

# Are We Under *Bondage* to the *Law*?

by  
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*The book of Galatians has been a stumbling block for many people. The fourth chapter is often held up as "proof" that the law has been done away, and that God's law is actually bondage. We need to be able to respond to this challenge and give a ready answer when the scriptures are misused. The real problem Paul is addressing in Galatians may surprise you!*

## Part 1: Are We Free From the Law?

Is the law bondage? Is obedience to God's law a form of slavery to a harsh, cruel God? There are some who will tell you that that's what the apostle Paul taught. In order to answer this challenge, let's look into some of the scriptures used by the "no law" religionists, to understand what Paul really meant.

Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from Mount Sinai which genders to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answers to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children" (Galatians 4:21, KJV).

The idea that many people have is that the Jews, with the Old Testament law God gave them, were under bondage to that law. Supposedly, the law was a form of physical bondage from which we, under the New Covenant, are free. Thus, according to this reasoning, we do not need to observe God's commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath, or the Holy Days.

Continuing in Galatians 4: "But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, you barren that beareth not; break forth and cry, you that travailest not: for the desolate has many more children than she which has an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now" (verses 26-29).

According to some people, Paul is saying here that those who are still in "bondage" to the Old Testament, and the Old Covenant law, are going to persecute those Christians who are free of that law. That's what some people would have you believe.

"Nevertheless what says the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman" (verse 30).

According to this argument, then, those who would preach God's law as it appears in the Old Testament are actually to be cast out, chased out of fellowship, lest this law somehow taint the Christian congregation and bring bondage again.

"So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free" (verse 31).

## THE STORY OF SARAH AND AGAR

How do Sarah and Agar, two ancient women, apply to God's law, and our relationship to that law? Let's briefly review their story.

Abraham's wife Sarah was unable to have children. She had reached her old age, and was very despondent over her inability to have children, so she gave her handmaid Agar (or Hagar) to Abraham, who then had a child through Agar. That was Ishmael, who was the forefather of the Arabic peoples.

Shortly after that, God appeared to Sarah and promised that she would later give birth to a child in her old age, which she did. That child was Isaac.

When Isaac was a young boy, and Ishmael was about 13 years old, Ishmael began to feel his inheritance threatened, because he knew about the promise God had given to Abraham to make Isaac his heir. Ishmael began to mock Isaac, and be very cruel toward his younger brother. Isaac's mother Sarah was understandably displeased, and she cast out Agar and her son, into the wilderness, where God appeared to them and promised to make a great nation out of Ishmael. But Isaac was Abraham's heir, and ultimately the father of the Israelite people.

Understanding this history will help in understanding Paul's meaning in Galatians chapter 4. Is Paul telling us that adherence to the Old Testament law is a kind of bondage? Or is he *not* saying that? And if he is not saying that, what principle is he trying to get across by using the figure of these two women?

### BONDAGE TO WHAT?

The first thing to do is simply look at the passage. Exactly what is it to which Jerusalem is said to be in bondage? Is it the law? The passage nowhere states that anyone is enslaved by the law! Such an idea must be completely *read into* the passage, because it appears nowhere in the text!

In order to understand what Paul means when he speaks of bondage in Galatians 4, it is necessary to see what Paul has to teach regarding the subject of bondage elsewhere in the Bible.

In Romans 6:16-17, he asks "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked, that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Paul's teaching was clearly that those who are granted liberty in Christ are freed from servitude, from slavery, from bondage to *sin* and *death*, and corruption (Romans 8:21; compare with 2 Peter 2:19).

Paul here merely echoes Christ's own teaching on the subject. In John 8:33-36, the Jews challenge Jesus, saying, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ... Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." We see again that in biblical phraseology, the liberty of Christ sets us free, not from obedience to God's law, but from bondage to sin and death.

### IS THE LAW BONDAGE?

If we search the Bible, we will see that neither Christ, nor the disciples, nor the prophets ever spoke negatively of the law. Paul asked, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! *On the contrary* ..." (Romans 7:7). Paul knew that some would try to twist his teachings on grace in an effort to discredit the law itself.

He knew that they would try to portray the law as the source of bondage. In order to make his position absolutely clear, he emphasizes: "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore *the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good*" (Romans 7:11-12).

