

# LIFE IN THE SPIRIT AS WISE REMEDY FOR THE FOLLY OF THE FLESH: ETHICAL NOTES FROM GALATIANS

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that wise ethical behaviour is not determined and regulated by law, but emanates from the faithfulness of Christ as introduced into the believer's life by the Spirit. It is a fruit or result of the indwelling of the Spirit and the believer's obedience to Him. It is characterised by a love and sacrificing service born from the faithfulness of Christ and the believer's faith in Him. It is about responding to one's fellow believers and their needs and ultimately about God's honour and accountability to Him. Christian ethics is not characteristically Christian because of its ethical rulings, but because of its pneumatological-soteriological foundation and way of operating. For this reason it might not always be obviously different to other ethical systems, but completely different in its origin and aim, creatively seeking to do good for the sake of others and to the glory of God, even when it makes abundant use of ethical maxims and standards from society at large.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a gem, in fact, one of the most invaluable jewels of Biblical literature. Paul's spiritual children were, at the very least, considering reversion to law as essential for Christian living. He was shocked by the news—flabbergasted! In its very essence the letter is an extremely urgent appeal to them to turn away from this foolishness and to stick to the true and only gospel. They were to stick to their initial wise choice when they heard the gospel originally as if Christ was publicly crucified before their very own eyes. Ironically, although Paul goes to great lengths to explain the gospel once more, and although he regards it as divine revelation and therefore divine wisdom, he never uses the word "wisdom". The nearest he gets to referring to wisdom, albeit indirectly, is his very frank reference to the Galatians' lack of it, addressing them as: "O, foolish Galatians!" They lacked spiritual discernment (Longenecker 1990, 99).

Actually, their folly was of an order beyond obvious explanation and could be explained only in terms of the extraordinary—bewitchment (Gal 3:1,3)!

However, there are quite a few other allusions to this lack of wisdom and discernment. Paul expresses astonishment at their desertion of Christ by turning to a different and perverted gospel (Gal 1:6). He regards anyone doing this as under a curse (Gal 1:8-9). In the same vein he sees Peter's separation from the Gentiles in the presence of Jewish believers as insincere and self-condemning (Gal 2:11-14). In Gal 3:10-14 he states that all who rely on the works of law are under a curse, and that Christ came expressly to redeem believers from that curse. Paul refers to their former life as one without knowledge of God. In terms of Jewish thought this was a life without wisdom and in bondage to "beings that by nature are no gods" (Gal 4:8). This changed for them when they came to know God (Gal 4:9) and thus became wise. Therefore his perplexity (Gal 4:20) when he writes: "how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more?" (Gal 4:9)—sheer folly! Of course, there is the classic remark where he wishes those who enforce circumcision would go the whole foolish hog and cut off everything (Gal 5:12).

So, even though wisdom is not directly mentioned it is strongly implied. This article aims to determine the contribution of Galatians towards wise ethical behaviour. If the Galatians were foolish in considering reversion to law, what would the wise ethical stance be of which Paul hopes to convince them? It will be argued that Paul is all in favour of an ethic determined by the Spirit rather than by laws and handed down traditions (Gal 1:11-17) that have little bearing on God's will for the time in which we live. It hopes to remind readers of and sensitise them to seek the guidance of the Spirit in ethical matters, rather than simply falling back on our default arrangements that might just be merely human.

## **1. Wisdom as Partaking in God's Full-time in Christ**

For Paul it was extremely important that the Galatians knew what time they were living in (Martyn 1997, 104). For this reason apocalyptic plays an essential, albeit unobtrusive role, in Galatians (Loubser 2004, 68-69). Gal 4:4-5 is probably one of his clearest apocalyptic statements.

