the church, they belonged to the community of 'the unrighteous'.[93]

William F. Cook III is in full agreement:

> Paul's point is not that believers would not receive a fair hearing before a civil magistrate, but that believers involved in litigation within the community have no business being there. The church again failed to understand their identity in Christ. They are an eschatological community, indwelt by the Spirit and they should be capable of handling these matters themselves.[94]

Fee applies the lessons of this passage to our contemporary circumstances, identifying a present world-view that is at odds with the world-view Paul longs to inculcate in the churches:

> The difficulties with our "hearing" this text are related primarily to our general lack of a biblical self-understanding, especially in terms of the essential eschatological framework of our existence as the people of the future who are to be totally conditioned by that future as we live in the present. Therefore, our priorities tend to be warped toward the values of this age rather than the age to come. Here we have great need of deep reformation.[95]

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[93] The precise nature and details of this eschatological judgement, in which believers will be active and not only unbelieving human beings, but also angels, will be judged (1 Cor. 6:2-3) is not spelled out for us. It seems likely that either these details had not been revealed to Paul, or else that they belonged to that category of revelations 'which man may not utter' (2 Cor. 13:4).

[94] William F. Cook III, *Twenty-First Century Problems in a First Century Church* (1 Corinthians 5–7), Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 06:3 (Fall 2002), 47.

[95] Fee, *Corinthians*, 238.

But how might this 'deep reformation' be carried out in practice?  To the related question 'what do mature believers look like?' an instinctive response might reasonably be, 'Show me some examples!'  This is exactly what the New Testament does when it speaks of imitation, which will be considered in the next section.

**7. Maturity is realised not only through precept but through example, and Paul's writings are suffused with the language of imitation.**

On a number of occasions Paul explicitly uses the vocabulary of imitation (1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1; Eph. 5:1, 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9).  In each case he employs either the plural noun μιμηταί or the verbal infinitive μιμεῖσθαι.  But this represents only a tiny fraction of the Pauline corpus in which the exhortation to imitation is at least implied.

Andrew D. Clarke notices that whilst the references to imitation in the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians appear to address the specific area of suffering, the whole letter suggests that the theme of imitation is a broader one:

> Paul was pleased to hear reports of the Thessalonians being imitators of Paul's team, the Judean Christians and the Lord in responding to the message of God with conviction. They had been both good imitators and examples; but Paul continued to remind them of these broader aspects of his life as they grew to maturity: "Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, *as you learned from us* how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1).[96]

When Paul speaks of imitating other Christians, he does not restrict the objection of imitation to himself.  Timothy and Titus are both urged to be examples of godly living (1 Tim. 4:12, Tit. 2:7).   Thomas R. Schreiner observes that '[t]he Christ-exalting passion of Timothy and Epaphroditus is the primary reason Paul commends them.'[97] But far more often Paul puts himself forward as such an example.

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[96] Andrew D. Clarke, *'Be Imitators Of Me': Paul's Model Of Leadership*, Tyndale Bulletin 49:2 (1998), 339, emphasis mine.
[97] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 26.

Clarke, speaking of imitation in general, agrees. 'It is a practice which he not only commends, but it is one which he explicitly praises when it appropriately takes place (1 Thess. 1:6). Furthermore, it is a practice which he himself exemplifies – thus, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ"' (1 Cor. 11:1).[98] It is not Paul's exaltation of himself that he desires, but rather that he should be observed as a faithful ambassador of the Christ he serves.

In 1 Cor. 4:14-17 Paul's paraenesis is couched in terms of his paternal relationship with the Corinthians. In order for this mode of address not to be construed as overly possessive, it should be understood that in the Graeco-Roman world the imitation of one's father was expected and indeed applauded.[99] Paul frequently emphasises to the Corinthians that they should not be imitators of pagan Corinthian culture, but imitators of those who had brought the gospel to them and lived out that gospel among them. And again, lest it be thought that Paul was exalting himself as the only appropriate model for imitation, he also mentions Timothy (4:17) having earlier cited Apollos (4:6).

Clarke seeks to demonstrate that Paul is in no way setting himself, as an individual, upon the highest rung of personal holiness: 'Rather than Paul seeking to reinforce a hierarchy at this point, the intention underlying his exhortations to imitation of himself is to point to the real example of Christ which is the ultimate goal, in a self-effacing recognition of his own indebtedness to Christ.'[100] And he concludes:

> What, then, is Paul's model of leadership? This can be viewed from three
> perspectives: first, in one sense Paul's model of leadership (the model to which he
> turns) is Christ, supremely depicted as the servant of the Philippian Christ-hymn;
> secondly, Paul's model of leadership (the model or example which he sets) is his own,
> albeit imperfect, "imitation of Christ"; and thirdly, Paul's model of leadership (the
> model which he teaches) is that, in their own imitation of Christ, leaders should direct

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[98] Clarke, *Be Imitators Of Me'*, 330.

[99] Eva Maria Lassen's comment is enlightening at this point. 'That Paul should have so ended his lengthy discussion in 1 Cor. 1:10–4:21 with the father image of justice or moderation suggests that he is invoking an authoritative relationship over the congregation as its founding father, the impact of which is more readily appreciated when placed against the background of its imperial use in this Roman colony during the Claudian Principate'. Eva Maria Lassen, *The Use Of The Father Image In Imperial Propaganda And 1 Corinthians 4:14–21*, Tyndale Bulletin 42.1 (NA 1991), 136.

[100] ibid., 347.

all believers to imitation of Christ, in contrast to the secular models of Corinth or the politeia-dominated practice of the Philippians.[101]

Christian maturity is learned, therefore, in the context of communal fellowship where imitation of appropriate role-models – those who are themselves dedicated to imitating Christ – is encouraged. Although the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews is not a position that I am seeking to advocate here, the words of Heb. 13:7 are in agreement. 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith'.

## 8. Maturity is also seen in the 'putting on' of Christ which is all-embracing in its application.

Not unrelated to the idea of imitating Christ is the concept of 'putting on' Christ. This type of imagery relates very strongly to the motif of new creation, which is seen in the restored image of man, Christ himself.

Sometimes the metaphor is expressed in military terms (Rom. 13:12, Eph. 6:11-17, 1 Thess. 5:8). At other times God's people are urged to 'put on' characteristics very similar to the fruit of the Spirit (Col. 3:12, 14); or 'the new self' (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10). In Rom. 13:14 the believers are instructed to 'put on' (imperative) Christ himself, and the Galatians are told that 'as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on (indicative) Christ' (Gal. 3:27). There is no contradiction between the last two texts quoted, but rather an eloquent tension; here, once more, we see the indicative and the imperative working in tandem.

Paul's metaphor of 'putting on', like all the imagery he uses, is never used because he happened to stumble upon a vivid analogy. In Col. 3:10 the 'new self ... is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' The allusion to the first human creation in Genesis 1:27 is impossible to miss. Kenneth M. Gardoski, commenting on Col. 3:10, elaborates on this:

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[101] ibid., 359-60.

As a new man, the believer is continually being renewed (ἀνακαινούμενον) "to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him" (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ᾽ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν). Three things are notable about this clause. First, "it is impossible to miss the allusion to Genesis 1:27"[102] in the reference to the creator's image. The image of God is in view, but now in relation to the believer and not to mankind in general. Second, the believer is continually undergoing a renewal in relation to the image of God. Third, Paul says that the believer is being renewed to a true knowledge (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν).[103]

It should be added that to 'put on' Christ is not to act in an inauthentic or insincere fashion. That is, a Christian who 'puts on Christ' does not assume a false persona, but actually lives in a manner consistent with what he has now become in Christ. In an era where 'authenticity' is highly applauded, this is a significant consideration. When we examine Paul himself, we see that the central motivation of his life is crystallised in his declaration that 'For me to live is Christ' (Phil. 1:21). Schreiner exhibits this Pauline motivation thus:

> The goal of his [Paul's] life is to know him [Christ] better, to have his righteousness, to participate in his sufferings and to obtain the resurrection of the dead. Even though he has not yet attained perfection (Phil 3:12-16), he exerts his energy to reach the prize of perfection, which awaits him at the eschaton. Thus, those who oppose the message of the gospel are to be avoided as enemies, while those who live like Paul are to be imitated as co-workers and friends (Phil 3:17-4:1).'[104]

He continues: '[t]here is no conception here of doing what is right simply because it is the right thing to do, or of duty for duty's sake.'[105] The Pauline ethic can be summed up in Col. 3:17. 'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' The universality of this exhortation is the reflection of Christ's sovereignty and ownership over the whole creation. Paul would undoubtedly include the physical activities of eating, drinking and lawful sexual activity in this exhortation, as can be observed in such passages as 1 Cor. 6:18-20 and 10:31.

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[102] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 147.
[103] Kenneth M. Gardoski, *The Imago Dei Revisited*, Journal of Ministry and Theology 11:2 (Fall 2007), 33.
[104] Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 26-27.
[105] ibid., 28.

**9. Maturity is exhibited in Paul's approach in writing to Philemon**

In the Epistle to Philemon we can examine the workings of Paul's mature Christian mind, and view him close-up as a model for imitation in inter-personal relations. For all its brevity, this letter exhibits for us the reasoning power of the apostle's mind.

What is especially interesting, however, is not so much the brevity of the Epistle as its considerable length, bearing in mind that Paul could indeed have issued a straightforward command to Philemon on the basis of his apostolic authority (Phmn. 8). Nevertheless Paul does not send Philemon a terse, pithy directive but instead saturates the letter with expressions of brotherly love and the enjoyment of shared fellowship, so that the letter is a masterpiece of what we might call Christian diplomacy. In the Epistle to Philemon we are permitted to see, as it were, the careful 'working-out' by which Paul arrives at the answer to a specific problem in the church community. We see the chief considerations which informed not only his judgment, but the manner in which that judgment is expressed. For Paul, doctrine and *pastoralia* were profoundly integrated.

Paul's entire approach to Philemon is shaped by new relationships in the transformed Christian community. It is a striking fact that in worldly terms, Paul would have been reckoned Philemon's inferior by some distance: Philemon was wealthy enough to own slaves. But for Paul such considerations of socio-economic status carried no weight. In Christ he could count Philemon as a 'beloved fellow-worker' (Phmn. 1) and 'my brother' (Phmn. 7). Their *brotherhood in Christ* enabled Paul to stand on level ground with Philemon. It could be argued, conversely, that his status as an apostle meant that he could have addressed Philemon in authoritarian terms; but in the *meekness of Christ* he chose rather to appeal on the basis of love. F. F. Bruce elaborates on this point:

> Orders are liable to be resented, from whomsoever they come, but an appeal from a friend is difficult to resist, especially when it is made expressly "for love's sake." The Lord whose ambassador Paul is can command obedience with supreme authority, but even he prefers to appeal to his people "for love's sake," as being more congenial to

his nature.  The ambassador, vested with his Lord's authority, will follow his Lord's example.[106]

Philemon 'is given plainly to understand what is expected of him, but the favor which Paul asks must be granted spontaneously, under the prompting of Christian grace.  Only so would he be happy to receive it.'[107]

More generally, in his extensive treatment of Philemon in his *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, N. T. Wright shows that inherent in this Epistle is 'the way Paul expressed the obligation which he understands to obtain between two or more members of the messianic family', and 'at the heart of his [Paul's] work is the yearning and striving for messianic unity across traditional boundaries'.[108]  It is not diplomacy *per se* that is exhibited in Paul's approach to Philemon, but a personal approach that has been shaped by the radical implications of transformed fellowship in Christ. It is the outworking of this approach, being imitated by the whole Christian community, which speeds along the process of corporate maturity.

## 10. Maturity is learned through identification with the dying Christ in the sufferings of this present life.

Paul's sufferings and weaknesses are to be seen in stark contrast to the boasts of the Corinthians – witness the contrast between 1 Cor. 4:8 and 4:9 – and far from being an embarrassment to him or in some sense inimical to his exercise of apostolic authority, they were means by which he could learn and then communicate important lessons about Christian maturity.

It is obvious from any reading of Paul's letters, and, in addition, the relevant chapters in Acts, that these sufferings were far wider and more varied than the 'thorn' which afflicted him (2 Cor. 12:7).  But it is in this episode that Paul's sufferings reach a specific and highly personal focus.

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[106] F.F.Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 211-12.
[107] ibid., 215.
[108] N.T.Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts I and II* (London: SPCK, 2013), 11.

Ronald Russell addresses Paul's sufferings in the context of modern medicine whose primary aim, it is largely considered, is the alleviation of suffering.[109]  Russell considers the various options that have been suggested as the identity of Paul's 'thorn'.  He rejects any kind of 'spiritual torment', especially the sensual temptation to give up his celibacy;[110] he also discards the suggestion of persecution, believing that the likely time-frame of Paul's experiences militates against persecution: he was caught up to heaven 'fourteen years ago' (2 Cor. 12:2) and the 'thorn', he suggests, followed closely afterwards.  By a process of elimination, concludes Russell, the 'thorn' is most likely to have been a physical complaint.  The apparently recurring nature of this problem (2 Cor. 12:8-9) increases the probability of Paul suffering from some chronic physical condition.[111]

Russell is right to observe that '[t]he boasting of Paul in his weakness is that which gives his claim to apostleship an ironic contrast to the claims of his opponents who believed their stature was sanctioned by their powerful presence' (1 Cor. 10:12, 18).[112]

And yet when Russell concludes that Paul 'sought to relieve his suffering and to restore an unhampered sense of meaningfulness that came from pursuing his divine vocation', we might question whether he has missed the central divine purpose in Paul's suffering.  The great lesson for Paul, and for all who follow in his path of suffering, is given in 2 Cor. 12:9: 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.'  Paul's climactic boasting in his sufferings is the profoundly counter-cultural foil to the Corinthians' boasting in their human wisdom and strength, and even in their divine and supernatural gifts.[113]

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[109] Ronald Russell, *Redemptive Suffering And Paul's Thorn In The Flesh*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 39:4 (December 1996), 563.  It is within this context, of course, that much of the modern debate about euthanasia is taking place - the suffering of both the patient and the carers are in view.

[110] It seems highly unlikely that Paul would have ceased seeking deliverance from this temptation; 12:8-9 imply that the sufficiency of God's grace meant that Paul no longer pleaded with God about the removal of the thorn.

[111] 'While the usage of *skolops* in the LXX often has a human reference (Num 33:55; Ezek 28:24), it does not function this way exclusively (Sir 43:19; Hos 2:10). In Greek texts, demons place prickles on a woman's forehead.  And in Biblical tradition Satan is clearly connected with physical illness (Job 2:5; Luke 13:16). This suggests that it is more likely that the "thorn in the flesh" refers to a physical malady inspired by the forces of evil.'  Russell, *Redemptive Suffering And Paul's Thorn In The Flesh*, 567.

[112] ibid., 565.

[113] ibid., 569.