Paul here once again identifies *sin* as the source of bondage, not the law itself.

God said to Moses, "I will speak to you all the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which you shall teach them. ... You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess" (Deuteronomy 5:31-33). According to Psalm 19:7, "the law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul." It is evident that God never viewed his commandments and statutes as a burden upon the Israelites, or a form of harsh bondage. Rather, they were a blessing, for the *well-being* of the people. In fact, according to the apostle Paul, "the commandment was ordained to *life*" (Romans 7:10), not to bondage and death. How is it then that people misunderstand Paul so badly, and persist in teaching that God brought his people out of harsh bondage in Egypt, merely to deliver them into bondage again by instituting a harsh and unfair set of "Jewish" rules and regulations?

### ARE WE DEAD TO THE LAW?

We have seen that Paul teaches explicitly that it is *sin* to which we were in bondage without Christ, and that the law itself is holy, and just, and good, ordained to life. But doesn't Paul say that we are set free from the law? What about Romans 7:6: "But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held."

Is the law "dead"? Absolutely not! Paul is emphatic on this question: "Do we then make void the law through faith? *God forbid: yea, we establish the law*" (Romans 3:31). And once again, we see that Paul merely echoes Christ's own teachings on this subject: "Think *not* that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus insisted that his coming would not abolish the law of God, but on the contrary, magnify it, and establish it, going beyond the mere letter of the law to encompass the *spirit* of the law. In fact, after He said these words, He went on to give examples of *how* the law was to be magnified, as the subsequent examples in Matthew 5 illustrate.

On another occasion, Jesus was asked, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?". He responded, "if you will enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17). He understood that the love expressed in the spirit of God's commandments (not merely the letter of the law) is the foundation of wellness and eternal life.

Yet there is a "dark side" to the commandments: they come with a penalty for disobedience, as Paul wrote: "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). It is this penalty of which Paul speaks when he says, "we are delivered from the law" (Romans 7:6). In other words, the law itself is not nullified by faith, as Paul explains ("do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid!"). Rather, we are delivered from *the penalty for disobedience of that law!* There is no need to be confused. As usual, Paul is careful to explain everything.

How did Paul view the relationship between the law, and the bondage to sin and death which people are under, apart from Christ? What was the role of the law in this bondage? Paul answers, "Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, *I had not known sin, but by the law*: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, You shall not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead" (Romans 7:7-8).

Again, for Paul, the law itself was not at fault. The role of the law is simply to *define* the crime. This is a function that is "holy, just, and good" (verse 12). It is the lust and corruption of sin that is to blame for the transgression: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under [in bondage to] sin" (verse 14). "For that which I do I allow not [that is, I cannot control]: for what I would do [that is, what I *want* to do in my mind], that do I not [because of my carnality]; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, *I consent unto the law that it is good*" (verses 15-16).

We see again that the law of God is good. It is *sin* to which we are in bondage, apart from Christ -- not the law of God. Paul explains, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (verse 22). He places the law of God in juxtaposition to "another law": "For I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and *bringing me into captivity* [bondage] *to the law of sin* which is in my members" (verse 23). It is *this* law, "another law," the law of sin -- not the law of God -- from which we are freed: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Now we are in a position to understand what Paul means when he says "we are delivered from the law" (Romans 7:6). The law of God *defines* sin, and prescribes a penalty for sin. That penalty is death. We are delivered from the penalty of the law by justification through faith in Christ.

Now, deliverance from the penalty of the law does not do away with the law itself. For example, the Motor Vehicle Code prohibits excessive speed on the highway. If we were convicted of violating the speed limit, we might be able to obtain leniency, or pardon, from the judge. In such a case, we might consider ourselves "delivered from the law." However, we would understand that obtaining such pardon does not "do away" with the law itself, nor does it diminish the expectation that in the future we will do our best to comply with that law to the best of our ability. Would anyone dare to anger such a lenient judge by rejecting the law?

