

**ETHICS IN THE NEW CREATION:
A CELEBRATION OF FREEDOM!
A Perspective from
Paul's Letter to the Galatians.**

by

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Dissertation submitted in part
fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree

DOCTOR DIVINITATIS

in the Department of
New Testament Studies
in the Faculty of Theology of
the University of Pretoria,
South Africa

May, 2004

*In gratitude to my loving, dedicated, most supportive
and lovely wife,*

Heleen,

*who, through loving service, words of wisdom and humour,
remains divinely instrumental in my discovery of
our freedom in Christ.*

*May we stand firm in that freedom,
forever loving, laughing, and hoping!*

*And to my equally loving and supportive children
whom I wish only to love and serve,
my pride and joy:*

Gysbert, Stephan and Lienké.

*May you walk tall and in step with the Spirit,
celebrating your freedom in Christ.*

*May your roads be graced with love, service,
hope, and much humour,
till that glorious Day!*

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ABREVIATIONS

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>Biblical Interpr.</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>Bijdragen</i>	<i>Bijdragen Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
DPL	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i>
EBD	<i>Eerdmans Bible Dictionary</i>
EBT	<i>Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology</i>
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ER	<i>Evangelical Review</i>
ET	<i>English Translation</i>
<i>Exp. Tim.</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HTS	<i>Hervormde Teologiese Studies</i>
IDS	<i>In die Skriflig</i>
IBD	<i>Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>Interp.</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>Jud.</i>	<i>Judaica</i>
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NDT	<i>New Dictionary of Theology</i>
NGKB	<i>Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk Boekhandel</i>
NEB	<i>New English Bible</i>
<i>Neotest.</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>Nov. Test.</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RExp.</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RStR</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TWAT</i>	<i>Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testaments</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>Zygon</i>	<i>Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like the merchant of the parable, one sometimes sets out in search of something valuable and is overwhelmed when discovering it. Other times one is grateful for simply stumbling upon a treasure. I experienced both of these in the past years of reading and reflecting. I set out to investigate Christian freedom, having a “good idea” where the road would lead and ending up somewhere else. I discovered what others already knew – freedom is to live through and to walk in step with the Spirit on the way prepared by Christ, and so to do the will of our God and Father. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that this life is lived anonomistically!

When I took to the road I knew I could only endure with the blessing of my wife, children and colleague, as well as that of our local congregation. I consulted with them, received their blessing, and took to the road. Heleen made peace with my reading and reflecting as early as our honeymoon, when I took along Karl Barth's *Evangelical Theology*. Fortunately she has a keen sense of humour! Strangely, I never came to reading it! As a layperson she has distinguished herself for having a most discerning theological mind. This has been not only to my benefit, but also to that of the communities of faith in which we have served. Her dedication to me, the children, the community of faith and our Lord, are above reproach. My children have done more than their bit in supporting me in my ministry and studies. In fact, they have been an inspiration to me. Continually confronting me with new issues, they have helped me not to stagnate in my theological reflection. Dedicating this labour to them, I wish to honour them for their love and support. Loving them and never wishing to neglect them, I might have – hopefully, only on the odd occasion.

Very special gratitude is due to my trusted friend and colleague, the Reverend WD Jonker. He was supportive far beyond normal collegiality and a fine example of how to love, serve and bear another's burdens in freedom, when oneself has a load to bear. His kindness towards me with all my peculiarities, and his unwavering encouragement, is priceless. He more than often stood in for me in dealing with pastoral matters and helped me up when I was downhearted. Hopefully our extended collegueship will liberally provide me with opportunity to reciprocate with equally loving service and friendship.

The congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church of Boksburg East has endured me and was supportive in many ways, communally and individually. I especially thank you for my regular sabbaticals and times when you granted me privacy and even solitude. I am happy to be back! Hopefully this venture will prove worth our while in the long run.