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

The advent of Christ had once and for all brought about a switch in eras. Paul clearly distinguishes between the *present evil age* (τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστώτος πονηροῦ—Gal 1:4) and *new creation* (καινὴ κτίσις—Gal 6:15). The *present evil age* is the time before the advent of Christ, dominated by flesh and its over-powering negative effect on man, causing him to live in slavery to the elements of the world (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου—Gal 4:3,9) and to being in bondage to beings that are by their very nature not gods (Gal 4:8). They did not know God and therefore, in terms of Jewish theology, were unwise (Prov 1:7). Not only the former Gentile believers, but even those formerly from Judaism and under law, were previously slaves (Gal 4:5) and under a curse (Gal 3:10), because they were then living on the wrong side of full-time. Although the law was given to them to help them identify and stay out of sin's way, it could not help them against flesh's power and in the end only served to emphasise their vulnerability, slavery and capitulation to flesh. It must be added that, although the present evil age emphasised man's plight of slavery, it was not as though their position before the advent of Christ was regarded to ultimately remain hopeless. By God's grace, as Paul indicates, they also lived under divine promise (Tolmie 2008, 139; Hays 1989, 107). Prophets such as Isaiah (Isa 35, 40-42, 65-66), Ezekiel (Ezek 47), Zechariah (Zech 8, 9, 13) and Joel (Joel 3:16-21) had already indicated that God would intervene somewhere in the future. But, all things being equal, life in the realm of the present evil age was predominantly one of slavery. Divine deliverance was needed.

*New creation* is the current time in which believers in Christ partake, the time following his advent. It is the age in which man lives in deliverance from the slavery of the previous age. It is the apocalyptic time of which the prophets spoke and to which Second Temple Judaism looked forward. It was the time in which the Spirit would manifest itself in believers and law would be written on man's heart to guide him from within, instead of through external measures such as law (Barclay 1988, 215). A total and irreversible paradigm shift had occurred in Christ's advent (Loubser 2004, 54-93). Although the present evil age had been dealt with and could not be revived, it still had a limited life and efficacy parallel to new creation (Tolmie 2008, 141) leading to a bi-focal type of vision on time (Martyn 1997, 104).

Paul goes to great lengths to explain that the main feature of this new creation is *freedom*. Even as early as Gal 2:4 he speaks of the believer's position as one of freedom in Christ. He motivates this position with a very strange allegorical exposition of the tale of Sarah and Hagar culminating in

the very pivotal Gal 5:1 with which he summarises his Christological arguments and introduces his ethical section (Loubser 2004, 180-183).

For freedom Christ set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Using a *dative of purpose* (τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ) (Morris 1996; Witherington 1998) and *decisiveness* (Loubser 2004, 238), he claims that Christ came to earth with the firm intention to provide freedom from the slavery of the present evil age, but together with that, he urges them to take up that freedom and to live it to the full (Betz 1979, 256). He confirms this notion in Gal 5:13, referring to freedom as a calling.

God, in his wisdom and by his own initiative, provided deliverance and freedom in his Son. Through the faithfulness of Christ (Hays 1983, 157-176) that cost Him his life, God provided the dawn of the new era of salvation. This was the true gospel.

The wise choice in this era would be to participate in it through faith. Paul stresses the subjective faith required of believers. The Galatians had received the gospel (Gal 1:9). Clearly Paul means that they believed it. This is why he can write of their desertion and turning away from the gospel (Gal 1:6). In fact, in Gal 3:1-5 he spells it out. After hearing of Christ—apparently experiencing it in very vivid terms—they received the Spirit and had very real experiences of his wondrous works in and amongst them. He once more emphasises that the Spirit and the promises of God in Christ are received through faith (Gal 3:14, 22). In Gal 4:6, directly after the statement of God having filled up time in the sending of his Son, he speaks of the Spirit having to be sent into the hearts of believers (Gal 4:6). Equally, Christ had to be formed in the lives of the Galatians (Gal 4:19). Of himself he testifies that Christ had revealed Himself to him at a time when he was all but seeking Him (Gal 1:10-24). The result was that he was now living a life of faith in Him who loved him and gave Himself for him (Gal 3:20). He refers to his reception of Christ as being crucified with Christ (Gal 3:20; 6:14) and bearing his marks on his body (Gal 6:17).