So whilst we might struggle to wholeheartedly affirm Charles Hodge's observation that '[h]is sufferings thus became the source of the purest and highest pleasure',[114] we would surely agree that Paul's experience of suffering became the occasion, if not the solitary means, of his greater usefulness in Christ's service. James D. G. Dunn offers a somewhat more nuanced observation: 'it was precisely *not* experiences of power leaving behind bodily weakness which Paul saw as the mark of grace, but experiences of power in and through bodily weakness.'[115]

This should be explored more deeply. Christian suffering is inextricably linked both to the experience of fellowship with Christ and the eschatological prospect of the end of suffering.[116] Dunn displays insight when he observes that '[t]he tension, suffering, death, and life experienced by Paul he experienced as the outworking of Christ's death and risen life.'[117]

Commenting on Paul's use of the perfect tense in Rom. 6:5, Dunn demonstrates 'that the believer is and continues to be in a state of having been fused with the very likeness of Christ's death.'[118] He goes on to elaborate,

> Paul did not think of crucifixion with Christ as a once-for-all-event of the past. Nor was he thinking in these passages of the believer as already taken down from the cross with Christ and risen with Christ. On the contrary, "I have been crucified with Christ"; that is, I have been nailed to the cross with Christ, and am in that state still; *I am still hanging with Christ on that cross*.[119]

Dunn's final statement needs some qualification. A misapplication of our continuing identification with a Christ *undergoing* crucifixion easily results in doubts about the believer's justified status: Christ did indeed *die* on the cross, cried out 'It is finished' (John 19:30), was buried, raised to life and then ascended into heaven. In terms of the believer's

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[114] Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 663.
[115] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 483, emphasis original.
[116] It is perhaps noteworthy that the threefold prayer of Paul for deliverance (2 Cor. 13:8) echoes Jesus' threefold prayer in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:44, Mark 14:41).
[117] Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 484.
[118] idem.
[119] ibid., 485, emphasis original; in Gal. 2:20 (ESV; in some versions 2:19) we see Paul's similar use of the perfect tense (συνεσταύρωμαι).

status, I would want Dunn to declare with more full-throated conviction that the believer *has been* crucified with Christ, with all the resultant consequences for his justification and assurance.

But Dunn is right to say that the believer – and believers – will often resemble the dying Christ during their present lives. In 2 Cor. 4:10-12 Paul speaks of himself and his companions, not so much as dead but as undergoing the process of death.[120] The suffering of the Christian is transformed when viewed from Paul's perspective. It is not only a matter of the need for personal sanctification in specific areas – as might be acknowledged by a Christian who says that 'God has a lot of work to do with me and that's why I'm being put through these trials' – but an integral part of the believer's identification with Christ. The necessary pain of believers' affliction is to be understood as the extension of Christ's own suffering on the cross. Indeed a valid and satisfying explanation of Christian suffering can only be achieved through an understanding of believers' union with Christ. The ramifications of that union are very wide; whilst believers may be aware that their justification is 'in Christ' and so is their glorification, there may often be less willingness to embrace the latter half of Rom. 8:17: 'provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.'

For Paul a call to Christian service was necessarily a call to suffering, from the very earliest point in his ministry (Acts 9:16). The considerable extent of Pauline teaching on suffering indicates that he did not regard suffering as playing a peripheral role in his life.

Moreover, if Paul's 'thorn' was indeed a physical malady rather than an experience of persecution, the pastoral usefulness of that 'thorn' can be seen to be enhanced. For example, pastors will have spent time with Christians, especially elderly Christians, who suffer from various infirmities or disabilities, but who may believe that their suffering in some sense belongs to a kind of 'second tier'. They are not suffering as martyrs, or even explicitly because they are Christians, and therefore, in their own thinking, their suffering may have little or nothing to do with their identification with Christ. But in actual fact the very mysterious nature of Paul's 'thorn' – and it was clearly an experience of suffering which pained and bewildered him considerably – gives every believer the right to understand that what Peter calls 'suffering in the flesh' (1 Pet. 4:1) is part of their participation in Christ. The

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[120] See the noun νέκρωσιν in 4:10, and especially the expression εἰς θάνατον παραδιδόμεθα διὰ Ἰησοῦν in 4:11.

'sufferings of this present time' (Rom. 8:18) should therefore be understood in the most comprehensive sense.

It is this perspective which will enable mature believers to rejoice in their sufferings (Rom. 5:3), to see themselves as those in whom the historical process of redemption is moving inexorably towards its final goal: that of the sons of God being revealed and the whole creation being renewed in harmony with them, all in Christ.

**Summary of Chapter 2**

- The concept of maturity is related to the theme of fruitfulness, and that believers are required to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit listed in Gal. 5:22-23.
- It is evidently the work of the Holy Spirit to produce that fruit, yet never in such a way that believers are inactive in the process; rather, they are to 'walk in the Spirit' (Gal. 5:16) as responsible agents. Believers are not 'under the law', the law being understood as the Mosaic Law, because that law has no power to give life, only to condemn those who are sinners. Nevertheless, there is a place for moral exhortation in the Christian life.
- It is the area of communal relations among believers that Christian maturity is especially to be exercised.
- Maturity can be evidenced in both accomplishment and attitude; indeed the two are interlinked because attitude will direct what is to be accomplished.
- The mind-set of maturity comprehends God's eschatological purpose for his church so that present conduct is viewed in the light of future privilege.
- Maturity is not learned solely by precept, but by imitation of other mature believers who are themselves seeking to imitate Christ.
- Maturity is developed through identification with the dying Christ as believers suffer in this present life.

# CHAPTER 3

## How is this description of Christian maturity expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, especially in Gal. 3:1-18?

The intention in this Chapter is to crystallise the themes which have been identified so far and to ground them in the context of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. I will seek to contend that the maturity Paul looks for in the Galatians is directly derived from their understanding of Christ's death in the context of redemption history and, as a consequence, to see their own participation in the redemptive narrative. I will then seek to link this with the 'blessing of Abraham' of which Paul speaks in Gal. 3:14, which is itself identified with the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

Following necessary background to the Letter, the main theological categories with which Paul is dealing will be identified. I will seek to engage with a number of scholars, especially Bruce W. Longenecker, J. Louis Martyn and Richard B. Hays, who have all produced scholarly work on this passage. The centrepiece of this Chapter will consist of an analysis of Gal. 3:14, a correct understanding of which is central to the pursuing of Christian maturity.

So I begin with the Greek text of Gal. 3:1-18.

[1] Ὦ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν, οἷς κατ᾽ ὀφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος;

[2] τοῦτο μόνον θέλω μαθεῖν ἀφ᾽ ὑμῶν· ἐξ ἔργων νόμου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐλάβετε ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως;

[3] οὕτως ἀνόητοί ἐστε, ἐναρξάμενοι πνεύματι νῦν σαρκὶ ἐπιτελεῖσθε;

[4] τοσαῦτα ἐπάθετε εἰκῇ; εἴ γε καὶ εἰκῇ.

[5] ὁ οὖν ἐπιχορηγῶν ὑμῖν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἐνεργῶν δυνάμεις ἐν ὑμῖν, ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως;

[6] Καθὼς Ἀβραὰμ ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην·

[7] γινώσκετε ἄρα ὅτι οἱ ἐκ πίστεως, οὗτοι υἱοί εἰσιν Ἀβραάμ.

⁸ προϊδοῦσα δὲ ἡ γραφὴ ὅτι ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοῖ τὰ ἔθνη ὁ θεός, προευηγγελίσατο τῷ Ἀβραὰμ ὅτι ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοὶ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη·

⁹ ὥστε οἱ ἐκ πίστεως εὐλογοῦνται σὺν τῷ πιστῷ Ἀβραάμ.

¹⁰ Ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσίν, ὑπὸ κατάραν εἰσίν· γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὃς οὐκ ἐμμένει πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά.

¹¹ ὅτι δὲ ἐν νόμῳ οὐδεὶς δικαιοῦται παρὰ τῷ θεῷ δῆλον, ὅτι ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται·

¹² ὁ δὲ νόμος οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ πίστεως, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ ποιήσας αὐτὰ ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς.

¹³ Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασεν ἐκ τῆς κατάρας τοῦ νόμου γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα, ὅτι γέγραπται· ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὁ κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου,

**¹⁴ ἵνα εἰς τὰ ἔθνη ἡ εὐλογία τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ γένηται ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ἵνα τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πνεύματος λάβωμεν διὰ τῆς πίστεως.**

¹⁵ Ἀδελφοί, κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω· ὅμως ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεται.

¹⁶ τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ. οὐ λέγει· καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν ἀλλ᾽ ὡς ἐφ᾽ ἑνός· καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστός.

¹⁷ τοῦτο δὲ λέγω· διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ μετὰ τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτη γεγονὼς νόμος οὐκ ἀκυροῖ εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν.

¹⁸ εἰ γὰρ ἐκ νόμου ἡ κληρονομία, οὐκέτι ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας· τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ δι᾽ ἐπαγγελίας κεχάρισται ὁ θεός.

Whilst Galatians 3:1-18 quoted above will be the centre of gravity in this chapter, and especially 3:14, there are also significant matters that call for comment on account of the contextual background of the Letter as a whole.

## 1. The Galatians are not in a state of maturity while they do not understand the nature of the spiritual conflict they are in.

The polemical style of Paul is wholly appropriate because he is severely perplexed about the attitudes and actions of his Galatian readership which impinge directly upon the central theological substance of his Letter. [121]  It is the failure of the Galatians to understand these substantial theological issues that greatly concern Paul.  While they continue as they are, they are not only languishing in spiritual immaturity but are in the very greatest spiritual danger.

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[121] Paul states as much in Gal. 4:20.

This polemical motif finds dramatic expression in the public debate between Peter and Paul at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14, though possibly also 2:15-21).[122] The way in which Paul rehearses his dispute with Peter is alarming: the fissure emerging in the churches of Galatia is part of an intense, spiritual life-or-death struggle in the churches of Galatia that runs so deep as to divide, quite openly, the two apostles who play the largest human roles in New Testament history.

A polemical style of writing presupposes the existence of opposing forces, whether they be abstract or concrete. We therefore need to identify these opposing forces as they are presented in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. How do all the various 'players' line up? On what side do they fight? How does Paul utilise this confrontation in order to urge the Galatians towards Christian maturity?

We have already made reference in Chapter 2 to two great antagonists: the 'Spirit' and the 'flesh'. The opposition between these two is worked out in the life of believers as we have already seen in Gal. 5:16-26. But there is a necessary and anterior theological argument in which Paul must engage before he comes to the application of that later passage. Therefore the battle lines between 'Spirit' and 'flesh' need to be clearly drawn in Gal. 3 as Paul's argument develops.

J. Louis Martyn summarises the conflict between them as follows: 'the Spirit and the Flesh … are two opposed orbs of power, actively at war with one another since the apocalyptic advent of Christ and of his Spirit. The space in which human beings now live is a newly invaded space, and that means that its structures cannot remain unchanged.'[123] The language of 'power', 'war' and 'invasion' which Martyn employs emphasises the polemical character,

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[122] Ronald Fung argues that '[s]tructurally speaking, these verses are a continuation of Paul's address to Peter which began with v.14b, but because of their content they are treated here as the first paragraph of Paul's doctrinal argument. Ronald Y .K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 112. The NIV assumes that Paul's address to Peter, in view of the Galatians, continues to Gal. 2:21. I would argue in favour of the NIV interpretation, not least because in Gal. 3:1 Paul turns to specifically address the Galatians.

[123] J. Louis Martyn, *Apocalyptic Antimonies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, New Testament Studies 31, 417. I would query whether Martyn is wholly accurate in implying that the Spirit and the flesh have only been 'actively at war with one another' since the coming of Christ and the Spirit. Was not David's struggle with sin, exposed so pungently in Psalm 51, an outworking of the same conflict? It would be more accurate to say that the Spirit-flesh conflict has taken on a global dimension since the New Testament era.

not only of Paul's argument with the Galatians, but the whole scenario in which the Galatians find themselves.

The title of Bruce W. Longenecker's 1998 work, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians*, clearly commends itself as being highly relevant to the subject matter under consideration. Longenecker's work, in general, is characterised by a strong emphasis on the influence of suprahuman forces which were directing the drama in the Galatian churches. For example, he holds that the 'bewitching' (ἐβάσκανεν) in Gal. 3:1 'signals that Paul envisaged the current situation of his addressees as involving the influence of spiritual powers'.[124] He goes on to suggest that '[i]f the Galatians' experience of the Spirit had been put in jeopardy, this cannot have been due merely to the influence of human beings, but must include also spiritual powers of some kind within that process.'[125] Longenecker describes these suprahuman forces as 'tribal angels' who oversaw the nations outside Israel, and goes so far as to identify these powers with the 'elementary principles of the world' (στοιχεῖα) of Gal. 4:9.[126]

Longenecker has been influenced by the works of J. C. Beker[127] as well as Martyn, and he comments that:

> For them, the driving force behind Paul's theological presentations is the invasion of God into the world in order to subjugate forces that run contrary to God's will and to set relationships aright. Behind any concern for ethics, ecclesiology, pneumatology, christology (*sic*), and the like, lies a theology that focuses on God as the cosmic overlord of creation.'[128]

It seems to me that Longenecker is dangerously overstating his case here, insofar as 'ethics, ecclesiology, pneumatology, christology, and the like' are not simply corollaries of Paul's

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[124] Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 26.
[125] idem.
[126] This is argued at length in Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 46-58. Martyn agrees: 'In Galatians we find repeatedly the linguistic pattern *hypo tina einai*, "to be under the power of something" … This pattern reflects Paul's belief that all human being are subject to powers beyond their control' (J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010), 23.
[127] J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Edinburgh: T. &T. Clark, 1980)
[128] Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 8.

theology, but the essential building blocks of it, and the very subjects he focuses upon as he writes to the Galatians. Indeed, lumping them all together in this fashion surely underplays the theological centrality of Christology and pneumatology in particular. These branches of theology are not secondary outgrowths of 'a theology that focuses on God as the cosmic overlord of creation' but truly *constitute* that very overlordship.[129]

More pointedly, in the theological kernel of Galatians which is 3:1-18, Paul does not explicitly engage with the subject of invisible suprahuman powers, other than the supreme cosmic power of God himself. He argues on the home territory of the Galatians' own experience, but in particular their *understanding*. Paul's controversy with the Galatians is played out in the divine-human sphere, without any reference to additional beings or powers. It is not that Paul denies their existence or even their actions, but they are not the concerns to which he draws the Galatians' specific attention.

To put it at a most basic level, Paul is challenging the Galatians: do they understand that the coming of Christ – his birth, life, death and resurrection – indicate that God's plan of redemption has moved into an entirely new epoch, the epoch of fulfilment? As long as the Galatians fail to see this they remain stunted and immature.