I cannot express the profundity of the gratitude and respect owing to my *Doktorvater*, Prof. J.G. van der Watt. The vastness of his knowledge and expertise; his availability amid vast responsibilities; his honesty and concern for God's Word; and his humility and warmth, have earned him an honorary position in my life. Without his enthusiasm, encouragement and guidance it would not have been such a fulfilling adventure. He was always unassuming and never

imposing when making suggestions, but compelling with the depth of his expertise and integrity. It has been an exceptional honour to read and reflect under his guidance. I am also indebted to his wife, Shereen, for her hospitality.

I am most privileged and exceptionally grateful for having, what I affectionately term, a *Doktorgrossvater*, Prof. A.B. du Toit. When I started my post-graduate studies at the University of Pretoria 13 years after graduating from the University of Stellenbosch, majoring in dogmatics, he was most supportive in re-introducing me to NT scholarship. After his retirement he made the vastness and depth of his expertise and the warmth of his personality available to me, taking time to read my work with meticulous attention and making most valued suggestions. I also thank him and his wife, Lydia, for their hospitality.

Prof. H.J.B. Combrink, emeritus of the University of Stellenbosch, introduced me to reading the NT 23 years ago. I am often reminded of his respect for the text and its context. I have not forgotten his dedication, expertise, discipline and enthusiasm. I am also reminded of his warmth towards Heleen and me when he served as my spiritual mentor during my time in seminary.

A special word of appreciation is reserved for my colleague and friend of the Saint Michael's Anglican Church in Boksburg, the Reverend, Fr. Tom Amoore, who undertook the arduous task of proofreading, and did it with the utmost diligence. I am grateful for his very constructive suggestions, as well as for his corrections that have spared me much embarrassment. More importantly, he has shown me much to be learnt of Christian humility and service.

My research was made easier by the friendly and helpful assistance of the library staff. In this regard Ms. Thea Heckroodt, herself a walking library, deserves special mention and gratitude. She was always willing to go the extra mile, usually without being asked. I also thank Ms. Elize Henning, administrative secretary of the Department of NT Studies, for always being friendly and encouraging, and providing me with administrative support when needed.

I am privileged for having been raised by loving parents, affording me freedom together with responsibility and accountability. My formative years were filled with their love, encouragement, wisdom and dedication. I enjoyed the freedom of life on our farm. Often I overstepped moral and social boundaries, even causing them anguish. Despite being reprimanded, I never felt unloved! I remember how we often debated various issues – many revolving around the politics of our beloved country and the need for all its children to be free! I thank our Lord for the privilege to complete my formal education for them to see.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

INTRODUCTION

Christianity places a very high premium on its conviction that the believer in Christ is free! Freedom in Christ is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental convictions of Christian faith and central to its proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, there often seems to be a disparity between the confession of this freedom and living it to the full. It seems that Christians are quick to proclaim freedom in a soteriological sense, but often most cautious to celebrate this freedom on an ethical level. Can one honestly be at peace with a conviction stating: “We are free, but please, put it on hold for Christ’s sake!” If we are free in Christ, do we not honour Him precisely by living and celebrating this gift?

All too often communities of faith do not celebrate their freedom, probably because they, quite understandably, do not trust themselves with their freedom and fear succumbing to the flesh once more. Obviously, this in itself is quite understandable. One should not put one’s trust in oneself. But when this distrust is extended to include the Spirit of Christ within us, it is fundamentally wrong. All too often this fear of succumbing to the flesh is dealt with by reverting to some form of prescriptive ethic within which we feel ourselves to be safe – sometimes, tragically, even saved! Sadly, this reveals an underlying distrust that Christ and his Spirit will provide us with true freedom and help us live this freedom to the full.