Clearly, wisdom was more than a mere objective acknowledgement of the facts concerning Christ as God's Deliverer of man. It was about participating in Christ through faith manifesting in their lives by the indwelling of the Spirit through whom believers cry "Abba! Father" (Gal 4:6)! Paul attests to this, stating that we live by the Spirit (Gal 5:25). It is

through his gracious and convincing indwelling that believers become convinced of God's deliverance in Christ and accept Him in faith.

It is because of the advent of Christ and his Spirit in this world and in believer's lives that they make the wise choice to believe the true gospel and allow them to be delivered from the present evil age into new creation in God's full time! To reject this directly, or, as in the case of the Galatians, to revert to the enslaving elements of the present evil age, was folly beyond compare (Gal 3:1,3)!

## 2. Wisdom as Living According to the Spirit

Paul goes to great lengths to convince the Galatians that a life according to law is anachronistic to new creation. Since full time had been achieved in the advent of Christ and his Spirit, ethics had also changed. In as much as law was soteriologically impotent, lacking in the ability to provide deliverance from the curse of flesh in the present evil age, it was also ethically deficient for new creation. It could not empower believers to correct ethical behaviour and largely served to accentuate their sinfulness and the curse under which they lived. Besides this limitation, using the metaphor of the pedagogue, he indicates that law's lifespan was meant from 430 years after Abraham till the arrival of his offspring, Christ (Gal 3:16-18) (Loubser 2004, 162-166).

The great change in ethics, the new way of living, would come about by the very same Spirit who gave new life to believers by introducing them to Christ. This is why Paul writes in Gal 5:25:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Paul uses four pneumatological expressions to describe the believer's new life in Christ. Firstly, he uses a soteriological-pneumatological expression, *live by the Spirit* (ζῶμεν πνεύματι—Gal 5:25), to indicate the believer's reception in faith of Christ's graceful deliverance and so becoming part of new creation, as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and convincing ability. This is obviously the foundation and indicative of Christian life. Without it there can be no imperative. It equally implies an ethic of the same order. Therefore, the role of the Spirit does not end at this soteriological point. Since the believer has received this new life through the agency of the Spirit, he equally continues to live this life of following Christ, through the Spirit. For this Paul uses three ethical-pneumatological expressions, i.e. *walk by the Spirit* (πνεύματι

περιπατεῖτε—Gal 5:16), *be in step with the Spirit* (πνεύματι στοιχῶμεν—Gal 5:25) and *be led by the Spirit* (πνεύματι ἄγεσθε—Gal 5:18). He also describes the ethical life of believers as the fruit of the Spirit (καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματος—Gal 5:22) in opposition to works of the flesh (ἔργα τῆς σαρκός—Gal 5:19) that belong to the previous dispensation.

### 2.1 *Living according to the Spirit*

All three above ethical-pneumatological expressions emphasise the imperative on the believer to be sensitive for and obedient to the guidance of the Spirit. He should determine the believer's conduct. With regard to πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε (Gal 5:16) Betz correctly states: "The term expresses the view that human life is essentially a 'way of life'" (Betz 1979, 277). It is not only about having this life, but equally, about living it. It is about being governed by the Spirit as one walks each step of the way in faith. "To walk according to the statutes of Law" (Exod 16:4; Lev 18:4; Ezek 5:6-7) was a typically Jewish way of ethical speaking. Now, however, the typically Christian walk in life was no longer determined by any external legal ruling, but by the Spirit Himself. In Jer 31:33-34 and Ezek 36:24-32 already, the promise was given of God's law and will one day being written on their hearts, and of their knowing God's will with greater immediacy than in the old dispensation were the law had to be consulted and analysed. As Dunn puts it (1993, 296):

[T]hose who had been given the Spirit thus also knew the eschatological experience looked for in Jer. xxxi.33-4—an immediate knowledge of God, an enabling to know what God's will was in particular instances. This is the basis of a charismatic ethic, depending more on inward apprehension of what is the appropriate conduct than on rule book or tradition.