**2. The Galatians' accurate theological understanding of the meaning of Christ's death within salvation history is a necessary part of their maturity.**

God is indeed 'the cosmic overlord of creation' and thus he has invaded this creation in an historical, flesh-and-blood character, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The great fault at the heart of the Galatian crisis, the great bar to their maturity, is a doctrinal one insofar as the Galatians display an inadequate understanding of salvation history, specifically observed in their poor grasp of what Christ has done for them, especially in his death. Christian maturity consists in the conscious grasp of the Christ-event – or Christ-*events* – and their consequent implications within the community of God's people.

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[129] Because Christology and pneumatology deal, respectively, with the Second and Third Persons of the Godhead, it could be a regarded as an assault on the Trinity to relegate these disciplines to some second echelon of importance.

The Galatians have been taken in by 'agitators' – which could translate οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες (Gal. 5:12) – who have become widely referenced as the 'Judaizers', and will be referred to as such here.[130]  Longenecker believes that the Judaizers

> might have held that Paul's message of faith provides an easy introduction to the Christian community for gentiles – a 'primer' that eventually needs to be supplemented with fuller teaching about the God and people of the covenant.  In this way, the agitators might have conceived of their efforts as bringing to completion what Paul's ministry started.'[131]

How does all this affect a view of salvation history?  According to Longenecker, what Beker and more pointedly Martyn do in common is to emphasise the *discontinuity* in salvation history between the Old Testament, specifically Abraham, and the eschatological purposes of God which are announced in the New Testament.[132]  Longenecker's aim is to demonstrate that Paul has very clear and explicit eschatological features in his Letter to the Galatians.  By contrasting Beker and Martyn with J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, Longenecker goes on to show that it is in the 'transformed identity of God's people that Paul locates the hope for communal and societal health, the advertisement of God's sovereignty, and the embodiment of God's emerging triumph.'[133]  The linkage between Abraham and the new covenant, suggested by the title of Longenecker's work, thus stands against any idea of a discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments.

Paul's eschatological framework is abundantly confirmed as we look at the beginning and the end of Paul's Letter to the Galatians; the emphases found in the 'top and tail' of Paul's Letters are frequently eloquent clues as to their chief substance.  In 1:4 Paul tells us that Christ 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age' (ὅπως ἐξέληται ἡμᾶς ἐκ τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος πονηροῦ).  Then, in 6:14 Paul reaffirms the heart of his theological concern for the Galatians: 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' (καινὴ κτίσις).

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[130] There is not the scope here for a thorough discussion of the identity of the Judaizers.  See Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 25-30, and the much fuller discussion in Walter B. Russell III, *Who were Paul's opponents in Galatia?*, Bibliotheca Sacra 147:587 (July 1990).
[131] Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 29.
[132] ibid., 11-12.
[133] ibid., 188.

Paul's all-consuming passion and longing as he writes to the Galatians is that they will realise that with the death of Christ and their faith in Christ, they themselves have become that 'new creation' in Christ. It is only as they lay hold of this doctrine that they will attain to the maturity that Paul seeks for them.

## 3. The Galatians' 'hearing with faith' includes both a passive aspect (the gospel message of Christ crucified) and an active aspect (giving careful and continuing attention to that message).

Paul begins Chapter 3 with a castigation and a barrage of rhetorical questions. His outburst in verse 1 is a pungent indicator of his grief and concern over the Galatians' lack of maturity.[134] Paul is painfully and overwhelmingly aware of the Judaizers and their arguments, which run quite contrary to the trajectory that Paul is on.

When Paul speaks of the public portrayal (προεγράφη) of Christ crucified he does not intend the bare recounting of the historical facts associated with Calvary, much less the visual depiction of them, but the faith-begetting proclamation and explanation of the theological implications of Christ's death.[135] There had once been the strongest relationship, almost a kind of symbiosis, between the event of Christ's death and the faithful response of the Galatian hearers. When the Galatians had first heard the gospel message preached by Paul, they evidently received it with faith (Gal. 3:2) and also joy (Gal. 4:14-15). Now, with alarming speed, their eyes have been diverted from Christ crucified; but Paul is determined to draw their gaze back to the 'hearing with faith' (ἀκοῆς πίστεως) that was their initial experience.

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[134] Richard B. Hays speaks of 'the Galatians' incorrigible dullness that they fail to understand the point'. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 167.

[135] At the same time, Paul's language is strikingly visual. S. Lewis Johnson jr. speaks about the 'eye trouble' that the Galatians were suffering from. He links this to the language of 'bewitched' in Gal. 3:1 with its possible allusion to the 'evil eye', commenting that this type of speech 'was often used in connection with the practice of magical powers, and an allusion to magical arts may be implicit here. That figure would be very suitable to the reference to the portrayal of Jesus Christ before the "eyes" of the Galatians. In fact, the apostle may intend a play on words here and, if so, the *Today's English Version* has caught it with the translation, "Who put the evil eye on you? Right before your eyes you had a plain description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross!"'. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *O Foolish Galatians! An Exposition of Galatians 3:1-14*, Emmaus Journal 12:2 (Winter 2003).

Much discussion has taken place around the interpretation of ἀκοῆς πίστεως in verses 2 and 5. These have centred on the grammatical voice – active or passive – of both these Greek words as well as the nature of the genitive πίστεως: whether it be a subjective or objective genitive. Fung believes that πίστεως is active and then, after longer and more careful consideration, concludes that ἀκοῆς is also active. He appears to take it for granted that πίστεως is a subjective genitive. If ἀκοῆς is indeed active then it is not the gospel message or 'report' (the interpretation if ἀκοῆς is passive) which has caused the Galatians to receive the Spirit, but the active exercise of their hearing, along with the active exercise of their (subjective genitive) faith.[136]

Fung ties up his interpretation of ἀκοῆς πίστεως with the προεγράφη of Christ crucified in verse 1. προεγράφη 'refers … to the public and official character of the apostolic kerygma which set forth, like a placard for all to see, "Jesus Christ … crucified"'. 'The perfect participle ἐσταυρωμένος in this phrase … describes him in his character as the crucified (and risen) One'. 'If only the Galatians had fixed their eyes on that placard, it would have enabled them to escape the fascination of the false teachers; for that one phrase, if it had been truly understood, would have removed the ground from the Judaizers' argument'.[137]

It seems more nuanced to regard ἀκοῆς as a 'passive-active' form. This is not an evasive response to the discussion, but a recognition that the Galatians both *received* a message – the placarded gospel of Jesus Christ crucified – and then *actively exercised faith* in that message. To alter the grammatical terminology, there must be both an object of faith (the gospel message) and a subject of faith (the one who exercises faith).

This treatment of the 'passive-active' nature of faith can be tied in with our earlier discussion about the indicative and the imperative. There is a correlation (though not an exact equivalence) on the one hand, between the *passive* aspect of faith and the *indicative*; and on the other, between faith exercised *actively* and the *imperative*. The gospel message must be heard and understood in order for faith in it to be exercised. Nevertheless, while a false gospel is being believed there can be no justifying faith and no possibility of spiritual

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[136] Fung, *Galatians*, 130-32. Clearly the choice of grammatical interpretation is a rudder that will steer the exegete in radically diverse directions, which is why Fung devotes so much space to this discussion. Hays (*The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 131) believes by contrast that ἀκοῆς is better translated as 'message'.
[137] ibid., 129-30.

maturity.  Paul's great priority is to reaffirm the true gospel which the Galatians are in danger of throwing away in favour of a false one.

**4. The Galatians, having believed, received the Holy Spirit.**

In Chapter 2, when we looked at Gal. 5:16-26, we saw how fruitfulness is linked to maturity, and how the agent of this fruitfulness is the Holy Spirit, with whom believers must co-operate.  It is necessary to examine Gal. 3 carefully in order to appreciate the centrality of the Holy Spirit in Paul's whole argument with the Galatians.

How are the Galatians to profit from the ἀκοῆς πίστεως?  It is striking that Paul does not hesitate to speak in verse 2 of the reception of the Spirit as the Galatians' great gain.  This consideration is such a pressing one in Paul's mind that the answer to this question of the Spirit is the 'only' thing he needs to learn from his readers.  Although Paul has not mentioned the Spirit so far in this Letter, his rather abrupt introduction of the subject might suggest that for him, the fact that Spirit is *the* great gain or reward of the Galatians means that the Galatians did not need to be convinced of this.

Paul's essential point is that this reception of the Holy Spirit came about when the Galatians believed the gospel.  Martyn describes the spiritual birth of the Galatian believers:  'The generative context in which the Spirit fell upon the Galatians was not their act of commencing observance of the Law; it was God's act in the revelatory proclamation of Jesus Christ suffering crucifixion, the act by which God kindled their faith.'[138]

Paul's reference to the Spirit necessitates the final drawing-up of the battle lines in his theological argument.  So in these first five verses Paul aligns certain principles in clear opposition to one another.  On the one side is 'the Spirit' (3:2,3,5)  and 'hearing with faith' (3:2,5); on the other are 'works of the law' (3:2,5) and 'the flesh' (3:3).

But there is by no means a straightforward symmetry in Paul's argument.  The Spirit is presented both as the result of faith (3:2, 5) and a means of attaining perfection (3:3). The word translated 'perfection', ἐπιτελεῖσθε, is related to the noun τέλειος which was

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[138] Martyn, *Galatians*, 289.

considered, with various cognates, in Chapter 1. How do Christians strive for 'perfection' or 'maturity'? Paul's clear answer here is that they do so by the Spirit they had received; they continue as they started. For the Galatians to live according to the flesh is an inferior, infantile mode of behaviour, a retrograde step bearing in mind that they had already 'begun by the Spirit'.

At this point it is worth recalling that there is both a *Present Maturity* that Paul is looking for in believers, and a *Future Maturity* towards which they are aiming. We can recall the paradox of Phil. 3:12 and 3:15 which we considered in Chapter 1. Paul knows that he and others are not yet 'perfect' (Future Maturity) but he urges those who are 'mature' (Present Maturity) to think as he does. This analysis now needs to be fed into the Galatian situation. For the Galatians to pay heed to the Judaizers' teaching is abundant proof that they are not exhibiting Present Maturity. Additionally, the route marked out for the Galatians by the Judaizers would not direct them to Future Maturity.

The great common link which encompasses both Present and Future Maturity is the Holy Spirit himself. The Holy Spirit is not only the great reward of initial faith but the means by which obedient believers grow until they reach the destination of Future Maturity.

The nature of 'works of the law' and their relationship to 'the flesh' need to be clarified in order for us to clear the way for a better understanding of the work of the Spirit. Ben Witherington III demonstrates the range of this category by proving that

> Paul sets the Spirit over against: (1) 'works of the Law' as here in 3.2; or (2) just 'the Law' as in 4.5-6 and 5.18; or (3) 'desires of the flesh' as in 5,16-17, 24-25 or (4) 'works of the flesh' as in 5.19-23 or finally (5) just 'flesh' (cf. 3.3 and 6.8). What (1) and (4) have in common is that they are dealing with merely human actions rather than divine ones.[139]

Paul wants the Galatians to appreciate that when they heard with faith about Jesus Christ crucified, no 'merely human actions' were taking place. It was not through being

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[139] Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 211.

circumcised that they received the Spirit. Both the initial and the ongoing work of the Spirit are bound up with their hearing with faith.

We can relate all these observations to one from Chapter 2: the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, with whom believers co-operate, is the means of transformation by which maturity is produced. Understood thus, the hearing with faith can, at any stage of the Christian life, be understood in a 'passive-active' sense. The Galatians had, at the initial stages, been 'passive' in so far as they had heard a message which was divine and heavenly in its origin and character.[140] But the exercise of their faith was emphatically an active phenomenon.

In verses 4 and 5 Paul drives his point home by appealing to the Galatians' experiences, both past and present. His question in verse 5 is substantially the same as in verse 2, but it is updated from the past into the present, and is also enlarged by a reference to the works of the Spirit which are currently manifested among the Galatians.

The translation of ἐπάθετε in verse 4 has been a matter of some controversy. The widespread usage of this word in the New Testament points to 'suffered' rather than 'experienced', but a strong case can be made out that the latter rendering is superior. Verse 5 speaks clearly of the working of miracles, a common evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit in the apostolic church (Acts 4:33, 8:13, 19:11; Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28; 2 Cor. 12:12). Fung believes that the positive-sounding experiences in verse 5 imply that ἐπάθετε ought to be translated as 'all your great experiences'[141]. Witherington likewise favours 'experienced' over 'suffering', arguing that 'the Galatians had, in Paul's view, some remarkable spiritual experiences when they were converted, and presumably vs.4 suggests that such experiences continued beyond conversion.'[142] In verse 5, ἐπιχορηγῶν and ἐνεργῶν are both present active participles, which suggests that the manifestations of the Spirit were still continuing at the time Paul was writing.

Whichever interpretation is admitted, the point is that by listening to the Judaizers the Galatians were cutting themselves off from the Holy Spirit, the only supply of spiritual life

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[140] In support of this statement consider Gal. 1:11-12: 'For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.'
[141] Fung, *Galatians*, 133.
[142] Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 215.

and growth, and turning to what was redundant and sterile.[143]  The continuing supply and energy of the Spirit, at this stage of the Galatians' life, was no less important than it had been at the beginning.  By the Holy Spirit the Galatians had first come to new birth, and by the Holy Spirit they must attain to maturity, both Present Maturity in this age, and Future Maturity in the age to come.

**5. The Galatians should look to Abraham's faith as a pattern of their own faith.**

Paul has to combat the false doctrine of the Judaizers, whose flagship doctrine is the necessity of Gentile circumcision.  In order to do so he evokes Abraham, the OT patriarch to whom circumcision was first given (Gen. 17:10-14).  That the Jews in the time of Jesus and of Paul boasted in their relationship to Abraham can be evidenced from several Gospel texts (Mark 3:9; Luke 3:8, 16:24; John 8:33).  Paul is now redefining what it means to be 'sons of Abraham' (Gal. 3:7) and therefore to partake of 'the blessing of Abraham' (Gal. 3:14).

Presumably, Paul understands that the Judaizers, in insisting upon circumcision, were adverting to Abraham as the primal exemplar of circumcision.  The very antiquity of Abraham as the father of the Jewish race would have counted for much in the ancient world. Witherington posits that Paul thus proceeds with the Galatians on 'the assumption that the more ancient a notion is, the greater the authority and significance it is likely to have.'[144]  He continues:

> [t]wo emphases with regard to Abraham are constantly made in the literature of Judaism: (1) that Abraham was counted righteous because of his faithfulness under testing; and (2) that Abraham's faith spoken of in Gen. 15.6 must be coupled with his acceptance of circumcision as referred to in the covenant of Gen. 17.4-14 … Furthermore, Abraham's faithfulness under testing is always presented as being meritorious both for Abraham himself and for his prosperity[145].

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[143] Martyn, *Galatians*, 294, paraphrases Gal. 3:3 thus: 'Are you Galatians really so foolish as to think that, having begun your life in Christ by the power of his Spirit, you can now move on to perfection by means of a severed piece of flesh?'
[144] ibid., 224.
[145] ibid., 225.