St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is foundational for the church. It is a landmark document in the Christian library: a trend setting document as it were. It is, as will be argued, almost without a doubt the oldest of St. Paul’s letters and, for that matter, the oldest canonical book of the NT. It was born at the forefront of Christian expansion on the dividing line between being in Christ and being without Him. It was a time in which the newly born Church was wrestling with the question of what to do with its Jewish roots. At one end they were being challenged by Christians converted from paganism, who did not take a Jewish ethos for granted. At the other end there were converts from Judaism who found it difficult to cast off their old Jewish mould, and of whom some even insisted on retaining Torah as an ethical standard. Galatians could be seen as a literary watershed for the young Christian Movement trying to come to grips with the question of what ethos befits those in Christ. The fact that it was written by a born Jew and Roman citizen, who was acknowledged by no less than the “Jerusalem pillars” as the Apostle to the Gentiles, enhances the significance of the letter in defining the Christian ethic of freedom.

Dunn describes it as “one of the fiercest and most polemical writings in the Bible.”¹

Galatians is not an academic treatise drawn up in the calm autumn of a long life, the mature fruit of long debate, with every statement duly weighed and every phrase finely polished. Rather, it comes from the early morning of a vigorous new movement (Chris-

¹ Dunn, 1993, 1.

tianity) when basic principles were first being formulated, and when the whole character of the movement was at stake. In the pages of Galatians, one of the earliest documents of the New Testament, we see, as it were, fundamental features of Christian theology taking shape before our eyes. In no sense is Galatians an ivory tower tract remote from real life, the dispassionate statement of one high above the battle. Rather, it is a cry from the heart of one at the very front of the line of Christian advance, dealing with questions which determine the identity and whole life-style of those to whom he wrote. It is theology engaging with the challenge of competing interpretations of central beliefs and with the crisis of new adherents caught in the crossfire of whom to believe and how to act. It is itself theology under fire, theology in the midst, living theology. There can be no question that the man who wrote this letter was deeply engaged with and totally committed to what he wrote.¹

1. ORIENTATION

Much has been written on the subject of freedom as presented in Paul's letter to the Galatians. One is humbled by the magnitude of the scholarly activity in this field, both in terms of volume and scholarly eminence. The present study bears only small testimony to this large volume of scholarly activity in an ongoing debate. Some have changed the course of the debate irrevocably, while others assisted in fine-tuning the activity. Some did it by posing critical (sometimes even irritating) questions, while others offered helpful suggestions. One is indebted to each one of them. It is no mean task to decide between two or three contrasting arguments posed by equally eminent scholars. When twenty centuries of theological and intellectual mastication has not been able to come to a generally accepted conclusion, it is extremely humbling to try to come to a personal decision on what Paul meant with his statement in Gl 5:1:

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

In view of the letter's fundamental significance for Christian soteriology and ethics, it is a pity that most writings on the subject of freedom in Galatians focus mainly on freedom in terms of freedom from the law, or at least place a heavy emphasis on freedom from law. In other words, they limit the subject of freedom to its relation to law. This pitfall seems to come with the territory. There are probably many reasons for this approach. After all, Paul did not, detached from a historical and polemical setting, set out to write a discourse on Christian freedom *per se*. He was presented with a very specific problem: what was the position of law in the Christian community? This was the vantage point from which Paul had to operate. He was presented with a position where law, or at least a discussion on law, had become prominent in Christian life. Some would argue, Paul had to refute arguments giving prominence to law as an entrance requirement additional to faith in Jesus Christ. Others would reject this notion, emphasising it was all about the role of law with regard to Christian ethics.

¹ Dunn, 1993, 3-4. Refer to Ch. 1 of this dissertation where rhetoric will be discussed.

There are those who, for fear of leaving Christianity without a moral norm or ethical code, replaced the law and its works with a new law, namely the fruit of the Spirit. Others even revive law, by arguing from Paul's seemingly more positive stance on law in Romans and his reference to the *law of Christ* (Gl. 6:2). Obviously, this stance includes re-interpretation of law, with Christians being free from ceremonial, cultic, calendar and dietary laws, but not from moral law. I will argue that this opens the door for moralism and ethical casuistry.