The expression πνεύματι στοιχῶμεν (Gal 5:25) adds a slight nuance to πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε. It is a military term meaning "to be drawn up in a line" or "to be in step with" the leader of the platoon (Betz 1979, 294). In this sense it meant the Galatians were all to fall in line with and follow the ethical guidance of the Spirit. It adds a further nuance in being a less Jewish expression than the previous one, and more appealing to Greek believers, having the same root as the *elements of the world* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου—Gal 4:3,9). The latter could refer to the principles, philosophies or teachings in general according to which different peoples arrange their lives

(Delling 1971, 667). This had come to an end in the fullness of time. It was now about the ethical leadership of the Spirit.

## 2.2 *Fruit of the Spirit*

The expression *fruit of the Spirit* (καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματος) is used in direct opposition to *works of flesh* (ἔργα τῆς σαρκός). Obviously, *Spirit* (πνεύματός) and *flesh* (σάρξ) are intended as the “driving forces” of the two eras. In the old dispensation flesh enslaved man and bound him into doing works typically described by law as sin. In the new dispensation the Spirit renewed man by placing him in a new relationship with God in Christ and leading him in living life according to God’s will. This being said, fruit and works are also in radical opposition to each other, both indicating the nature of the ethics of the two aeons. The ethics associated with the flesh and the present evil age fell in the category of work. It was about human endeavour and the resulting failure or achievement, but *sheer effort* both ways.

On the other hand, the believer’s ethics, being from the dispensation under guidance of and empowerment by the Spirit, was not one of human effort. It was not work. It was not about unleashing human possibilities. In fact, it was the result of being crucified with Christ and allowing Him to live in the believer (Gal 2:20). It was about being dead to the world and regarding the world to be dead also (Gal 6:14). It was about an ethic born from the pneumatologically induced intimacy between the believer and the Father (Gal 4:6). It was about being a new creation by God’s grace and the Spirit who works miracles (Gal 3:5). It was the result, the fruition of the believer’s walk with the Spirit, the latter endowing him with a new character from which a new ethic would be born (Dockery 1993, 317; Hansen 1999, 210-211). There was something effortless in it, something natural and typical that could not be described as human achievement, but rather as pneumatological enablement (Loubser 2005, 631).

Paul wishes to stress that in those who have been received into the body of Christ, in whom the Spirit of Christ is active and who have a share in the gifts of this living fellowship, the outworking—the fruit—appears naturally, because it is not something manufactured (Hensel 1975, 723).

This is not to disparage the believer’s active participation and his need to make ethical decisions involving obedience and responsibility. It is all about the Spirit enabling believers to produce these qualities and associated deeds for which they do not have the inherent capacity. The Christian’s life is

about surrendering to God's work in Christ which He does in us through the Spirit of the Son.<sup>1</sup>

For Paul the Galatians' possible reversion to law was tantamount to choosing to live without the Spirit after having begun their road of faith with Him (Gal 3:3)—utter foolishness (Gal 3:13). Wisdom was to have life through the Spirit and to live it according to Him!

### 3. Wisdom as a Life of Cruciform Love

Galatians abounds with references to Christian life and ethics as cruciform. Gal 2:20 is one of the profoundest in this regard:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

The very basis of Christian life is that it is founded on and drenched in the love of Christ as illustrated on the Cross. It is not only about Him and his Cross as foundation of the believer's new life, but equally about partaking in Christ's life and cross. If salvation flows forth from Christ's loving-service and sacrifice, the ethic emanating from it must equally portray that attitude (Loubser 2006, 634-635). It is about faith working through love (πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη—Gal 5:6); about finding oneself in the disposition of faith and under the impulse to love others (Houlden 1992, 29). It is the vocation of Christians to live freely, but in such a fashion that they “through love serve one another (διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις—Gal 5:13).