But wait! Doesn't Romans 7:6 also say plainly that "the law is dead"? No! It says, "that being dead wherein we were held." A better rendering is "being dead to that wherein we were held" -- in fact, this rendering is substituted in the marginal references of many Bibles. The context for understanding Romans 7:6 is to be found in Romans 6:2 ("How shall *we* that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"), and in Romans 7:4 ("my brethren, *you* also are become dead to the law"). This context plainly shows that it is *we* who have become dead to the law, not the reverse!

In fact, the Jamieson, Fawcett & Brown *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1971) comments on the mistranslation of Romans 7:6: "It is now universally agreed that the true reading here is, 'being dead to that wherein we were held.' The received reading [that is, the KJV] has no authority whatever, and is inconsistent with the strain of the argument; *for the death spoken of, as we have seen, is not the law's, but ours*, through union with the crucified Saviour" (emphasis mine).

The teaching of Paul is plain and easy to understand. We are freed from the penalty of the law, which is death, because we ourselves have *become dead to sin*, through faith in Christ.

But then, if we are not loosed from the law itself, how are we to understand Romans 7:1-4? "Know you not, brethren (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman which has a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he lives; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, *you also are become dead to the law* by the body of Christ."

Doesn't this say we are free from the law? Does Paul contradict himself here? After saying that we do not make the law void through faith, but rather that we establish the law through faith (and having said that the law is holy, just, and good), does Paul now do an about-face here by declaring that the law is stricken down? As Paul says, "God forbid!" We are not freed from our obligation to uphold the law!

Then how are we to understand Paul's declaration that our death in Christ has freed us from a marriage union "under the law"? In a formal wedding ceremony, the law of the land recognizes the terms and provisions of the marriage union. However, when one is married "under" such a law, one does not "marry the law" itself. When one partner in such a union dies, does the Civil Code that bound them die with the union? No, of course not. However, the legal status of the partners changes, and the union is formally dissolved.

Once again, let us look at Paul's teaching in context. In Paul's teaching, to whom, exactly, were we formerly bound under the law? To what, or whom, are we dead? We are "dead to *sin*" (Romans 6:2)! From what, or whom, are we freed? We are "freed from *sin*" (Romans 6:7, 22). To whom did we "yield ourselves servants to obey"? We yielded ourselves as "servants [slaves] ... of *sin* unto death" (Romans 6:16, 20).

The context is clear. We were bound through sin, defined under the terms and penalties of the law, in a fatal union with death and corruption. Sin is the husband from which we are freed in Christ. As Paul teaches, we then became dead in Christ (Romans 6:8). This death frees us from captivity to our former husband (Romans 7:1-4), and from the penalty we had incurred under the law. We are released to eternal life, to serve a new husband, in the *spirit* of the law. Thus, our freedom does not make that law void; rather it *establishes* the law.

Paul explains how we are freed from the penalty prescribed by the law: "And you, being dead in your sins and uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:13-14). It was not the law itself that was "taken out the way," but the accusation of guilt!

### **THE LAW IS NECESSARY, BUT NOT SUFFICIENT**

Now that we have carefully studied Paul's own teachings on the relationship between grace and the law, we are in a better position to understand the thrust of his argument in the book of Galatians.

Simply stated, Paul's message to the Galatians is not an attack against the law itself, but against the false concept, rampant in the Galatian church, that we can be justified by the law *apart from* faith in Jesus Christ.

The fault is not with the law, but with the inability of flesh and blood humans to fulfill the spirit and intent (let alone the letter) of the law: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault *with them*, he says, Behold, the days come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Hebrews 8:7-8).

### **ADDRESSING THE CONTRASTING THOUGHT**

We have seen how Paul taught that the law was something beneficial, "ordained unto life," "holy, and just, and good." However, Paul also found it necessary to address the opposite heresy, also growing in the early *ekklesia*, that salvation can be found through the law, or through acts of law-keeping.

In answering this challenge, Paul recognized the limitations in the law: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *in us*" (Romans 8:3-4).

"Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law" (Galatians 3:21).

The law can define righteousness. And it can provide just penalties for transgression. But the law is insufficient; it does not have power to lead to a change of heart. In other words, the law of itself has no power to *justify*. Only Christ can grant us the reformation of character that is necessary to break free from bondage to sin and death: "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ ... purge *your conscience* from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:13-15).

The law has no power either to purge our consciences, or to forgive us of our sins. Paul wrote, "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (verse 21). "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith" (3:11).