At first sight, this might seem to be a compelling reason for the Galatians to follow Abraham and to be circumcised. Paul's appeal to Abraham in Gal. 3:6-9, as well as his longer treatment of Abraham in Rom. 4, confirms that he agrees with contemporary Jewish literature in viewing Abraham as a prototype. But Paul has a more profound intention. He seeks to enable the Galatians to see that the essence of God's relationship with Abraham was first of all one of covenant and blessing from God; and *in consequence of this*, faith and obedience from Abraham.

The introduction of Abraham in Gal. 3:6 begins with the comparative Καθὼς. The ESV translation 'just as' seeks to draw out the close correspondence between the faith of the Galatians upon hearing the gospel, and the faith of Abraham on the occasion when God gave him the promise of many offspring (Gen. 15:6). The force of this comparison is that Abraham, the biological forefather of the Jews, engaged in a parallel action to that in which the Galatians engaged when they first heard the gospel: Abraham had believed God and so had they.[146] The mention of Abraham being counted righteous is calculated to remind the Galatians that they too are counted righteous – justified – upon believing the promise of God.

Further light can be shed upon this lesson by examining Rom. 4, a more extensive treatment of justification where Abraham is again cited as the key paradigm of faith. The context in which Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 in Rom. 4:3 is one in which Paul is strenuously opposing works against faith. It is precisely in order to establish the gospel of grace and faith against a system of works that Paul cites the example of Abraham. Abraham is the main figure in the spotlight throughout Rom. 4, other than a short, though important, excursus into the case of David (4:6-8). The fact that Abraham is designated by Paul as the 'man of faith' or more literally 'faithful Abraham' (AV), τῷ πιστῷ Ἀβραάμ, underlines the extent to which for Paul, at any rate, faith is the demarcating characteristic in Abraham.

It is worth quoting Martyn at length in order to emphasise that God's promise was antecedent to the exercise of faith in the case of the Galatians, just as it was in the case of Abraham:

> In Galatians Paul's own later references to God's promise (3:16, 17, 18) reflect his
> certainty that Abraham's faith, far from being the first step, was itself elicited by the

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[146] Martyn renders this 'things were the same (with Abraham)', *Galatians*, 297

power of God's prior promise. Moreover, Paul elsewhere shows that God's promise to Abraham was in no way responsive to some act on the part of the patriarch. God's promise was predicated on nothing other than God's will to create life, calling into existence those things that do not exist (Gal. 3:21; cf. Rom. 4:17). It is precisely in this regard that Abraham's faith is analogous to the faith that was kindled – and that continues to be kindled – among the Galatians by the power of the gospel.[147]

In Gal. 3:7 Paul explains that it is those who are 'of faith' (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως) who are the 'sons of Abraham'. Both Paul and the Judaizers would equally accept that the terminology 'son of …' can have the broader sense of sharing in a common likeness or having common characteristics. But when Paul wants to locate the focal point of Abraham's faith he directs his readers – both Galatians and Romans – to the faith of Gen. 15:6, not to the faith of Gen. 17.

Why does Paul do this? H. Wayne Johnson, examining the text of Gal. 3:6-9, opines that '[i]t is not Abraham's faithfulness that is referred to in Gen 15:6 but his act of "believing."'[148] It seems to me that Johnson draws an unhelpful distinction here, as Biblical 'faithfulness' is often evidenced and crystallised in a specific 'act of "believing."' Behind every 'act of "believing" 'there exists a 'faithfulness' that motivates and directs that 'act'. Gen. 15 itself is a case in point, as Abraham's faithfulness – he believed God – is shortly made concrete in his obedient action in dividing the animals and laying them out as God commanded (Gen. 15:9-10).

But Paul's deliberate citation of Gen. 15:6 is also significant in that (1) it is of greater antiquity than Gen. 17 and especially (2) it shows us Abraham exercising faith as an uncircumcised man. This ties in with Paul's more extensive treatment of Abraham in Rom. 4, in which he makes it clear that faith was accounted to Abraham as righteousness *before* he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12). Paul is determined, therefore, to sever any idea of an unbreakable and necessary connection between faith and circumcision.

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[147] ibid., 298
[148] H.Wayne Johnson, *The Paradigm Of Abraham In Galatians 3:6-9*, Trinity Journal 08:2 (Fall 1987), 192.

The expression ἐκ πίστεως in 3:7 would appear to be an abbreviation of the fuller ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως which Paul has employed in 3:2 and 3:5. Viewed in this way, it could function as an adjectival genitive, indicating the distinctive characteristic of God's people. The ἐκ πίστεως community are marked out, not by their physical descent from Abraham, nor by the physical marks of circumcision, but by what Johnson helpfully terms a 'genealogy of faith which goes back to Abraham.'[149] The varied usage of ἐκ πίστεως throughout the Pauline corpus affirms such an interpretation. Its extremely frequent use throughout Gal. 3 – five times in 3:7 to 3:12 alone – establishes it as the fundamental identity of the true people of God, *contra* circumcision itself. So Witherington concludes that 'the sons of Abraham are 'those who live from or out of or on the basis of Abraham.'[150]

N. T. Wright goes so far as to say that 'Abraham is the beginning of the truly human people. He is the one who, in a faith which Paul sees as the true antecedent of Christian faith, allows his thinking and believing to be determined, not by the way the world is, and not by the way his own body is, but by the promises and actions of God.'[151] In Wright's analysis we see that Abraham, living as he did two thousand years before Christ, anticipated the faith and hope which Paul longed to see in the Galatians and indeed in other believers.

**6. The Galatians should welcome the inclusion of the Gentiles as a key part of the promise to Abraham.**

In Gal. 3:8 we see that Abraham's faith in God was marked by its international character: God was determined to bless all nations in Abraham. Paul wants the Galatians to understand that this international aspect of the gospel has reached full fruition, so that this blessing of all the nations is a present-day reality which encompasses the Galatians themselves.

The calling and the blessing of the Gentiles is a prominent and recurring theme throughout the Abrahamic narratives of the Old Testament. The earliest such announcement, in Gen. 12:3, was given not only before Abraham was circumcised, but long before it was possible to speak of him belonging to any specific nation. The words 'I will make of you a great nation' (Gen. 12:2) rules out the possibility that Abraham was a member of any 'nation' at that

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[149] ibid.
[150] Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 226.
[151] N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010), 133.

particular point.  Given its great antiquity, and its place as the culminating prophecy of Gen. 12:3, the blessing of the Gentiles  must not be seen as a subsidiary or secondary plan of God, but as a powerful and public demonstration of his gracious activity in the world.

So, in Gal. 3:8, Paul is seeking to redirect the whole trajectory of thought that the Judaisers, presumably, had brought to bear upon the Galatians.  The Judaisers pressed the antiquity and seminal function of Abraham into their service.  For them, Abraham was the blueprint to which they tried to make the Galatians correspond.  Paul has no hesitation in advancing Abraham as a key witness; however his preoccupation is not with circumcision as the centre-piece of Abraham's faith, but with the Godward, revelatory content of Abraham's faith in the entirety of God's promises.  Paul does not emphasise one aspect of the outworking of Abraham's faith (his obedience in being circumcised) but the character of Abraham's lifelong faith as believing and relying upon all the revelation which God gave to him (Rom. 4:20-21).  His aim is to show that in the divine purpose the gospel of Jesus Christ which he is now preaching is the fulfilment of God's words to Abraham about the blessing of the nations in him (Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18).

**7. The Galatians should recognise that the OT law does not lead to blessing but is subordinate to the promise which was made to Abraham, and confirmed in the new covenant.**

Paul's course of argument from 3:10 to 3:14 is one in which the sharpest opposition and contradiction between the Galatians' position and his own is emphatically established.  There is an inherent and unavoidable incompatibility between them, and Paul demonstrates this forcibly by bringing into play starkly opposing principles.  Here the argument 'comes right down to the wire' and the Galatians will be won or lost depending on their response to Paul's teaching.

Clearly, in Gal. 3:10-14, *the blessing of faith* is sharply contrasted with *the curse of law*.  The Galatians will always be in the greatest danger until they have clearly understood the gospel of God's blessing through faith alone, leaving no place for any blessing whatsoever through law.  The way in which Paul seeks to confirm this in their mind is by setting up a series of sharp antitheses, backing the theological agenda of the Judaizers firmly into the wrong corner.  So, in 3:10-14 Paul reaches the great summing up of his principal argument and in

doing so he disqualifies the law from any role in justifying any human being. This is seen most acutely in the threefold repetition of 'curse' in 3:13 (κατάρα in various forms), a strongly emphatic rhetoric technique which prepares the readers for what is to come in the next verse: 'the blessing of Abraham'.

Martyn draws the dividing line between two opposing groups who are defined according to their identity. 'Those whose identity is derived from faith' are set against '[t]hose whose identity is derived from observance of the Law curse.'[152] This is to be seen as a radical departure from the doctrine of the Judaizers, because the lines of demarcation which *they* sought to draw were firmly between those who observed the law and those who did not.

The Judaizers' intention, believes Martyn, was to intimidate the Galatians into a state of submission with regard to observation of the law. Their citation of Old Testament passages had this end in view. 'The threatened curse of Deut. 27:26 fits the Teachers' theology hand in glove.[153] One supposes that it was with such scriptural passages that they threatened and frightened the Galatians.'[154]

For Martyn, blessing and curse should not be thought of primarily in connection with righteousness and guilt. He argues that 'the human dilemma consists at its base, not of guilt, but of enslavement to powers lying beyond the human being's control.'[155] In this, we can see, his thinking resembles that of Longenecker, with the result that Galatians is primarily a manifesto of freedom, not of righteousness.

There is no doubt whatsoever that freedom *is* a major theme in Paul's argument in Galatians. The first clear indications of a situational controversy in the letter are seen in 2:3-5. Titus is not compelled to be circumcised (2:3), which evidences the existence of some party seeking to bring about that kind of compulsion. In this context, Paul speaks of 'false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so

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[152] Martyn, *Galatians*, 308.
[153] Martyn uses the term 'Teachers' to designate those whom I have labelled 'Judaizers', as he uses 'rectification' where others more frequently speak of 'justification'.
[154] ibid., 309. It seems to be on account of this methodology on the part of the Judaizers that Paul's citation of Old Testament passages is especially dense in Gal. 3:10-13.
[155] ibid., 308

that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you' (Gal. 2:4-5). Later, he sounds a clarion call to the Galatians in 5:1: 'For freedom Christ has set us free', and he goes on to tell them in Gal. 5:13 that they were called to freedom, but were not to use their freedom as an opportunity to indulge the flesh.

But Martyn presents a false dichotomy when he separates the category of slavery/freedom from that of guilt/righteousness. The two are linked in that they both fall under the wider classification of gospel blessings and curses. Justification, understood in its classic Reformation and forensic sense as the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness, is a gospel blessing just as is the freedom that Paul is urging as he writes to the Galatians. But freedom, understood in the Galatian sense, belongs more properly to the doctrinal category of adoption rather than justification. Not only does Martyn tend to conflate justification with adoption (or at least part of the consequences of adoption) – his argument does not satisfactorily explain how it is that Christ's death substantially ends the rule of the law. Absent from his discussion is any doctrine of Christ satisfying the demands of the law, both in his life and in his death. Although Martyn does not deny substitutionary atonement, he somewhat eclipses it: '[c]entral to the action in this apocalyptic struggle is, therefore, not forgiveness, but rather victory, God's victory in Christ and the resultant emancipation of human beings.'[156] Many of Martyn's insights are valuable but his downplaying of moral categories in connection with God's gospel blessing is lamentable.

The blessing that the Galatians have received is, nevertheless, a blessing of freedom. Consequently, says Martyn, Paul wants the Galatians to stop thinking in terms of law-observance when it comes to receiving God's blessing. Paul's reference to Hab. 2:4 has been included so that the Galatians will cease thinking in legal terms.

The issue of whether law observance is actually possible is, for Martyn, an irrelevancy. Indeed, Martyn seems to side with Hays in rejecting the idea that Paul believed that it was impossible to keep the law. Hays takes Paul's belief 'that during his career as a Pharisee he was κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἄμεμπτος[157]: "in legal rectitude – faultless"

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[156] ibid., 318f.
[157] Phil. 3:6.

(NEB)' at face value.[158]  Martyn summarises: 'What is wrong with seeking rectification through Law observance is not that observance is impossible, but that the Law one is observing does not spring from faith.'[159]  I fully concur with Martyn that here is a category error dividing Paul from the Judaizers.  This is what Paul is seeking to hammer home.  So, 'we could render v.12, "Moreover, the Law *does not have its origin in faith*; but rather, *failing to have its origin there*, it says, 'The one who does the commandments will live by them.'"'[160]

A much earlier writer, J. B. Lightfoot, is in agreement on this point.  Law and Promise 'are used without the article, as describing two opposing principles'.[161]  God's inheritance was given by grace, not as a commercial transaction.  Paul began in 3:1-5 with the gracious gift of the Spirit to the Galatians, and in coming to 3:14 he concludes with the gracious gift to Abraham which was the source of spiritual blessings to the Gentiles.  So Witherington agrees: '[s]ubmitting to the Law would be neither necessary nor beneficial in such a situation'.[162]

But Martyn's thought, additionally, is characterised by a disturbing antithesis between 'God' and the 'Law', almost as if the law were inherently opposed to God and working against his purposes.  It is difficult to read Martyn at times without imagining him to believe that the Law is intrinsically linked to cursing as God is to blessing.  He speaks of the 'enslaving voice' of the Law being given at Sinai 'in God's absence'.[163] This does not sit easily alongside the plain teaching of Paul in Rom. 7:12, where he states that 'the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.'

This needs further clarification.  Certainly, as the law comes into contact with sinful humanity it is powerless to bless, but this is because of the sinfulness of the flesh (Rom. 7:5); the law remains 'holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good' (Rom 7:12).

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[158] Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 178.
[159] Martyn, *Galatians*, 311
[160] ibid., 315, emphasis mine.
[161] J.B.Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St.Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: W.F.Draper, 1870), 144.  I will subsequently investigate the continuity from 'blessing' to 'promise' with Gal. 3:14 as a kind of pivot.
[162] Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 246.
[163] ibid., 370.

Nevertheless, given the sinfulness of the flesh, the law *can* only bring cursing and not blessing. It is only Christ who redeems from that curse (Gal. 3:13) by his death.

In 3:15-18 Paul addresses this question further. He shows that the law was not an addition to the covenant established with Abraham. It was a temporary administration which was unable to negate any of the promissory ingredients of the Abrahamic covenant. Prominent in Paul's mind is the greater antiquity of the Abrahamic covenant, and the period of 430 years (3:17) was well-known to the Jews (Exod. 12:40-41). The law, being a much later addition, has no force to invalidate or even to weaken what had been promised before. The law, therefore, necessarily occupies a subordinate role within the divine covenantal economy; the promise made to Abraham and his seed must retain its primacy.