To this Paul adds the metaphors of being *baptised into* and *putting on* Christ (Gal 3:27). One need not go into the issue of sacramental theology as it is done by Schlier (1971, 173f) and refuted by Betz (1979, 187-188). The issue is that the Christian, through faith in Christ, so fully identifies with Him as if he had been immersed into Christ or had been clad with Him—fully becoming one with Christ, taking on a new identity extending from Christ's faithfulness even into crucifixion. This identification should be such that the believer is not only saved (Hays 1983, 248-249), but himself

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1 Bornkamm (1966, 48) stresses the relation between indicative and imperative very well: “...die Dringlichkeit des Imperativs ist erst recht dadurch begründet, dass die Entscheidung gefallen ist: wir sind von der Sünde befreit ... Was die Glaubenden zu tun haben, ist sehr schlicht und einfach das *πιστάειν*, das Sich selbst .. Gott überlassen”.



becomes faithful in partaking in new creation, even though it involves the crucifixion of his flesh (Gal 5:24) and even persecution (Gal 6:12,17).

Christ's victory in the topical sequence has won freedom for humanity, but this freedom is neither an end in itself nor the end of the story: it is the necessary precondition which enables those who are redeemed to complete the story by carrying out their mandate, by becoming active subjects who fulfil God's original purpose by loving one another (Hays 1983, 238).

The Christian identity has to reflect Christ in some way and self-giving should be evident (Longenecker 2003, 66; Carter 1997, 63)—something in which the promoters of the Galatians' foolishness were totally lacking. They were promoting themselves and their flesh (Longenecker 2003, 69-70).

Paul adds that he is in extreme pain, hoping that Christ will take form in them (Gal 4:19). As a mother in labour looks forward to see who the child resembles, so Paul is in pain and hope that the Galatians will reflect a clear resemblance to Christ. As Christ's faithfulness was driven by his love, so the believer's faith should also be faithful to Christ and driven by love (Gal 5:6).

At this point Paul's words in Gal 6:2 are relevant: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ". How should we understand ὁ νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ? It would be "foolish" to regard νόμος in this context as referring to some ethical form. Christ did not provide his followers with a new set of rules. He did, however, go to great lengths to teach them to love God above all and their neighbour as themselves (Matt 22:37-39). Paul reiterates this in Gal 5:14.

The whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

This has become the main ethical standard of Christianity. It cannot be viewed as a law, though, because love ceases to be when it has to be enforced and regulated by law (Deidun 1981, 118). The very essence of love is that it directs one rather spontaneously away from oneself and one's needs to that of others. Paul's remark subsequent to his list of virtues: "Against such there is no law" (Gal 5:23), actually stresses the fact that Christian morality is not about regulation by law, but rather about living an ethically responsible life without law requirements (Betz 1979, 289). It is all about *doing* good as a result of obeying the Spirit and loving as Christ did.

This being said, it is interesting to note how this notion emanates from the fruit of the Spirit. The latter starts off with what is widely regarded as the

actual fruit of the Spirit, i.e. love (ἀγάπη), and then portrays the multiple forms it takes on in daily living. At the very least one could argue that the other virtues take their cue from love (Dunn 1993, 309). Interestingly, it ends with ἐγκράτεια, which is often translated with *self-control*. However, even though Paul adds this virtue to his list of Christian forms of love, he does have a uniquely Christian content in mind. For him ἐγκράτεια is not about the Greek notion of self-control as ultimate virtue (Betz 1979, 288). Rather, it is about the willingness and ability to set one's own needs secondary to those of others (Bredenkamp 2001, 195-198). In terms of the very central notion of freedom in Galatians it is about the willingness to lovingly curb one's freedom if it imposes on the freedom of another. Betz is correct that ἐγκράτεια is in juxtaposition to ἀγάπη (1979, 288). Paul, so to speak, wraps his list of virtues in ἀγάπη and ἐγκράτεια. It is about loving-service. In other words, the way Paul structures the list of virtues, beginning with love and ending with self-sacrifice, rings very well with Gal 6:2. Christ's *love* for mankind *required* of Him to bear its burden of living in the present evil age even to the point of *sacrificing his life*.

A believer is and acts wisely, not by living a morally good life according to the set rules of the community, albeit Christian, but by living a cruciform life emanating from an allegiance with Christ and his love.