If Christ is set aside, reliance on circumcision or any other law for justification from sin is not only ineffective, it is dangerous. Such misplaced faith can actually negate the power of Christ: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; you are fallen from grace" (5:4).

### TURNING BACK TO SIN

How is it, then, that reliance on the law for justification can lead so quickly to destruction? The answer is that when Christ is left out of the picture, the law is powerless to reform our character or forgive us from sin, and we are quickly drawn back into bondage to sin and death. The Galatians were in danger of returning to their old sinful habits. This is why Paul warns them: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1).

Paul warns: "For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor" (Galatians 2:18). And again he warns: "But now, after that you have known God ... how turn you again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto you desire again to be in bondage?" (4:9).

The shocking truth is that the danger presenting itself to the Galatian church was not strict Jewish legalism and zealotry, but re-emerging immorality, idolatry, and licentiousness, brought about by the influence of certain false teachers. Paul reveals the nature of these false teachers to us: "You did run well; who did hinder you that you should not obey the truth? ... A little leaven leavens the whole lump ... he that troubles you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be ... I would they were even cut off which trouble you ... For, brethren, you have been called unto liberty; *only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh*" (Galatians 5:7-13).

The false teachers in Galatia were not purveyors of strict Jewish moralism, but rather of sin, and fleshly self-indulgence. They taught and practiced *licentiousness!* Paul's warning about their false teachings in the book of Galatians echoes the words of the apostle Peter: "they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (2 Peter 2:18-19).

Can we know more about these false teachers? Yes, we can. Learn more about the major heresy of the early church of God in Part 2 of this article. Continue.....

## Part 2: The Shocking Story of the Gnostics!

Who were these teachers of false liberty? Were they the Pharisees? No, the false teachers in Galatia were not any moralizing, straightlaced Jewish zealots; they were Jewish *mystics*, forerunners of a class of amoral and godless mystics that later developed into the religion known as Gnosticism (from the Greek *gnosis*, "knowledge").

To the Galatians, these false teachers preached salvation through a form of ritual, mystical works. The focus of their program was a type of circumcision. But accepting Christ, and repentance from evil works, were not a part of their program. In fact, these people were teaching that one could attain salvation by certain works, even while *indulging* the desires of the flesh! Such a teaching made a mockery of God, prompting Paul to warn: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Galatians 5:13 shows that the brand of "liberty" preached by these false teachers included freedom from moral constraint: "use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh." The fruits of their teachings were apparent: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings ..." (Galatians 5:21).

Witchcraft? Idolatry? Could these kinds of abominable practices have taken hold in the Galatian church? Indeed, "Howbeit then, when you knew not God, you did service unto them which by nature are no gods [but are idols]. But now, after that you have known God ... how turn you again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days, and months, and times, and years" (Galatians 4:8-10).

Having been redeemed from idolatry by the preaching of the gospel, some were now *turning back* to idols, and astrology ("observing times"). This is not, as some would have us believe, a reference to Jewish Sabbaths and Holy Days. The Galatians were *Gentiles*. They could not "turn back" to Jewish observances, because *they had not come out of Judaism!*

How do we know that "observation of times" refers to idolatry, and not to Sabbaths and Holy Days? Because the God of Israel specifically *forbade* the Israelites from "observing times"! In Leviticus 19:26, God warns: "You shall not eat any thing with the blood: neither shall you use enchantment, nor *observe times*." Similarly, in Deuteronomy 18:10 is the warning, "There shall not be found among you ... an *observer of times*, or an enchanter, or a witch"!

These practices, forbidden by God, are clearly forms of astrology and divination. In fact, the word "horoscope," still familiar to us in modern times, comes from the Greek *horoskopos*, meaning "to view hours" (see *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*). The astrological term "horoscope" literally means to *see times!* The translators of the King James Bible understood this. That is why they employed the term "observation of times" to refer to astrology and divination in Leviticus 19:26 and Deuteronomy 18:10.

The word translated "observe" in Galatians 4:10 is the Greek *paratereo* (Strong's #3906), which comes from the idea of "to note insidiously or scrupulously." The sense of this word implies a superstitious, fearful watching, as would be the case with a practitioner of astrology who carefully evaluates the omens to determine whether or not the times are favorable for certain kinds of conduct.