This is where considerations of eschatology in relation to maturity must come to the fore. The law is indeed 'holy, righteous and good' (Rom. 7:12), and was given by God and in his presence, not in his absence as Martyn suggests, but the law is not 'of faith' (Gal. 3:12). Instead the coming of faith, as understood by Paul (Gal. 3:23, 25) is an epoch-creating and epoch-defining episode that ushers in the eschatological maturity of God's people. Prior to the coming of faith – that is, the publication of the gospel of Christ crucified, the hearing of it with faith, and the reception of the Holy Spirit – Israel were in a state of minority.

## 8. The Galatians should identify 'the blessing of Abraham' (Gal. 3:14) with the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Gal. 3:14 is the climax of Paul's central argument and, as such, the hinge upon which his applications hang. Why does he speak of 'the blessing of Abraham' and what does he intend by it? I will seek to demonstrate here that this 'blessing of Abraham' is to be identified with the reception of the Holy Spirit. I will also try to show that not only is the Holy Spirit the indispensable *means* by which the Galatians, walking in obedience, realise their maturity, but in a more profound way the personal possession of the Spirit of God is *equivalent to* the spiritual maturity that Paul looks for in the Galatians.

The only other place in Scripture where the expression 'blessing of Abraham' is found is in Gen. 28:4, where we read Isaac's final words to Jacob before the latter's departure: 'May he

give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!'

It is uncertain whether Paul has this text in mind as he uses the expression 'blessing of Abraham'; it is an equally moot point whether the Judaizers were using it as part of their own ammunition, as Martyn suggests.[164]  Nevertheless, Martyn sets out his own translation of Gal. 3:14 in a manner which most helpfully enables the reader to grasp its logical structure.  It is also a provocative structure, raising many questions, and I have cited it below:

in order that

a.   The blessing of Abraham

  b.   might come

    c.   to the Gentiles

    d.   in Jesus Christ

in order, that is, that

    c.   we

  b.   might receive

a.   the promise, which is the Spirit

    d.   through faith[165]

[164] ibid., 322
[165] ibid., 321

Martyn's translation, as can be seen, identifies the genitive in the phrase τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πνεύματος as a Genitive of Apposition ('the promise, which is the Spirit').[166]

We should appreciate why Paul is exasperated and even appalled with the Galatians. Through the gospel of Christ crucified, the regime of the law is over and the reign of the Spirit has begun, but the Galatians have forgotten that. We read in Gal. 3:2 that they had received the Spirit when they first heard the gospel of Christ crucified and believed. In the Galatians' own experience, the rule and curse of the law ended at that point; the new order of the promised Spirit took over from then on. Martyn agrees: 'as the Spirit, God's promise institutes and constitutes a new state of affairs.'[167] Our discussion about maturity is so deeply relevant at this point because this 'new state of affairs' in which the Galatians are led by the Spirit is the eschatologically inaugurated environment in which, and only in which, the Galatians can attain maturity.

Given the prominent connection between the exercise of faith and the work of the Holy Spirit which Paul teaches, we are entitled to enquire into the role of the Spirit in the life of Abraham. The most obvious remark is that there is no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire Genesis narrative of the life of Abraham. Hays makes the following observation, and poses a question:

> Nowhere in the OT does the promise to Abraham have anything to do with the Spirit. The content of the promise is clear: the land, descendants, and an eternal covenant. There is no reference to the *Spirit* at all. Yet Paul speaks of the presence of the Spirit as an obvious evidence that the promise is now fulfilled. Is this a purely arbitrary assertion?'[168]

Hays, to my mind, struggles to persuade his readers that the presence of the Spirit is indeed very much more than 'arbitrary'. What Hays designates a 'partial answer' to this question, in terms of texts such as Isa. 44:2-3, actually seems a rather compelling answer which he would

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[166] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 95-100 gives a comprehensive overview of this use of the genitive, though he does not cite Gal. 3:14 among his many examples.
[167] ibid., 323.
[168] ibid., 181, emphasis original.

do well to develop further.[169]  Hays fails to draw a connection between this Isaianic text, where Jacob is singled out by name, and Gen. 28:4, the only OT text where the formula 'blessing of Abraham' is found and, in addition, a promise made to Jacob.  Isa. 44:3 should be seen as the promise of a major eschatological development of what was embedded in God's much earlier words to Jacob, which themselves hark back to Abraham.

S. K. Williams is more nuanced in his comments concerning the relationship between Abraham and the giving of the Holy Spirit.  Whilst noting that the term 'Spirit' is missing from the entire Genesis account of Abraham, Williams recognises that there is no literal mention of 'promises' in Genesis though the concept is seen throughout the Abraham narratives.

> But since God keeps his word, fulfils his pledge, through the operation of his Spirit, the promise of many descendants is, at the same time, the promise of the Spirit – that is, the promise of the means by which sons of Abraham would be created out of people who have been enslaved.[170]

What is the force of 'the promised Spirit' or, to use Martyn's rendering, 'the promise, which is the Spirit'?  The beginning of the Abraham narrative, in Gen. 12:1-3, comprises God's promise and his determination to bless Abraham, a blessing which is specifically alluded to in Gal. 3:8.  That promise reaches its consummation in the coming of the Spirit in the eschatological age in which the Galatians are now living.  Because the faith of the Galatians co-ordinates with the reception of the Holy Spirit, and it is by the Spirit that they are to continue in faith, it is wholly appropriate to equate 'the blessing of Abraham' with 'the promised Spirit'.  The era of eschatological fulfilment has now arrived through the gospel.

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[169] ibid., 182-83.  Here is the text of Isaiah 44:2-3: 'Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.'
[170] S. K. Williams, *Promise in Galatians: A Reading of Paul's Reading of Scripture*, Journal of Biblical Literature 107 (1988), 716.

## 9. The Galatians should understand that the eschatological era of the Spirit embraces the Gentiles as fellow-heirs of God's promises.

This era of eschatological fulfilment radically redefines the relationship between Israel and the other nations, and between the nations and God himself. Gal. 3:14 marks another kind of transition. Prior to this point, Paul has been self-consciously depicting Jews and Gentiles as distinct categories of people. His rehearsal of the Antioch confrontation with Peter (2:11-21) is the most obvious indication of this. But the apposition of 'we' and 'the Gentiles' in 3:14 ends that distinction for good, and 3:28 seals it. Longenecker summarises thus:

> God's eschatological triumph results in, and consists of, and is exhibited by, the establishment of a community of catholic membership. The formation of such a group is itself the placard, the display, and the disclosure of the power of the ultimate divinity. This fundamental tenet of Paul's vision for Christian corporate identity is structured succinctly in Gal. 3.28: in the eschatological community of God's people "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".' [171]

Longenecker thoughtfully weaves the category of ethnicity into the broader canvas of human diversity. He comments that '[t]his union of diverse people is enabled only by the eschatological character exhibited by Jesus Christ and brought to life within his people by the Spirit of Christ: that is, by love, defined not in terms of emotion or sentiment, but in terms of committed self-giving on behalf of others.'[172] Moreover,

> Ethnocentrism and egocentrism are not different matters in Paul, but are one and the same phenomenon carried out on two different levels of existence; the contours of covenant ethnocentrism are themselves perceived to be demonstrations of the fundamental human condition.[173]

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[171] Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 57.
[172] ibid., 74.
[173] ibid., 77. This point has not always been sufficiently stressed in analyses of Second Temple Judaism and the New Perspective on Paul, including such writers as E .P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright.

The distinction between Jew and Gentile, which the Judaizers sought to perpetuate, crumbles beneath the greater eschatological distinction: between those of the law and those of faith, to which we now turn.

## 10. The Galatians are justified through the faith which they exercise, not the faith exercised by Christ.

Throughout this thesis I have sought to demonstrate that the mature believer is not someone acted upon by the Holy Spirit as if the individual were a passive receptacle of blessing, but that the believer is active in exercising faith. This is an important area of discussion in which great clarity is needed, and a number of scholars, Martyn and Hays among them, take a view which I will seek to oppose.[174]

Martyn's analysis of Gal. 3:14 ties together 'in Christ Jesus' (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησου) with 'through faith' (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). His suggesting partnering of the various clauses in Gal. 3:14 is more apparent when their ordering in the Greek text is examined, and as I have already indicated, I find his analysis plausible and indeed convincing.

A hugely significant exegetical conundrum, however, concerns the interpretation of πίστεως Χριστοῦ, 'faith of Christ', in Gal. 2:16, and this has a key bearing on how Gal. 3:14 should be understood. The question is whether Χριστοῦ should be taken as an objective or a subjective genitive.[175] The position taken by the exegete on this issue to a large extent determines the direction of subsequent doctrinal development. N. T. Wright is in agreement when he writes that '[t]he polarization between the objective genitive ("faith in Christ") and the subjective genitive ("the faith[fulness] of Christ") might seem like a small exegetical either/or. But a good deal hangs on it, which is no doubt why the debate has run on in public, private and print.'[176]

The conclusion one comes to on this issue is not a matter that concerns only the beginning of the Christian life, but its ongoing continuation. A number of scholars associated with the

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[174] Martyn, *Galatians*, 251, 263-275; Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 170-183.
[175] It is the genitive Χριστοῦ, and not the double genitive πίστεως Χριστοῦ, which is under examination. There is general consensus that justification is 'from faith'; the question concerns how that faith relates to Christ.
[176] N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (London: SPCK, 2015), 97.

'New Perspective' on Paul and on Justification have taken the view that Χριστοῦ is a subjective genitive. Prominent among these are Martyn and Hays. If Χριστοῦ is a subjective genitive then it is effectively a faith exercised *by* Christ rather than a faith exercised *in* Christ.

The great argument with which Paul began Gal. 3 – that the Galatians received the Spirit not by works of law but by hearing with faith – must surely be seen as determinative of the faith which is referred to subsequently in the passage, specifically the 'by faith' of 3:11. It seems inescapable that Martyn should identify the faith of 3:11 with 'faith on the part of the human being whom God has rectified in Christ'.[177] However, because he is wedded to an exegetical position which understands Gal. 2:16 as speaking of the 'faith of Christ'[178] he concludes that 'Paul can use the single word "faith" to speak simultaneously of Christ's faith and of the faith it kindles, referring in fact to the coming of this faith into the world as the eschatological event that is also the coming of Christ.'[179]

The title of Hay's work, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, underlines his standpoint. He understands that Hab. 2:4 is 'a messianic text that proclaims that the Messiah … will live by faith', and states that '[a]s a result of Christ's faith, his people are given life.'[180] He summarises his own thesis thus:

> Christians are justified/redeemed not by virtue of their own faith but because they participate in Jesus Christ, who enacted the obedience of faith on their behalf. Abraham is understood by Paul not as an exemplar of faith in Christ but as a typological foreshadowing of Christ himself, a representative figure whose faithfulness secures blessing and salvation vicariously for others.[181]

This discussion must take into account Paul's insistence in Gal. 3:16 that the promises made to Abraham 'and to his offspring' were made to a singular offspring, who is Christ.[182] Hays identifies possible confusion in Gal. 3 when he maintains that '[i]n Gal. 3:6-9 Paul seems to

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[177] Martyn, *Galatians*, 314.
[178] ibid., 251.
[179] ibid., 314.
[180] Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 172.
[181] ibid., 166
[182] The words 'to your offspring' are spoken God in connection with Abraham in Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:7, 8, and 24:7.

say that all who believe are ipso facto Abraham's children and heirs of the promise, but in 3:16-19 he clearly argues that Christ is the one 'seed,' the exclusive heir.[183]

It is the latter identification of Christ as the offspring which is the key, argues Hays, as he goes on to say that 'the idea of Christ as the one "seed" who is sole heir of the promise governs verses 16-29, and … it is in fact the "center" of Paul's treatment of the Abraham story.'[184] Subsequently he links 3:14 to 3:16, stating that '[t]he formulation of 3:14a (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησου) anticipates the assertion of verse 16 that Christ is the one heir of the promise. On the basis of this assertion, Paul is enabled (or required) to say that the Gentiles inherit the promise "in Christ Jesus".'[185] But how can Paul's focus upon the 'one seed' be co-ordinated with his assertion in Gal. 3:7 that 'those of faith' are 'the sons of Abraham'? Hays himself acknowledges a 'clash' between '[t]he idea that only Christ is the heir of the promises to Abraham' and 'the idea that all who believe are Abraham's sons'.[186]

Hays rightly identifies Gal. 3:26-29 as an important key for understanding Paul's argument throughout 3:1 to 4:11, although in doing so he rejects an interpretation of 3:6 which locates it in the vicinity of Paul's meaning in Rom. 4.[187] Whereas Rom. 4, Hays understands, emphasises Abraham's capacity to exercise faith, Gal. 3 has a different purpose. 'The accent in verse 5 falls heavily upon the action of God, who "supplies the Spirit and works miracles," and ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως must therefore be understood to mean "through the proclamation of [the] faith." Thus, if καθὼς refers back to verse 5, the primary point of comparison must be God's working in both cases, rather than the faith of Abraham and the Galatians.[188]

The problem with this discussion is that it tends to polarise the phenomenology of faith. I have already sought to demonstrate, in the previous Chapter, the 'passive-active' nature, not only of faith which justifies, but faith as exercised throughout the whole Christian life in its journey towards maturity. Hays is never so clear about his meaning as he is in the following instance: 'As the discussion unfolds, it becomes clear … that these people share the blessing

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[183] Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 164
[184] ibid., 165
[185] ibid., 180
[186] ibid., 168.
[187] ibid., 169.
[188] ibid., 170.

*not* because their faith imitates Abraham's faith, but because they participate in Christ, who is Abraham's "seed".'[189]

Hays' position, which ultimately goes back to his interpretation of Gal. 2:16, casts a shadow over the requirement on the part of the hearers of the gospel to exercise their own, active faith. By contrast, *maturity is demonstrated and obtained through the active exercise of faith*. Whilst Hays would want to widen the interpretive gap between Rom. 4 and Gal. 3, I would argue that a parallel reading of the two passages enhances our understanding of Abraham, not only as the prototype of justifying faith, but the prototype of the faith which must be exercised as an inherent part of Present Maturity.

This whole discussion can be satisfactorily resolved only if we understand that Paul, in this passage, understands Christ to be in *covenantal union* with his people. The fact that Paul can move so easily between Abraham, the Galatian believers and Christ himself underlines the strong covenantal framework that guided his thinking. The formula ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησου is at the heart of Gal. 3:14 and is so typical of Paul's covenantal understanding.[190] To make matters as clear as possible, whilst there can be no doubt that Christ, as the Mediator and last Adam, exercised faith in God as the representative of his new covenant people, the accent in this letter falls strongly upon the need for the Galatians to continue to exercise faith.

In conclusion, then, Paul has every reason to be deeply disturbed at the condition of the Galatians. Having put themselves in thrall to the Judaizers, they have rejected the apostolic message. Their faith is not anchored in God's promises because they do not understand and embrace the fulfilment of the promises, which were first spoken to Abraham, realised in the coming of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. By thinking that something extra (in particular, circumcision) must be added to the work of Christ and the sending of the Spirit, they are cutting themselves off from the experience and enjoyment of God's blessing. They are, essentially, in a state of spiritual immaturity.