#### **4. Wisdom as a Communal Ethic of Accountability to God**

Love and loving-service having been dealt with above, and being in essence very much about community, only a few remarks on ethical behaviour as a communal responsibility in accountability to God will suffice.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is very carefully structured (Loubser 2004, 187). It would therefore be very strange if he were to simply dump a few ethical maxims at its closing. I am convinced Gal 6:1-10 is an integral part of the entire letter (Matera 1988, 79-91) and that this section itself is well thought-through and well-structured (Loubser 2004, 304).

The section is chiasmically enclosed by introductory (Gal 5:25-26) and concluding exhortations (Gal 6:9-10) that are markedly different from those in between (Gal 6:1-8). *Firstly*, Paul makes abundant use of the first person plural in the verbs and participles. Secondly, they are less gnomic and express what is typically Christian, like: living by and walking in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25); the household of faith (Gal 6:10); and typically Christian allusions to the *parousia*, like κομῶς and reaping. *Thirdly*, the

chiasmus is enhanced by the introductory exhortations stating the expected conduct positively (Gal 5:25), followed by the banning of certain negative attitudes and deeds amongst them (Gal 5:26). The opposite is done in the concluding exhortations (Gal 6:9-10), the negative, not to grow weary of well-doing and not to lose heart (Gal 6:9), stated first and followed by the positive exhortation to do good (Gal 6:10).

Gal 5:25 Εἰ ζῶμεν πνεύματι, πνεύματι καὶ στοιχῶμεν.

#### Horizontal responsibility

- 6:1a Ἀδελφοί, ἐὰν καὶ προλημφθῆ ἄνθρωπος ἐν τινι παραπτώματι, ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοὶ καταρτίζετε τὸν τοιοῦτον ἐν πνεύματι πραύτητος,  
 6:1b σκοπῶν σεαυτὸν μὴ καὶ σὺ πειρασθῆς.  
 2 Ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε καὶ οὕτως ἀναπληρώσετε τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ.  
 3 εἰ γὰρ δοκεῖ τις εἶναι τι μηδὲν ὄν, φρεναπατᾷ ἑαυτόν.  
 4 τὸ δὲ ἔργον ἑαυτοῦ δοκιμαζέτω ἕκαστος, καὶ τότε εἰς ἑαυτὸν μόνον τὸ καύχημα ἔξει καὶ οὐκ εἰς τὸν ἕτερον.  
 5 ἕκαστος γὰρ τὸ ἴδιον φορτίον βαστάσει.  
 6 Κοινωνεῖτω δὲ ὁ κατηχούμενος τὸν λόγον τῷ κατηχούντι ἐν πᾶσιν ἀγαθοῖς.

Everything between the two markers is more gnomic or aphoristic and can be divided into, *firstly*, Gal 6:1-6, focussing on the *horizontal level* and dealing with the ethical responsibilities of both *individuals* and the *faith community* towards its fellow believers. *Secondly*, Gal 6:7-8, focuses on the *vertical level*, dealing with the believer's relationship with God and his accountability to Him.

**Vertical accountability**

- 7 Μὴ πλανᾶσθε, θεὸς οὐ μὲκτηρίζεται. ὁ γὰρ ἐὰν σπεῖρῃ ἄνθρωπος, τοῦτο καὶ θερίσει·  
 8 ὅτι ὁ σπεῖρων εἰς τὴν σάρκα ἑαυτοῦ ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς θερίσει φθοράν, ὁ δὲ σπεῖρων εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος θερίσει ζῶν αἰώνιον.  
 9 τὸ δὲ καλὸν ποιοῦντες μὴ ἐγκακῶμεν, καιρῷ γὰρ ἰδίῳ θερίσομεν μὴ ἐκλυόμενοι.  
 10 Ἄρα οὖν ὡς καιρὸν ἔχομεν, ἐργαζόμεθα τὸ ἀγαθὸν πρὸς πάντας, μάλιστα δὲ πρὸς τοὺς οἰκειοὺς τῆς πίστεως.