## WAS PAUL WARNING AGAINST THE SABBATH?

To claim that "observing times," as used in Galatians 4:10, is referring to the observance of "Jewish" Holy Days and Sabbaths, would be the same as saying that God delivered the Hebrews from Egypt, only to bring them into "bondage" again to the law of Moses. There are people who would characterize the law of God as "weak and beggarly elements" (Galatians 4:10). They do not understand that the law was "ordained to life." Nor do they understand the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4: "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may *live*. ... Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments. ... Therefore, be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people' ... and what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deuteronomy 4:1, 6, 8)

Was the law of Israel bondage? Or was it the gift of life to those who tried to live by its intent?

The problem in Galatia was not the observance of "Jewish" Sabbaths and Holy Days. Paul's accusation in Galatians 4:8-11 is clear: idolatry, astrology, and divination were becoming a serious problem in the Galatian church! These were not practices that were characteristic of Pharisaical Judaism. So who were the teachers who were enticing the Galatians into such things?

## ALSO IN THE COLOSSIAN CHURCH

We can begin to get a glimpse of these false teachers by reading about the situation in a neighboring area, in Paul's epistle to the Colossians. Paul warns that congregation, "Let no one beguile you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and *worship of angels*, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind. ... Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations -- 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.' ... These things indeed have *an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion*, false humility, and *neglect of the body*, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:18-23, NKJV).

The consensus of modern scholarship is that the philosophy described here is referring to *gnostic asceticism* (which was a ritualistic self-deprivation). In commenting on this passage, an article in the November, 1995 *Plain Truth* magazine noted: "The false teachings Paul attacked in the first century were only the first wave of what became known as the gnostic heresies (Greek *gnosis*, 'knowledge,' meaning, in the context, a supposedly 'inside' knowledge no one else possesses). Whole gnostic systems later sprang up outlining fantastic celestial schemes and cataloguing hosts of angelic intermediaries by name.

"In Colosse, this gnostic philosophy included secret names and ritualistic code words only the initiated could learn (verse 8). Bible commentator William Barclay comments:

"The Gnostic prided himself upon special visions of secret things which were not open to the eyes of ordinary men and women."

This article appeared in a magazine published by the Worldwide Church of God, a formerly Sabbatarian church that underwent a dramatic doctrinal shift in 1994, forsaking the Sabbath and God's Holy Days, as well as other major doctrines. Ironically, this organization could recognize the influence of gnosticism on the early church, and yet wholly fail to understand the ramifications of this recognition when it comes to how they now interpret Paul's teachings on grace and the law.

## TWO TYPES OF GNOSTICISM!

Is it possible that Jewish gnostics in the early church were promoting, at the same time, both asceticism (rigorous self-denial) *and* libertinism (self-indulgence)? How can these two seemingly opposite approaches possibly be reconciled in one mystic philosophy? Paul reveals the answer when he warns that the ascetic practices being promoted in Colosse were of "no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:23). The false teachers were promoting the idea that indulgence of the flesh could be practiced with impunity, provided that people were careful to "redeem" themselves by performing periodic acts of self-denial!

We should be able to recognize the close similarity between this philosophy and the abominable practices that arose in the Catholic church of "doing penance," and of paying church officials for absolution from sin (i.e., granting "indulgences"). Any Spirit-filled Christian should shudder at the notion that we can obtain forgiveness from sin by paying a priest, or by acts of asceticism!

Forgiveness can be obtained only by *grace*, through faith in Christ, and with a *repentant heart!* Thus Paul continues his discourse in chapter 3 of Colossians: "For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. ... Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence [lust], and covetousness, which is idolatry" (verses 3-4).

Here is a simple summary of Paul's message in Colossians 2:4 through 3:10: "There are idolatrous teachers in Colosse who teach that asceticism can purchase *the freedom to sin*, by appeasing God. Don't believe them! Your sins can be forgiven by the faith of Christ, but this must be accompanied by *repentance!* You must *stop sinning!*" (Also, see again Peter's warning about these teachers in 2 Peter 2:18-19).