The fact that Paul writes to them as he does, however, shows that he has not given up hope. It is to be expected that God's people might be confronted by 'false brothers' (Gal. 2:4) and

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[189] ibid 172.
[190] The expression ἐν Χριστῷ is found a total of 73 times in all of Paul's letters.

'a different gospel' (Gal. 1:6). Regrettably, some will be allured by 'a different gospel'. But maturity, in Paul's thinking, is to 'stand firm' (Gal. 5:1) in the face of such assaults. His deep pastoral desire is that the Galatians will do so.

**Summary of Chapter 3**

- The Galatians are in a state of spiritual immaturity because they are theologically ignorant of the nature of the spiritual conflict which Paul understands.

- Paul labours to bring the Galatians to an accurate theological understanding of Christ and his death, within the whole narrative of redemption. He sees such understanding as a necessary component of their maturity.

- There are necessarily both objective and subjective aspects to the gospel. The former is the message itself, the latter is the hearing of it with faith.

- Abraham is set before the Galatians as a pattern of the Galatians' faith. The essential comparison is that Abraham, having believed God's revelation, acted in faith.

- The Galatians, having believed, received the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, is not only a means to maturity but the eschatological marker of spiritual maturity.

- Possession of the Holy Spirit is equivalent to the 'blessing of Abraham' promised in Gal. 3:14.

- The eschatological era of the Holy Spirit embraces the Gentiles as fellow-heirs of God's promises.

- Believers are in covenantal union with Christ, but this does not in any sense lessen the need for believers to exercise personal faith in God's promises in the gospel.

# CHAPTER 4

# What implications does Paul's teaching on Christian maturity have for the twenty-first century Christian community in terms of its worldview and practice?

In the previous three chapters I have sought to describe the world-view by which the apostle Paul lived, and which he wanted to see in the churches and individuals to which he ministered. In this final chapter I seek to draw out implications for the contemporary church in the western world on the basis of these earlier chapters.

In order to lay a foundation for this, I will begin by arranging the substance of the first three chapters into a systematic summary. Having done so I will focus especially on the development of the mature Christian mind, which is a pastoral burden that weighs upon Paul and, by implication, on all who are involved in discipleship in the Christian church. Romans 12:1-2 will be examined as a key text in this regard. I will spend some time considering the important place of realised eschatology before coming to look at Christian maturity in relation to the concept of 'virtue'. In this I will especially interact with N.T. Wright's work *Virtue Reborn*[191] . These findings will then be related to the specifically Biblical and Pauline understanding of the renewal of the mind. The activities of this renewed mind will then be considered, with particular emphasis upon a Christian understanding of the whole cosmos, of prayer, community and present suffering.

## 1. Christian Maturity: Summary of the First Three Chapters

We have seen that God's goals for his people in the New Testament era are bound up with his goals for the whole cosmos. The creation of humanity was the apex of God's initial creative activity (Gen. 1:26-31). The new creation involves the restoration of the entire cosmos so that all creation will praise and worship God (Psa. 150:6). God's people are not only to be partakers in this praise, but as image-bearers of God, redeemed in Christ, they are to

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[191] N.T.Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010).

understand the goals towards which God is directing the creation.  The idea of maturity that I have sought to explain relates to both *(1) God's eventual goals for his people* and *(2) God's people's understanding of those goals and how these are to be appropriated in their own day*.  It therefore needs to be understood that there are two aspects to maturity, corresponding to the twofold distinction in the previous sentence.  The first I have designated 'Future Maturity' and the second 'Present Maturity'.  I deliberately put them in this order because the first needs to be understood before the second can be fully appreciated.

Future Maturity is the ultimate, final goal towards which God's people are directed.  It describes their existence and condition in the new earth, from which sin and the curse have been fully eradicated.  Future Maturity consists of perfect holiness, perfect happiness, and the perfected and uninterrupted enjoyment of the presence of God in a new Garden of Eden which surpasses the first Garden of Eden (Rev. 22:1-4).  In Future Maturity, the image of God will be perfectly reflected in man (1 Cor. 13:10, 12).  In Future Maturity, the renewed bodies of God's people will be as Paul describes them in 1 Cor. 15:42-44:  'imperishable ... raised in glory ... raised in power ... raised a spiritual body'.  That is, the resurrected bodies of God's people will be like the glorious resurrected body of Christ himself (Phil. 3:21).  Future Maturity cannot be a reality until the final events of this present age have taken place: the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the day of judgement, the appearance of the new heavens and the new earth.  Future Maturity, then, necessarily awaits the decisive and climactic actions of God which will take place at a time that he has determined (1 Thess. 5:2).  It is a presently unattainable state for any of God's people.

In order to understand the relationship between Future Maturity and Present Maturity, we should go to Phil. 3:12-15, a passage we considered in Chapter 1.  Indeed, Phil. 3:12 is itself the pivotal verse. Paul acknowledges that he has not attained to Future Maturity: '[N]ot that I have already obtained this or am already perfect'.  The 'this' of 3:12 is 'the resurrection of the dead' which Paul has mentioned in the previous verse.  But then Paul goes on immediately to a description of Present Maturity when he says 'but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own'.  Verses 13 and 14 consist of a further explication of Paul's attitude and then he applies the label 'mature' to this way of thinking in 3:15: 'Let those of us who are mature (τέλειοι) think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.'  His understanding and expectation is that the Philippian Christians will come to think as he does.

Present Maturity involves the attitude, the mind-set, which is to govern God's people throughout this present age. It comprehends God's stated goals for his whole creation in general, and for his own people in particular. This mind-set is the product of the world-view which, as we have seen, embraces God's narrative of redemption as outlined in the whole Bible. This narrative of redemption is not to be viewed neutrally, as if from some kind of spectators' gallery detached from the scene of the narrative. God's people must know themselves to be participants in the narrative. What is of especially crucial importance in a Christian world-view, in the era of the new covenant, is that *believers should know that they live in the age of eschatological fulfilment*: Christ has died, risen and ascended, and the Holy Spirit has been given. Because of these historical events it is New Testament believers, Paul insists, 'on whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11).

This leads to an extra dimension to our understanding of Present Maturity. It is not defined merely in terms of expectation and anticipation, as if it consisted simply in waiting for the termination of this present epoch. Paul's burden for believers is that they should realise that they live in what he refers to elsewhere as 'the day' (Rom. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:5, 8). The day is a time for activity, not passivity. That is the reason why Paul speaks of his own activity, his continual pressing on and striving in passages such as Phil. 3:13-14. It is also the reason why he is perplexed and troubled when believers in various churches, most conspicuously in Corinth, do not live with the same attitude and mind-set of Present Maturity.

Present Maturity, then, is a condition of thinking and living which is inextricably linked to the events which have ushered in the 'last days' or 'the end of the ages': the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the consequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. These are all events that herald and effect new creation. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come' (2 Cor. 5:17).[192] We have seen that it is the Holy Spirit who applies Christ's saving work to those whom God calls. Paul's understanding everywhere is that believers have received the Spirit; that is, they 'live by the Spirit' (Gal. 5:25).

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[192] The Greek of 2 Cor. 5:17 omits a connection such as 'he is'. ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· 'New creation' is more akin to an exclamation than a statement about a specific individual.

We might even say that in one sense Present Maturity requires that the intellectual apparatus of Christians should be 'running ahead' of the current state of creation, which continues to be fallenness. This fallenness is shared by all human beings, including believers, insofar as their bodies still exhibit the effects of sin: weakness, disease and death. But the mind of the Christian is to belong to 'the day' even while they are surrounded by darkness, and know in their own bodies the lingering effects of fallenness.

Living by the Spirit necessitates walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Present Maturity must be evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit. The production of the fruit is not an automatic process in which God's people are passive. Paul's appeals to the churches, as we have seen, include a good measure of both the indicative (what is true of them because of what God has done in Christ) and the imperative (how they are to live in the light of these actions of God). The classic imperative-indicative couplet is found, once more, in Philippians: 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:12-13). Although the imperative precedes the indicative, the connecting 'for' demonstrates that the imperative is given on the basis of the indicative.

Likewise, Paul's passage about Christ's humility and exaltation in Philippians 2:5-11 begins with the exhortation 'Have this mind in yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.' The mind that the Philippians need to operate by is a mind they already possess in Christ.[193]

When attention is turned to Paul's Letter to the Galatians, and to Gal. 3:1-14 in particular, the themes I have outlined above are amplified and developed. It is helpful to use the theme of redemption narrative as an entry point. The Judaizers, who are influencing the Galatians in such an inimical fashion, have their own narrative to which the Galatians are listening, but the trouble is that it is not the narrative which Paul, as Christ's apostle, has been charged to preach. The Judaizers' narrative does not recognise the utterly radical, world-changing, new covenant and new creation realities of the coming of Christ and the giving of the Spirit. Specifically, the new creation that has come to light through Christ marks the end of the era

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[193] Likewise Paul tells the Corinthians 'But we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16), and the 'we' would seem to indicate not only Paul and his companions, but Paul in solidarity with the church in Corinth.

of the law, the end of the era of circumcision, and the end of the era in which ethnic Israel are the exclusive recipients of God's covenant blessings. The blessings of the new covenant extend to all the nations on earth. The Judaizers are not teaching any such radical fulfilment.

Paul and the Judaizers (we assume) both agree in using Abraham as a template in their respective arguments. For the Judaizers, the key consequence of having Abraham as an ancestor – whether physical or spiritual – was that those who follow him should be circumcised. But for Paul, the far greater ramification of being 'sons of Abraham' (Gal. 3:7) is that these sons should be people 'of faith'. What is it about Abraham's faith that Paul specifically wants the Galatians to understand? It is that Abraham received the announcement of new covenant blessings, promises which would be realised now, at 'the end of the ages', the era in which the Galatians are presently living. Jesus Christ himself is the promised offspring of Abraham, the singular offspring or 'seed' of Gal. 3:16. The Holy Spirit, the abiding presence of God himself with his new covenant people, is the substance of 'the blessing of Abraham' (Gal. 3:14). The promise to Abraham that God would bless all the nations is now fulfilled in Christ, and has been fulfilled among the Galatians.

Five times in Galatians Paul uses the terminology 'under the law' (ὑπὸ νόμον). For the Judaizers, submission to the law of God, as given through Moses, was part of the package that included circumcision. But in Paul's thinking, if the Galatians were to return to this position it would be a repudiation of the adopted sonship and consequent freedom that they have now gained in Christ. It would evidence a failure on their part to understand the narrative of redemption and its present eschatological fulfilment in the gospel which they themselves had heard. It would consign them to spiritual immaturity. That is why Paul grieves over them as he does: 'I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain' (Gal. 4:11); 'I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you' (Gal. 4:20).

## 2. Christian Maturity in the Church of Jesus Christ is Paul's pastoral burden

I need at this stage to state something about the motivation of this work and thus to set the context for all that follows. As stated at the beginning of Chapter 1, my motivation is pastoral, aiming to assist spiritual leaders to view their calling (to help disciples to spiritual maturity) in a Biblical manner. Paul, as we have seen, was a man deeply exercised by the

condition of the churches to which he wrote (2 Cor. 11:28). We have noticed his dismay at the divisions among the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:1-3), and his deep alarm at the way in which the Galatians had been misled by false teachers (Gal. 1:6-9). Paul, we might say, 'ached' for the spiritual maturity of believers. Today's disciplers, especially pastors, must surely experience a similar yearning.

This pastoral yearning could even be understood as a sympathy with the present creation, which is 'groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now' (Rom 8:22). Paul's language in Rom. 8:22 is reminiscent of that in Gal. 4:19 where he tells the Galatians that he is 'in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!' We cannot fail to miss the note of almost visceral longing, to which Ronald Y. K. Fung gives expression:

> Faced now with the Galatians' defection from the true gospel to the counterfeit offered by the heretics, Paul experiences "over again" the pangs of labor - the sharp pains including those of perplexity (v. 20b), apprehension (v. 11), indignation (cf. 2 Cor. 11:29), and all the painful efforts required to reclaim the Galatians for the truth.[194]

Closely related to the language of child-bearing is the language of harvest. We noted in Chapter 1 that Paul understood himself to be 'a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:19). As the priests in Israel would anticipate the harvesting of fruitful crops, especially the 'Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour' (Exo. 23:16), so Paul viewed his ministry as the eschatological fulfilment of the Old Testament harvests (Rom. 1:13; Phil. 4:17, Col. 1:6).

The physical and spiritual locus of the progress towards maturity is, for Paul and the New Testament, the church of Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:25-26, 2 Cor. 11:2). It is here that Paul looks for, and expects to find, the necessary building blocks that facilitate growth to maturity: the community of believers where love is exercised (Gal. 5:13, 22), the routine practice of prayer (1 Thess. 5:25, 2 Thess. 3:1), and the ministry of teaching (1 Cor. 4:17).

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[194] Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, *NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 202.

The Pauline emphasis of the church as a visible and identifiable body is a clear challenge to the individualism and perhaps consumerism that is rife in twenty-first century 'Christian' culture.  Mark Sayers in his recent work, *Disappearing Church*, speaks of what he terms the 'Third Culture', a culture that has been greatly influenced by Christianity but has now rejected it.[195]  His argument is that contemporary spirituality in such cultures is a new form of Gnosticism, where the ultimate aim is the discovery of self and the realisation of one's own spiritual potential.  The church, certainly as an institution, has little or no place in such a system.  Sayers writes:

> We buck and resist the institutional, creedal, restrictive, sacrificial elements of church life because we have been formed to self-create.  To self-create one needs freedom, no responsibility, nothing mundane, no binding relationships or communal commitments; just free space in which to indulge our fantasies of our own godlikeness.  Such fantasies cannot be entertained in the institutional realities of creedal communities … Gnostic believers are ultimately anti-institutional believers who see no purpose in the benefits that institutions can bring.[196]

He goes on to reply that believers need the church:

> We are placed in a context, in a community, in institutions and webs of responsibility.  And Paul is reminding us that this is good.  The script of our culture tells us that we can only find self-fulfillment when we break away from these limitations, but Paul is reversing that false view of life.  Limitations and the defined space of living and ministering that God gives us within the institution of the church is a gift.  God places us in institutions, relationships, responsibilities, to teach us and shape us into Christlikeness.[197]

One very obvious evidence of Sayer's 'Third Culture', with its emphasis upon individual autonomy, is the prevalence of social media, especially in the realm of articles, sermons and

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[195] Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016).
[196] ibid., 137-38.
[197] ibid., 142.

podcasts that flood the internet. The individual Christian can choose from a vast number of such resources and can become, effectively, his/her own pastor, picking and choosing the ministry that he/she feels would be of greatest benefit, or perhaps, enjoyment. Against this, the Biblical and Pauline emphasis upon the gathered, physical church introduces what Sayers calls a 'limitation'. We have noticed that Paul's expressions of desire for maturity are grounded in the context of the local church. It is within this 'limitation', Sayer rightly argues, that the growth into 'Christlikeness' must take place.