The use of the first person plural in the chiasmus, together with the reference to “the household of faith”, creates intimacy. They were family! It is as if Paul is sitting down with them asking: “Where do we go from here?” They had probably begun to “bite and devour one another” (Gal 5:15), because of the disagreement on circumcision and other Jewish laws, and because it is the usual way of the flesh. Paul would probably not have mentioned these examples of misbehavior and suggested these guidelines if they were totally disconnected to the specific situation. He was addressing their specific situation. His maxims here are all about sound relationships—about love amongst God’s family. He presents us with applied Pauline ethics as argued up to now. He never intended his ethical views to be mere points of philosophical discussion, but to be put to use and practised in daily living in the community of faith. In honesty before God to whom they were ultimately accountable, and for the benefit of their “household of faith” for whom they were individually and corporately responsible, they who were πνευματικοί had to participate in a discussion on how to restore (καταρτίξειν—Gal 6:1) relationships and morals in the Father’s house, just as it would otherwise be required in respect of individuals. It is an ethic of participation in which they were to fall in step with the Spirit as one platoon. Together they would have to discover his lead.

In these discussions they had to be very wary of the fact that they were ultimately accountable to God. He is the final judge and a final reckoning of some kind was certain (Gal 6:7-10) (Hays 1997, 40-41; Fletcher 1982, 206), God is also not one to be mocked (Gal 6:7). Put differently, one should not take Him for a fool (Loubser 2004, 325). Add to this the references to God as Father (Gal 1:1,3,4; 4:2) and the believer as a son of that father (Gal 4:4-

7). As much as this is to the believer's benefit, he should always remember that he is a child in God's household and therefore has an obligation to honour his father (Gal 1:5,24; 6:14) by living according to the family identity and values (Van der Watt 2000, 120, 501-502). Christ, on whose faithfulness believers build their own lives, was faithful precisely in doing the will of the Father, which was the deliverance of the believers (Gal 1:4). There would have been no doubt in the minds of the Galatians on this score. Shame was not to be brought on the Father or his household in any way. This was general wisdom in the ancient Middle East and the Galatians are reminded to remember this in their spiritual lives.

However, within the context of Christian life and living this should not be regarded as a threat. For that Paul's letter, his shock and dismay about them aside, was too pastorally intended. One must remember that these references to accountability to God are not made to people of the present evil age in which failure was rife and damnation almost certain. It is spoken to people who were supposed to no longer be of the age in which flesh dominated. They were part of new creation. They were living in Christ through the indwelling of the Spirit. They were in the fortunate position of being led by the Spirit. By simply obediently walking with Him, they would do the Father proud!

Further, if one of them were to fall prey to sin of some kind, the others, who were *πνευματικοί* were to restore that person in the Father's house in a spirit of gentleness. His burden was their burden (Gal 6:2) and they were to help one another to keep on living wisely before God. Laws on how to deal with sinners is not appropriate in new creation. It is not about damning, but restoring the individual sinner and the entire family with him.

## 5. Wisdom as a Creative and Discerning Ethic

It is interesting that Paul's maxims and list of virtues are not from a specific Christian or OT background. In fact, Paul makes use of the entire range of dictums available from his *Umwelt*—especially Greek ethical wisdom (Malherbe 1998, 230-244). However, one should not be surprised by this, because it is fully in keeping with the essence of his ethics which is totally different from any other. True, he would, as in the case of *ἐγκράτεια*, probably have a defining nuance on the different virtues. Equally, Hellenism did not even vaguely have the same concept for love as Christianity (Quell & Stauffer 1964, 37), but the fact is when it comes to listing the ethical

expectations of different religions and communities, they are very much the same. All right-minded communities admire the virtues of Gal 5:22-23. The same can be said of the maxims in Gal 6:1-10. Obviously, Paul has put a very Christian slant on them, but in their essence they are taken from a pagan society and would be accepted by most.

So what makes Christian, or Pauline, ethics different from pagan ethics? *Firstly*, its foundation is the faithfulness of Christ who delivered believers from the present evil age and their slavery to σάρξ (flesh), the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (elements of the world—Gal 4:3,9) and the embarrassment that νόμος (law) brought over them. *Secondly*, the Spirit operating in their lives enabled them to do that to which He also sensitized them and would be acceptable and good in God's sight. *Thirdly*, their ethical conduct would be aimed at glorifying God and not one of the pagan entities that are by nature not gods (Gal 4:8). *Fourthly*, it would be characterized by self-sacrificing love for other people.