The Christian church encountered gnosticism early in its history. Simon Magus ("the sorcerer"), mentioned in Acts 8:9-11, was a gnostic philosopher, from whom a whole school of gnostic thought developed (see *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas, 1991, pp. 103-111). Simon's attempt to purchase the Holy Spirit with cash remind us of the false concept that redemption, and being pardoned for indulging the flesh, can be purchased by asceticism, or ritualistic works.

## CHARACTERIZING EARLY GNOSTICISM

The origins of Gnosticism are obscure and controversial. Until fairly recently, most of what was known about gnosticism came from the writings of early "church fathers" (e.g., Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, Epiphanius, Tertullian, Clement), who wrote against gnosticism in the period between the second and fourth centuries A.D. The original writings of the gnostic teachers themselves, which might have given us a more accurate picture of their philosophy, have been lost, except for some fragments of these works which have been preserved.

Some recent archeological finds have produced records and writings of various gnostic communities from the declining stages of gnosticism. However, none of these records predates the second century A.D., and so no record exists of gnosticism as it was developing during the time of the apostles and the early church.

Apparently, the only source of documentation that is available about gnostic philosophy during this period is the Bible itself! Although many scholars have failed to grasp it, we see revealed in the Bible a gnostic philosophy that paradoxically promoted both licentiousness and libertinism *at the same time!*

In later centuries, by the time the early Catholic "church fathers" began to record the practices of gnostics, the two sides of gnosticism had diverged into two different forms: some schools of gnosticism were strictly "licentious," while others were strictly "ascetic." However, gnostic asceticism was not rooted in any concept of "morality," as we understand the term, any more than the licentious form was. They were simply two different sides of the same coin.

Gnostic licentiousness and asceticism were both without moral principle. Gnostic self-deprivation, like the licentious form, was practiced not as a tool for developing morality, but as a device specifically for *frustrating* the will of the Creator!

According to Jonas, gnostics believed that "the world is the work of lowly powers [that is, it was created by lesser beings], which though they may ... be descended from Him [God] do not know the true God and *obstruct* the knowledge of Him in the cosmos over which they rule. The genesis [beginnings] of these lower powers, the Archons (rulers) ... is a main theme of gnostic speculation" (*The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas, 1991, p. 42).

Furthermore, "One recurring feature [in different systems of gnostic thought] is the assertion that the prophecies and the Mosaic Law issued from these world-ruling angels, among whom the Jewish god is prominent. This bespeaks a particular antagonism toward the Old Testament religion and toward its God" (*ibid.*, p. 133).

Gnosticism often took on a distinctly anti-Jewish flavor. It was even claimed that "Christ came to destroy the god of the Jews" (*ibid.*, p. 132). For libertine gnostics especially, "The law of 'Thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' promulgated by the Creator is just one more form of the 'cosmic' tyranny. ... The pneumatic [the gnostics' code name for a "spiritual" person] is free from ... the yoke of the moral law" (*ibid.*, p. 46).

In other words, to the gnostic, God's law was a form of tyranny and "bondage"! How ironic and shameful that we hear much the same concept taught today, by those who twist the teachings of the apostle Paul, claiming that the law of God is a form of bondage, and that for "spiritual" people, the law is "dead."

Again, Jonas explains, "Generally speaking, the pneumatic [spiritual] morality is determined by hostility toward the world and contempt for all mundane ties. From this principle, however, two contrary conclusions could be drawn, and both found their extreme representatives: the ascetic and the libertine" (*ibid.*, p. 46).

Yes, gnosticism developed into these seemingly opposite forms, neither of which had anything but contempt for our concept of morality. The same lack of morality undoubtedly prevailed in the earlier form of gnosticism, the form that is revealed in the pages of the New Testament, against which the apostles struggled. In this early form of gnosticism, however, licentiousness and asceticism were practiced together. Asceticism (later called "penance") was viewed as a way of "paying for" indulgence of the flesh.

Although we can only guess at the rationale, it seems likely that the mystics described by Paul viewed asceticism as the necessary price to pay in order to mollify the god of the Jews (who, to a gnostic, was one of the lower "world ruling powers") after a period of indulging the flesh. This would not have been done out of a sense of moral duty, since the concept of morality was foreign to a gnostic, but for purely practical reasons of self-interest. Gnostics viewed the world-ruling powers (including God) as feeble entities, who could probably be easily fooled and appeased.