## 3. Christian Maturity necessitates the renewal of the mind

I have drawn repeated attention throughout to the *mind*, because Present Maturity is to be understood principally in terms of a mind-set, an attitude. One consequence of the historical Fall of Man in Gen. 3 is a 'debased mind' (Rom. 1:28) - ἀδόκιμον νοῦν - literally a mind that is 'unapproved' and fails to past the test. God's redemption in this present age involves reversing this effect, renewing the minds of his people. This renewing of the mind is given definitive expression by Paul in Rom. 12:1, 2.

There has been a good deal of debate as to the most appropriate translation of the last part of Rom. 12:1, where Paul describes the offering up of believers' bodies as τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν. N. T. Wright admits that λογικὴν 'is hard to translate'. But he emphasises that the Christian offering of the body is 'of your body *as directed by your reasoning mind*.'[198] John Murray explains that [t]he term used here is not the term which is usually rendered by the word "spiritual" in the New Testament. Reasonable or rational is a more literal rendering.'[199] He elucidates further: '[i]t is rational in contrast with what is mechanical and automatic. A great many of our bodily functions do not enlist volition on our part. But the worshipful service here enjoined must constrain intelligent volition.'[200] Moreover, '[t]he term used here implies that we are to be constantly in the process of being metamorphosed by renewal of that which is the seat of thought and understanding.'[201]

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[198] N.T.Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010), 129-30, emphasis original.
[199] Murray, *Romans, I-VIII*, 112.
[200] idem.
[201] ibid., 114.

The image of God in man, in and of itself, implies distinctive capacities such as choice, deliberation, the determination to obey principle rather than to be governed by mere instinct. The more highly these faculties are developed in an individual, the nobler and indeed more godlike that individual is. Thomas R. Schreiner summarises this.

> Human beings ultimately decide on one course of action rather than another because that is what they wish to do. Even a person committing suicide prefers death over life since life is so miserable. Our choices are always in line with our preferences. The key to a changed life, therefore, lies in the transformation of the will since we choose what we prefer. Paul astonishes us here by teaching that God works in believers so that they desire to please him. God does not only work externally in believers, trying to persuade them by circumstances to follow him. He grants the very desire to obey him by transforming the heart.'[202]

Thus, the type of maturity that Paul seeks in believers here is never achieved by a process which is merely automatic.

Paul's exhortation in Rom. 12:1-2 implies a willingness to submit the mind to the instruction in Christian doctrine given by those who teach, with such effect that the mind is reshaped by this learning process. We have already seen that Paul expected his Galatian readership of the first century A.D. to follow his arguments. It should follow that believers living nearly two thousand years later should do the same. It may not be the case that the Galatian Christians understood everything Paul had written at their first hearing; it is not unreasonable to suppose that their initial exposure to the Letter was only the beginning of a process of learning and relearning; indeed, unlearning as well.

Our contemporary culture faces a challenge in this regard. To what extent are twenty-first century Christians prepared to think deeply and 'do the hard work' with Pauline texts, whether they are being read or explained by a teacher or preacher? A robust treatment of this theme lies beyond my present scope, but T. David Gordon relates this issue to a shortening attention-span brought on, to a significant extent, by the electronic age:

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[202] Thomas R. Schreiner, Paul: *Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 257.

The sheer pace of an electronic media-dominated culture is entirely too fast. Electronic media flash sounds and images at us at a remarkable rate of speed; and each image or sound leaves some impact on us, but greater than the impact of any individual image or sound is the entire pace of the life it creates. We become acclimated to distraction, to multitasking, to giving part of our attention to many things at once, while almost never devoting the entire attention of the entire soul to anything. The close reading of texts would be an antidote to such a pace because such reading is time-consuming and requires the concentration of the entire person.[203]

It should also be understood that there is substantial difference between 'academic' and 'intellectual', though the two are easily confused, not least in the church. Christian preaching and teaching must address the intellect, but that does not mean that it should become 'academic', which implies that it pertains to an academy or a centre of advanced learning. There is an onus laid on preachers, therefore, not simply to preach shorter or more immediately engaging sermons, but to demonstrate and convince their hearers that they need to become more able to receive and digest the 'solid food' (Heb. 5:12, 14) of God's Word.

N. T. Wright comes at this point from another angle:

Part of the problem in contemporary Christianity, I believe, is that talk about the freedom of the Spirit, about the grace which sweeps us off our feet and heals and transforms our lives, has been taken over surreptitiously by a kind of low-grade romanticism, colluding with an anti-intellectual streak in our culture, generating the assumption that the more spiritual you are, the less you need to think.[204]

This lays bare the confusion that is present about terms such as 'spiritual' and 'rational'. A populist view of what is 'spiritual' is influenced by a great number of diverse 'spiritualties', some of which originate from South and East Asia and tend to emphasise the emptying of the mind, or the non-use of the intellect. When we come back to Paul in Rom. 12:1-2 we are faced with a very healthy and necessary corrective.

[203] T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2009), 50.
[204] Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 137.

**4. Christian Maturity results from being taught the Biblical, eschatological world view**

We have already seen that eschatology is a dominant theme in this discussion. But how should Christian people be educated so that Paul's eschatological mind-set becomes part of their mental furniture? It is not necessary that the word 'eschatology' should occur frequently in preaching. But the world-view that needs to be instilled in Christians is the one summarised by Paul in 1 Cor. 10:11 when he says that believers are those 'on whom the end of the ages has come.' That is, Christians need to be trained to place themselves within the redemptive narrative which is described by Scripture. Every human being is in the great metanarrative of history whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not.

At various times in church history there has been a preoccupation with unfulfilled prophecy and with various millennial positions. But although this may seem on the surface to constitute an 'eschatological world-view', these themes can obscure the broad NT teaching that believers are to see themselves as belonging – ever since the time of the apostles – in the 'last days' (Acts 2:17, 2 Tim. 3:1, Heb. 1:2, Jas. 5:3, 2 Pet. 3:3). It is worth noting that altogether absent from Paul's doctrine, and from the whole of the NT, is any interest in a quantifiable number of years which will elapse before the end of the present age.

So when Paul says that 'the appointed time has grown very short' (1 Cor. 7:29) he is not thinking in terms of a computable length of time. He means that the next truly great and significant event in world history, one which every Christian should keep in the forefront of their mind, is the 'end of this age'. Murray summarises the mind-set by which Christians living in the present need to operate. 'We do well to examine ourselves by this criterion: are we calculating in those terms which the interests and hopes of the age to come demand?'[205]

A major part of the Christian world-view is a Biblical understanding of time. It is worth noting that in the Old Testament, the days, weeks, months and years were marked by repeated ceremonies, as can be especially seen in the annual feasts which took place. It is significant in this light that Paul regarded the observing of 'days and months and seasons and years' (Gal. 4:10) as a retrograde step for the Galatians. The Old Testament calendar was shaped by

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[205] Murray, *Romans, I-VIII*, 114.

the old creation, and the fallen creation at that: the existence of seasons of growing and harvesting reflect a post-Edenic ecosystem.  But such observance is unnecessary in the New Testament because God's people should have their eyes firmly fixed on the new age, where seasonal cycles will continue no longer.  Stanley J. Grenz explains that in a Biblical world-view:

> time is linear, not cyclical.  Events don't merely follow a repeatable pattern, rather, each occurrence is ultimately unique.  Taken together, events form a trajectory that moves from beginning to end.  Hence, occurrences form a history - a narrative.  And this history is the activity of the one God asserting a divine rulership over all nations.  God's actions move from creation to final redemption.[206]

The fact that present-day believers have their eyes on 'final redemption' does not mean that they should become dualists, mystics or ascetics.  So, when Paul writes to the Colossians: 'Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth' (Col. 3:2) he does not mean that they should ignore or abandon the concerns that relate to their earthly, physical lives (e.g. Gal. 6:10, 2 Thess. 3:7-13; 1 Tim. 5:8).  Rather, they are to manage those earthly concerns with the transformed attitude which comes from being in Christ and therefore being part of the narrative that is anticipating Christ's return.  In a similar manner, when Paul says 'let those who have wives live as though they had none' (1 Cor. 7:29), he does not mean that Christian husbands should ignore or neglect their wives, any more than he means that believers should ignore or disregard business or financial matters.  Instead Paul is instructing the Corinthians not to regard the temporary provisions of this present age as if they were a permanent arrangement.

The age to come invades the present age, and sometimes this is marked with greater prominence.  The way in which the NT speaks of the 'first day of the week', for example, conveys the suggestion that this day is especially invaded by the new creation and thus anticipatory of the age which is to come.[207]  This gives believers an added incentive to come together for worship and fellowship on the first day of the week.

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[206] Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 256.

[207] So not only is 'the first day of the week' the day on which Christ rose from the dead, which is of course the weightiest feature of the day (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1), but on the same day Jesus appeared for a second time to the disciples (John 20:26).  It was also on the first day of the week that Pentecost took place

However, the eschatological mind-set of God's new covenant people goes very much further than this. It is an essential consideration when it comes to the formation of Christian character. One contemporary application of this will be now be looked at in some detail.

**5. Christian Maturity can be related to the concept of Virtue, especially as understood by N. T. Wright**

N. T. Wright's *Virtue Reborn* is dedicated to the formation of Christian character, or 'virtue' as he calls it. Wright's work is valuable and appropriate in connection with this thesis because he speaks in a number of places about 'goals' – or more commonly the singular 'goal'. At the outset he sets out his major proposition.

> The basic point is this: Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand that goal, the better we shall understand the path towards it.[208]

Beginning with the account of Jesus and the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22, Wright comments that the call of Jesus is

> not to specific acts of behavior, but to a type of character. For another thing, it is a call to see oneself as having a role to play within a story – and a story where … there is one supreme Character whose life is to be followed. And that Character seems to have his eye on a goal, and to be shaping his own life, and those of his followers, in relation to that goal.[209]

'Virtue' (Greek ἀρετή), is not a word that occurs frequently in English translations of the Bible: its only two occurrences in the ESV are found in the same verse, 2 Peter 1:5: 'For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with

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(Acts 2:1), Eutychus was raised from the dead (Acts 20:7) and, if 'the Lord's day' (Rev. 1:10) is to be equated with the first day of the week, John saw the great visions recorded in the Book of Revelation.
[208] Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, ix.
[209] ibid., 6.

knowledge'.[210]  Wright acknowledges significant reliance upon classical and especially Aristotelian concepts of virtue.  But he seeks to apply it in the contemporary sphere: having given a vivid description of virtue in action – the heroic handling of a potentially catastrophic aeroplane crisis by Captain Chesley Sullenberger in New York in 2009 – Wright defines 'virtue' thus:

> [v]irtue, in this strict sense, is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn't "come naturally" – and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required "automatically," as we say.[211]

Wright explicitly grounds virtue within the eschatological context which I have sought to emphasise throughout, and also explicitly links virtue with maturity.

> The goal is God's new creation, and the full human maturity and dignity which will ultimately be celebrated in the resurrection.  The pathway to that goal is the complete set of learned habits of life – of heart and body *and especially mind*.  Straight, clear, sharp thinking not only grasps the goal and the pathway but is itself part of that maturity of which Paul speaks.[212]

Everett L. Worthington Jr., who has studied Wright on the subject of virtue, largely concurs with him.  Like Wright, he uses the language of τέλος, or a goal.

> In the practice of virtue we must have a telos, that is, a goal, a vision, or an endpoint. That telos differs between the secular and Christian approaches in three major ways. First, God is left out of secular telos, whereas He is central to Christian telos. Second, the role one has in the community is different. Third, the role the community plays in society is different.[213]

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[210] ἀρετή appears three further times in the NT, being translated 'excellence' in Phil. 4:8 and 2 Pet. 1:3 (plural 'excellencies' in 1 Pet. 2:9).
[211] ibid., 8-9.
[212] ibid., 149, emphasis mine.
[213] Everett L. Worthington Jr., *A Christian Psychologist Looks At Virtue*, Bibliotheca Sacra 170:677 (Jan 2013), 9.

This emphasis on God and also on community takes us to some central considerations of Christian character. Wright opens up a discussion on Christian conduct by introducing the reader to two fictional church members, 'Jenny' and 'Philip', who find themselves on collision course at a church meeting. Their difference boils down to essentially contrasting approaches with regard to Christian conduct. For 'Jenny', the Christian life is lived out, both individually and corporately, by following a set of well-defined 'rules'. For 'Philip' the methodology is entirely different: Christians need to be 'authentic' and to do what comes naturally. Wright's point is that 'Jenny' and 'Philip' represent two common modes of thinking about the Christian life which are not only mutually opposed, but are both unbiblical. There is a much better way:

> The rules still matter; one cannot play off virtue against rules and hope still to be talking sense. But what matters, since all of the above can be forgiven, is that the heart be renewed. And when the heart is renewed, it has a fresh set of tasks: to learn the habits that will make the avoidance of all manner of wickedness a matter of "second nature." Learning that obedience will be a hard and painful road. But it will teach us the language of life.[214]

This takes us back to a central issue in Galatians: Paul knew that if the Galatians submitted to the law of Moses they would be in a state of spiritual bondage and incapable of realising the freedom that comes with being mature and adopted sons of God. But the opposing error is recognised by Paul in Gal. 5:13: 'For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.' Bondage is bad, but so too is unbridled licence. The right way, as Paul goes on to show, is the way of the Spirit, covered by Paul in Gal. 5:16-26 and which was discussed in Chapter 2.

Examples of 'Jenny' and 'Philip' can be found in churches throughout the western world of the twenty-first century. Many struggles in the Christian life, especially crises of conscience, take place because believers tend to oscillate from one pole to the other. A dedicated Christian young man, for example, may choose to devote forty minutes every morning to reading three or four chapters of the Bible. But after a time the pressure of maintaining this

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[214] Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 115.

routine starts to upset him and he wonders whether he is gaining any spiritual benefit.  He shares this with his Christian friends who tell him that he is no longer being 'authentic' and should simply go with his 'gut instincts', whether to read or not to read.  But a few weeks later he is not reading at all, and he feels he is in a worse situation than before.

In order to understand such situations and to be in a position to help such people, it helps us to see that for Paul, 'virtue' or 'character' are not simply desirable personal qualities; neither is it simply that believers do well to learn from the historical record of Christ's sufferings and death; rather it is to Christ that believers have been united: in his life, his death and ultimately in his resurrection.  So whilst Paul's exhortation in Phil. 2:5: 'Have this mind in yourselves' could be viewed as a simple matter of imitation, Paul buttresses it a great deal further by adding that this mind 'is yours in Christ Jesus.'  If a professing Christian replies 'but I don't think in this way', then the straightforward answer must be 'you must, because being united to Christ you have the mind of Christ!'

Nevertheless, it is not inconsistent to speak of having the mind of Christ whilst at the same time needing to learn how to put this mind into practice.  Present Maturity is a mind-set that is willing to learn; it is not the finished, perfected product which only becomes a reality in what I have called Future Maturity.  But Present Maturity is teachable and undergoing constant development.