Interestingly, Paul, having to deal with a very volatile situation amongst his spiritual children, does not go into detailed ethical instruction (Lategan 1990, 321). He seems to hold back, leaving them to deal with the situation on the ground as they saw fit, being guided by the Spirit. In contrast to this, when he dealt with the theology underlying Christian ethics (more specifically the soteriology and pneumatology), he did it elaborately. To be sure, he even reserved curse for anyone, himself included, if another gospel were to be proclaimed. There could be no other theology and soteriology, but ethical behavior had to be worked out by those in the situation under the guidance of and in obedience to the Spirit.

It therefore seems, according to the example set by Paul, that Christian communities are called to contextualize their ethics for the situation in which they find themselves. To *do good* (ἐργαζώμεθα τὸ ἀγαθόν) to all people could be interpreted differently in different communities. In the household of faith it would have a very specific Christian slant, but Paul refrains from detail. For this reason it might be wise practice to Christianize maxims of the community in which it is operative in order to do good in that community's perception. However, this cannot be done without discernment (Lategan 1990, 325), which, once again, the Spirit should provide. The point is, too often we impose a certain set way of thinking on morals and simply, uncritically, in turn impose them on society or new Christian communities as if we alone know what good behavior is or is not. Sometimes the critical questions from society challenge us to rethink a specific ethical position in

new times and circumstances. In such cases we should not be too quick to judge or revert by default to former ethical positions as necessarily being above reproach. We should rather rethink our position with discernment and be open to new guidance that we so easily reject as foolishness. In this regard Cousar (1982, 67-68) makes an extremely relevant remark for Christian communities even in our day and age:

It points to a fact which the church in its history has continually rediscovered, namely that the more sinister enemies of the faith are not always the obviously irreligious practices of the world, but often the potent forces of morality and religion which operate within. The latter tend to undermine the gospel by a preoccupation with the particular form an obedient response ought to take. Rigid lines are drawn between those who do and those who do not, with the result that the law becomes a dividing wall.

## **6. Conclusion**

Even though Paul does not deal with wisdom as such in his letter to the Galatians, he does indicate quite clearly what wise ethical behaviour is. It is about partaking in the new creation inaugurated by Christ and his Spirit. Ethical behaviour in the new dispensation is not induced or regulated by law, but by the believer's obedience to the Spirit who leads him from within. It is about emanating a cruciform ethic of sacrificing love and service in faithfulness to Christ, whose own faithfulness provided believers with deliverance from his former bondage to flesh and law. It is an ethic of living responsibly within the community and being ultimately accountable to God, but not necessarily in terms of a unique set of maxims. It is about corporately participating in hearing the Spirit and taking his lead. It is about discerningly and creatively going about putting one's faith into practice by doing good to others while making use of the ethical maxims applicable in that community, *so that God is ultimately honoured*.

Till this day believers are not always in accord on all ethical issues. There are those who hold onto traditional, even legalistic views without a willingness to re-evaluate their positions in changed times with different challenges. They are often very quick to judge those open for discussion as liberal, undiscerning and disobedient to the Spirit, while they too are often undiscerning and have a lack of understanding of the new situation. In fact, they would often expect society at large to live according to their assumed Christian morals, and governments to enforce them. One also finds the

contrary situation where believers are so taken up by the position of love as sole standard of the Spirit, that they neglect the honour of God as well as the context of that specific community of faith. There is also a tendency to view ethics individualistically as if believers do not need each other in finding the Spirit's guidance. In the previous century this was illustrated well and on a very large scale by certain churches in South Africa who justified *apartheid* while most Christian communities rejected it and pleaded with them to retract their position. It was also illustrated in this very century by churches that supported the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq while many churches objected, believing there were other methods to deal with the crisis.

All things being equal, we will do well as communities of faith across the globe to once more take up Paul's letter to the Galatians and learn anew.

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