But Paul warned, "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption" (Galatians 6:7-8).

## **BACK TO GALATIANS**

We have seen that the false teachers who were influencing the Galatian church were not straightlaced self-righteous Jewish zealots, but were mystics who were practicing and promoting licentiousness. But if Paul's opponents were not self-righteous Jewish legalists within the church, why does he seem to dedicate the first two chapters of the epistle to protesting against Peter's treatment of the uncircumcised Gentiles? Why is there such a focus on circumcision?

Keep in mind that the "Jerusalem Council" (see Acts 15) had already settled, by the consensus of "the *whole* church" (verse 22), the question of uncircumcised Gentile converts. It had been concluded that Gentile converts need not be circumcised. It is inconceivable that Peter, or some of the other apostles, had gone back on their word, and repudiated an understanding that had been signified by the Holy Spirit itself (verse 28).

But in Galatians 2:11, Paul reminds the Galatians: "Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision."

Why would Paul bring up this incident? Was it because he was facing opposition from a renegade Jewish element within the church?

The answer is that Paul brought up this incident principally to establish his *independence* from Peter and the apostles in the church at Jerusalem. He is describing an incident that occurred prior to the Jerusalem Council! It was an incident that the Galatians were already aware of, but it was necessary for Paul to remind them of it, because he was defending himself against charges made against him by the false teachers in Galatia.

What, specifically, were the charges against which Paul was defending himself? Paul was accused of having received his gospel from *men*. Notice his defense in Galatians 1:10-12: "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is *not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it*, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ."

And from whom, specifically, was he accused of having received his gospel? From the apostles in Jerusalem! Thus, Paul devotes at least the next 26 verses to establishing his independence from the apostles, and how minimal was his contact with the apostles in his formative years in the ministry.

Notice the following: "Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia. ... Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James. ... And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. ... Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem" (Galatians 1:17-18, 22; 2:1).

Paul is careful to show how he maintained the independence of his gospel throughout these incidents ("not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised," 1:3). Paul then explains how his independent ministry to the uncircumcised Gentiles was accepted, in good faith, by the apostles (2:7-9). But the most persuasive evidence of his independence was the well-known incident that had occurred prior to the Jerusalem Council, when he had "withstood Peter to the face" (Galatians 2:11-12).

Who were the opponents in Galatia, and what sort of charge is this to make against Paul, that he is dependent upon men for his gospel? This is not a charge that would typically come from mainstream Judaism (where receiving understanding through tradition, and a succession of teachers, was the norm). But it *is* a charge that is typically Gnostic.

According to Walter Schmithals (*Paul & the Gnostics*, Abingdon Press, 1972): "This argument is genuinely Gnostic. The Gnostic apostle is not identified by means of a chain of tradition, by the apostolic succession, but by direct pneumatic vocation. When Paul says 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (I Cor. 9:1), this combination, which represents an *equation*, is in origin typically Gnostic. The Gnostic apostle is called by God directly. He then is shown to be such ... through the ecstatic attestation of the pneuma-self."

Schmithals also comments: "In Corinth, moreover, as in Galatia, the question about the *content* of the Pauline proclamation, and thus about the truth of his gospel, is to be decided by the question about his apostolate. This too is just as typically and originally Gnostic as it is un-Jewish and therefore un-Judaistic."

Thus we see that Paul's description of his confrontation with Peter was in the context of showing his independence from Peter, in answering charges against himself -- charges that were decidedly gnostic in character.

## CIRCUMCISION

However, what about the focus on circumcision, not only in Galatians 2:3-16, but indeed throughout the entire book of Galatians? Surely this is proof that the opponents in Galatia were strictly Jewish legalists! Or is it?

Here is where the confusion arises. The libertine mystics who were influencing the Galatian church were *Jewish* gnostics! Gentile converts to Christianity viewed themselves as converts to what was essentially a Jewish religion. They were thus extremely susceptible to the influence of anyone who claimed to represent Jewish tradition.