If, in our earlier example, the professing Christian continues to insist that he does not think according to the mind of Christ, we are warranted in challenging him with the straightforward question, 'But don't you *want* to?' William W. Combs suggests that for Paul:

> his process of mind-renewal is somewhat of a virtuous circle. As the believer grows in his understanding of and obedience to God's truth, his mind will be renewed so that he will be able to discern and obey God's moral will for his life. And as he continues to obey God's will, he will continue to be transformed.[215]

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[215] William W. Combs, *Romans 12:1–2 and the Doctrine of Sanctification*, Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, 11:1 (Fall 2006), 24.

So 'virtue' or Present Maturity develops over a period of time, like the piloting skills of Captain Sullenberger to which I have already referred. It builds up as a result of the continual learning to which the Christian disciple is called. But that learning is inescapably allied to obedience. A moral as well as an intellectual necessity is laid upon believers.

## 6. Christian Maturity is established and sustained by moral exhortation

The narrative of redemption has now progressed to the stage where Christian believers of every nation have received 'the Spirit of adoption as sons' (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6-7). They are no longer 'under the law'. The question for now is whether that renders moral exhortation superfluous. Thomas A. Bland states quite strongly that it does not: '[t]he most essential presupposition in the Christian life is the Lordship-discipleship relationship. Consequently, this relationship is the most important differentia of Christian ethics. Apart from the new birth this relationship does not exist.'[216]

Bland's is a rather bold claim and, in the light of Paul's emphasis upon the Spirit of adoption in Rom. 8 and Gal. 4, as well as Jesus' own teaching about God as the Father of believers, it is at the very least contestable.[217] But more to the point, the language of exhortation and obedience *is* seen in Paul's writings. The dynamic of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers by no means rules out the necessity of apostolic commands for the NT church. In 2 Thess. 3, for example, Paul is addressing a church where idleness and complacency appear to have set in. On no fewer than four occasions in that chapter, Paul uses the language of 'command' (2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 10, 12).

It is also the case that many of Paul's imperatives are couched in the language of the Decalogue, sometimes verbatim. And so Paul backs up the imperative, 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right' with a quotation of the Fifth Commandment, 'Honour your father and mother'' (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" (Eph. 6:1-3). The ethical requirement in Paul's imperative is identical to that given through Moses, even though 'the land' has now assumed a different, greater significance. Schreiner understands that:

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[216] Thomas A. Bland, *Ethical Imperatives for Disciples of Jesus Christ*, Faith and Mission 11:1 (Fall 1993), 16.
[217] See for example Matt. 6:9, 32; 7:11; John 20:17.

the imperative must be obeyed in order to obtain the salvation promised and granted in the indicative. The indicative cannot pre-empt the imperative so that the imperative is jettisoned, but the gospel would be distorted if the imperative, instead of the indicative, is placed in the foreground.[218]

He goes on to note that '[i]f eschatological tension did not characterize Christian existence, no imperative would be needed. At the day of redemption, when our bodies are transformed (Phil. 3:21), ethical exhortation will be superfluous.'[219]

The fact remains that Present Maturity is not the same as Future Maturity, and to the extent that it falls short, 'ethical exhortation' must be supplied. We could supply an analogy based on the maturation process in children as they grow into adults. The more immature a child is, the more frequently he/she will be commanded to complete certain tasks: doing his/her homework, tidying his/her bedroom, brushing his/her teeth. But the reasonable expectation is that a day will come when children become 'mature adults' in an earthly sense and such exhortations are no longer needed.

It follows logically that a Christian pastor will need to supply a proportionally greater quantity of moral exhortation – certainly exhortation of a specific and practical nature – when he recognises a lack of Present Maturity in a believer's life. The greater the level of maturity that is attained, the likelier it will be that moral exhortation will be given in terms of wide-ranging principles rather than specific and concrete directives.

## 7. Christian Maturity both acknowledges and anticipates New Creation

The era of eschatological fulfilment, or the era of 'new creation' has been inaugurated in the new covenant even though its completion awaits the age which is yet to come. The force of the expression 'new creation' can therefore vary, as Douglas Moo explains. 'Interpretations of the phrase "new creation" in Paul take three general directions: that "new creation" refers to the transformed Christian, to the transformed community of Christ, or to the transformed

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[218] Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 255.
[219] ibid., 254.

universe.'[220]  The last of these three, the transformed universe, is the direct and immediate work of God which follows this present age, but the preceding two are in the process of realisation.  In 2 Cor. 5:17 the individual sense is clearly intended: 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.'  In Gal. 6:15 Paul has the whole Christian community of Galatia in his direct view: 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation'.  Paul wants the Galatians to understand that for them, the new creation is *now*.

One of the consequences of the challenge of Darwinism to the church is an extensive devotion of energy and resources geared towards demonstrating the historicity of the first divine creation as recorded in the first two chapters of Genesis.  Without commenting critically on such endeavours, present-day Christians also need to have their attention drawn to the glory of God's *new creation*.  What might this imply in terms of what believers should be taught and reminded?  It means that there should be a demonstration of how the glory of the new creation exceeds the glory of the old, just as Jesus Christ exceeds Adam in his capacity as the representative of the human race before God.  Adam was destined for glory but failed to attain it, as did all who are 'in Adam' (1 Cor. 15:22), as Sinclair B. Ferguson explains:

> [h]is protological condition was intended to be the harbinger of an eschatological condition which, in the event, remained unrevealed because unattained.  Although unspecified, many indications are given to suggest that this final condition was one of glory.  Not least of these is Paul's statement that, when man sinned, he refused to glorify God as God and exchanged the glory of God for images of created beings lesser than himself (Rom. 1:21-22).  'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23).  The mark we were created to reach, but have missed, was glory.  We have sinned and failed to attain that destiny.[221]

In the new covenant, Ferguson explains the great significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which 'is given to glorify us; not just to 'add' glory as a crown to what we are, but actually to transform the very constitution of our being so that we become glorious.'[222]  The focal point

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[220] Douglas Moo, *Creation and New Creation*, Bulletin for Biblical Research 20:1 (NA 2010), 42.
[221] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers' Grove: IVP, 1996), 249.
[222] idem.

of the Christian's hope, in this regard, is nothing other than bodily resurrection which has been signalled and guaranteed by the historical resurrection of Christ himself. So Ferguson continues:

> the remarkable statement that Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father (Rom. 6:4) may be periphrastic allusion to the dynamic operation of the Spirit. The effect was to transform Christ's body into a body of glory which forms the prototype for the resurrection body of all believers.[223]

The future glory of man in his resurrection body is bound up with the future glory of the whole creation. Not only has man been appointed vice-regent over it but his own life and well-being is intricately related to it. This relationship loses none of its vitality throughout all the stages of human history: pre-Fall, in the fallen world, in the world that is being redeemed, and indeed in the completed new creation. So it is that in Rom. 8:19-23 creation is presented in its anticipatory longing for transformational renewal. The ἀποκαραδοκία or 'eager longing' experienced by the whole creation, in Rom. 8:19, takes place in solidarity with the people of God.

C. E. B. Cranfield, in discussing the range of ἡ κτίσις in Rom. 8:19, states that 'believers must certainly be excluded, since in v.23 they are contrasted with the creation.' His meaning seems to be that it is ἡ κτίσις which is eagerly longing for the τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ θεου, and therefore τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ θεου cannot be a subset of ἡ κτίσις. But Paul's language in Rom. 8:23 - Οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος ἔχοντες καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτοὶ - certainly does not point to exclusion. It seems rather to be the sense of 'not only the creation, but more and especially, we ourselves, having the firstfruits of the Spirit.'[224] Indeed, it is believers who have an especially intense longing for the final redemption of the earth, since their own bodies will be intricately bound up with it.[225]

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[223] ibid., 251.
[224] C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, Volume I, I-VIII: The International Critical Commentary* (London: T & T, Clark, 1998), 411.
[225] Cranfield, idem, does go on to acknowledge that κτίσις is 'a term specifically indicating a relation to God, which is not only one in which Christians stand no whit less than non-Christians but is also one which they above all men must acknowledge and delight in.'

## 8. Christian Maturity is presently witnessed in the praying, suffering and fellowship of the Christian Community

It is the activity of the Spirit, in which believers themselves actively participate, that sustains the Christian mind in this present age. In Rom. 8:26-27 Paul sees prayer as an essential part of believers' engagement with the Spirit. His characterisation of prayer as 'groanings too deep for words' (Rom. 8:26) is significant. Cranfield notes that 'What many Christians were admiring as a glorious heavenly manifestation, as angelic tongues, Paul saw – paradoxically – as evidence of the Church's deep weakness and ignorance.'[226]

This 'deep weakness and ignorance' needs to be explained. From a pastoral perspective, one frequently heard observation from believers is that 'it is difficult to pray'. This difficulty can be understood correctly in the light of the context under discussion. The type of prayer which Paul is describing is an inarticulate longing for the day of full redemption - when the bodies of believers, along with all creation, are fully released from the effects of the Fall. In prayer the realities of promised Future Maturity find expression in the characteristic longings of those who are marked by Present Maturity. At the same time it should be acknowledged that not *all* prayer consists of such inarticulate groaning. The many prayers of Paul found in his Letters demonstrate that a prominent subject of his praying is the equipping of Christians to think and to live as God's people in this present age.[227] Christians 'know in part' (1 Cor. 13:12) which means that there is a body of revealed knowledge which they *do* know, and upon which they can depend in their prayers. But the fact that this knowledge is 'in part' means that human language in prayer must inevitably be finite, and where words cease, groanings take over.

This prayer which arises from weakness is also connected with suffering. We have already seen in Chapter 2 that the suffering of believers is to be understood, in some sense, as identification with the sufferings of Christ; in one sense an extension of them. There is an added dimension to suffering in terms of its relationship to the Christian community: Paul's sufferings were 'for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Col. 1:24). How that works out in practice can be seen in the example of the churches of Macedonia which Paul describes in

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[226] ibid., 422.
[227] Especially Eph. 1:16-23; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12.

2 Cor. 8:1-4. Of particular interest is the way that these churches were 'begging us earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints (2 Cor. 8:4). The Greek word for 'taking part' is κοινωνία, which is often translated 'partnership' or 'fellowship'. What was it that drove these churches to act as they did? It was the opportunity to minister in a Christlike fashion, giving sacrificially to other believers, not out of compulsion but in order that they might enter into this deep fellowship and partnership with other Christians.

In this we see a quality of Christian 'virtue' which is radically different from the classical understanding, as Worthington explains:

> In Greece *eudaimonia* was about raising up great leaders of the polis – military and political exemplars of goodness for oneself and to inspire and lead others by developing justice, courage, self-control, and prudent wisdom. But Christian *eudaimonia* – virtue for self and others – is not about great leaders but is about great participators in a life of community.[228]

The view of suffering held by the Christian community is to be a central part of their identification with the redemptive narrative. Love and sacrificial self-giving, the character of Christ himself, is to be exhibited in the world. Christian conduct is to be remarkable because of its resemblance to the conduct of the incarnate Christ and therefore that resemblance is seen much more clearly when Christians suffer as Christ did. It must also be added, nevertheless, that Christians suffer as Christ did because they know that they will share in his resurrection (Phil. 3:10). This ever-present consciousness of partaking in his resurrection enables them to suffer as they do. Without this, believers would indeed be 'of all people most to be pitied' (1 Cor. 15:19).

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[228] Worthington, *A Christian Psychologist Looks At Virtue*, 9.

**Summary of Chapter 4**

- The ultimate goal for believers can be described as 'Future Maturity', the perfection of the age which is to come.

- The present goal for believers can be described as 'Present Maturity' which anticipates and lives actively in the light of Future Maturity.

- Christian preachers and teachers should share Paul's longing to observe Present Maturity in the church of Jesus Christ.

- Christian preachers and teachers should be concerned with the process by which the minds of Christians are renewed.

- Christian preachers and teachers need to teach believers the narrative of redemption and the place of believers in this present era of fulfilment or 'new creation'.

- Present Maturity is developed through the active and obedient hearing of the gospel and through a life in which the Christian mind-set is continually learned and reinforced.

- Present Maturity is sustained and developed by moral exhortation appropriate to the stage which believers have reached.

- Present Maturity is evidenced through a longing, shared by all creation, for the coming of the fulfilled and perfected new creation, or Future Maturity.

- Present Maturity is expressed in prayer, both inarticulate and articulate, which will often take place in the context of suffering.

- Present Maturity is expressed in Christian community where Christlike love characterises believers.

# Conclusion

I have sought to show that God's purposes for his redeemed people are intimately bound up with his purposes for the whole of creation, which will be restored to a perfection from which it will never fall. This eventual state of creation I have referred to as 'Future Maturity', but 'Present Maturity' is in anticipation of that future state. The apostle Paul labours for maturity in the churches which he is serving, seeking to enable believers to have, and to live by, the Biblical mind-set that results from understanding their historical place in God's narrative of redemption. That narrative reached its fulfilment when the Father sent his Son to redeem his people through his death and resurrection; this in turn resulted in the sending of the Spirit which is necessary in order for believers to demonstrate their maturity.

Nevertheless, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit does not render believers inactive, because they are to 'walk in the Spirit' (Gal. 5:16). Maturity among Christians is observed in the communal nature of their lives. Hence there is a strong Pauline emphasis on imitation as believers live in fellowship with one another. Believers know that because the era of Future Maturity has not yet arrived, there is an 'already/not yet' character to their experiences. The present world, including the bodies of believers, continue to be characterised by the fallenness that came as a result of sin. The fact that believers are united with a Christ who suffered in this present fallen world means that their perspective on sufferings is transformed during the present age.

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians can be understood as a detailed case-study in this question of maturity. The Galatians display spiritual immaturity because they have not understood that in the coming of Christ and of the Spirit, God's narrative of redemption in this world has reached its terminus. Paul emphasises the narrative of redemption by drawing their attention to Abraham, the patriarch to whom God made specific promises of blessing. 'The blessing of Abraham' (Gal. 3:14), Paul demonstrates, is fulfilled when the gospel of Jesus Christ is believed by all nations – Jews and Gentiles. If the Galatians were to receive the gospel as God's full, final and sufficient revelation – just as Abraham believed the promises of God made to him two thousand years earlier – they could be counted as spiritual children of Abraham and as mature in the faith.

Maturity, then, is a mind-set, informed by a world-view, but that mind-set needs to be nurtured in individuals and in churches over the course of time. There is to be an ongoing transformation of the mind (Rom. 12:2), in which Christian preachers and teachers are especially instrumental . Mature believers, while paying attention to the hearing of God's Word and moral exhortations (as necessary) from preachers and teachers, also longingly anticipate the day Future Maturity becomes reality. In such communities as this Paul detected the anticipatory ripples of the finished new creation, the new earth in closest communion with the new heavens, where Paul with every believer, in resurrected bodies, 'will always be with the Lord' (1 Thess. 4:17).

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