Before the development of a strong anti-Jewish undercurrent in gnosticism, Jewish gnostics would have retained some of the outward trappings of Judaism, but would have infused these traditions with a typically gnostic significance and meaning. This was particularly the case with circumcision, which was already a gnostic practice.

As Walter Schmithals explains: "Gnosticism seriously threatened the [Christian] community that was growing up in the Hellenistic environment. ... The church fathers unanimously know to report that precisely in Gentile territory, especially in Asia Minor, it [gnosticism] had preached circumcision. ... [There is an] abundance of documentation for this to be found in Hippolytus, Tertullian, Epiphanius, Philastrius, and others. It is most obvious to select the Jewish Christian Gnostic Cerinthus, particularly, as described by Epiphanius, for comparison with the Galatian adversaries of Paul. In *all* the accounts of the church fathers we can detect how dangerous Cerinthus must have been to the beginning Gentile Christianity. His appearance in Asia Minor is historically incontestable. Asia is said to have been his homeland. Epiphanius even reports that his school flourished in Galatia. In any case he belongs to the early period, to the beginnings of Christian Gnosticism, and without question connects typical Gnosticism with a confession of Christ and with Jewish practices such as that of circumcision" (*ibid.*, pp. 36-37).

Schmithals explains that Gnostic circumcision was different in principle than Jewish circumcision: "The reasons for circumcision within Gnosticism naturally are other than those within Judaism. Gnostic circumcision could never obligate one to keep the law in the Pharisaic sense, whatever may have been practiced in individual Gnostic groups by way of observance of the law. ... But Gnosticism was highly adaptable ... so also circumcision underwent a Gnostic reinterpretation. ... It is unmistakably clear that in the model ... the foreskin symbolized the body of flesh and thus the ... act of circumcision portrayed the liberation of the pneuma-self from the prison of this body" (pp. 37-38).

There was thus a purely gnostic motivation for the false teachers in Galatia to desire to see these Gentile converts circumcised. Circumcision was presented to these Christians as an essential step towards redemption, under the guise of "Jewish law-keeping." Since they had created such a facade, it was necessary for Paul to tear down the entire facade by emphasizing to the Galatians that salvation cannot be achieved by law-keeping (be it Jewish law-keeping, gnostic law-keeping, or otherwise), particularly when law-keeping is accompanied by immorality.

Throughout the book of Galatians, there is a remarkable focus on circumcision. But it is noteworthy that other characteristically Jewish rituals (which the opponents would no doubt have been promoting if they were simply legalistic Jews) are not even mentioned.

Why is there such a focus on circumcision in this epistle? The answer is that these false teachers were themselves chiefly interested in circumcision -- the gnostic variety -- but they were not wholesale law-keepers.

Paul explicitly states this fact in Galatians 6:12-13: "As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. ***For not even those who are circumcised keep the law***, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh" (NKJV).

In fact, the concept of wholesale law-keeping was so foreign to this gnostic influence, that Paul had to solemnly remind the Galatians that the law requires ***complete*** commitment: "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the ***whole*** law" (Galatians 5:3).

Complete commitment to the law is a sentiment echoed by the words of James: "But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:9-10, NKJV).

### WHAT AGAR REPRESENTS

Now, when we recognize that the opponents in the Galatian church were not simply legalistic Jews, but licentious mystics, whose teaching and example were leading the Galatians back into idolatry and immorality, we can better understand the allegory Paul used in Galatians chapter 4.

"For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answers to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children." Jerusalem is in bondage, not by virtue of practicing the law of Moses, but because the Jews as a nation do not accept the blood of Jesus Christ. Without this blood, they cannot yet receive forgiveness, and they are still in bondage to sin and death -- just as were the Gentile Galatians, who were beginning to put repentance and faith aside, and were returning to their former ways.

We can see now that the adversary in the book of Galatians is not God's law, nor is it a group of religious zealots who wished to obey God's law against Paul's teaching. Rather, the enemy in this story is the insidious and destructive teaching of those who would pervert the gospel and turn the liberty of Christ into a form of slavery to sin!

Paul's teaching is not "antinomian" (against the law), as some teach. Our approach today, as followers of the Way, should also not be against God's law. Let us not reject the law, as some do, but rather, as Paul would have us do, let us ***establish*** the law!