My thesis is that, although setting out to refute a position in which law was prominent, even primary, Paul did his utmost to indicate that Christianity was being eroded at a much deeper and profoundly more fundamental level than that which surfaced in Galatia. The freedom Christ brought about by delivering believers from the present evil age itself was being compromised. In the apocalyptic event of the advent of Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit, God provided a new paradigm for life. A new creation had been inaugurated within which believers in Christ were freed from the dominance and slavery of *flesh*, and enabled to make ethically responsible decisions in accordance with the *Spirit* living in them as individuals and as believing community. The believer was now a *new creation* (Gl 6:15), living and walking in the Spirit (Gl 5:25). He was liberated in order to be a loving servant of his neighbour (Gl 5:13), even to the point of sacrifice and persecution (Gl 6:12).

In other words, there is a much bigger picture to be viewed than merely, or primarily, freedom from law. It is about freedom from the *present evil age* (Gl 1:4) characterised primarily by slavery to *flesh* (Gl. 3:22; 4:21-31; 5:17). *Law* (Gl. 3:24), the *elements of this world* (Gl 4:3,9) and *beings that are by nature no gods* (Gl 4:8) only emphasise man's plight of slavery to the flesh, living under a curse and being threatened by hopelessness (Gl. 3:10-13). Even more fundamental than these results of the liberation in the advent of Christ, is the new foundation from which the believer operates.

The aim of the present study is not to present old bones in a new coffin, but to come to grips with the magnitude of information that has become available over many centuries. Many questions have to be answered. From what were Christians freed, and towards what? Who freed them and in whom do they exercise their freedom? Do Paul's arguments enhance libertinism? Is Paul concerned only with freedom from law in terms of soteriology (legalism) or is he also concerned with freedom from law with regard to ethics (nomism)? What bearing does Paul's concept of new creation (Gl. 6:15) have on his notion of freedom, and vice versa? What is the position and function of the Holy Spirit within this freedom?

2. CIRCUMSCRIBING THE FIELD

In his four main letters Paul has seemingly different nuances on the subject of freedom and the Christian's position with regard to law and life. This fact cannot be ignored and will be taken into consideration at the appropriate time, al-

though it will not be the main business of this study. Reference will be made to these viewpoints in the course of our reflections, but only in as much as it is helpful to get a clearer picture of what Paul intended to convey to the Galatians. After all, if the letter to the Galatians is Paul's first letter, as is argued here, and, for that matter, also the first of the canonical books of the NT, the Galatians would not have had the luxury of comparing different utterances by Paul.

Without diminishing the intricacies of the subject, one must mention the too often experienced disappointment that Galatians is so easily interpreted through the lens of Romans in particular. One wonders why it is hardly ever the other way around. The underlying question is often: how can we accommodate Paul's clear-cut stance on freedom and law in Galatians in our reflections on Romans? Should scholarship not rather place the onus on Romans to explain why it is seemingly more positive with regard to law? Why are perceived differences often explained in such a way that Paul's clear-cut stance in Galatians is softened, even reinterpreted, in a multitude of ways, in order to accommodate Romans? Why is it less obvious to scholars to approach the dilemma from the other side? Enough said! In the current dissertation the Letter to the Galatians is our focal point.

3. APPROACH

It is impossible to focus on freedom in Galatians without involving the whole letter. Besides this being a fundamental exegetical given, Galatians is an extremely well-integrated and complete argument on Christian freedom in a specific context. Seeking to follow Paul's argument to its logical conclusion, this dissertation is divided into three parts.

Part I deals with matters of introduction to the letter, such as its rhetoric, dating¹ and Paul's possible opponents.²

- In *Chapter 1* it will be illustrated how these matters enhance the *urgency* of the letter. Even just considering circumcision or any other form of reversion to law, was no small matter. In this regard Paul's rhetoric carries much weight. Equally important is the date of the letter, as well as the message of his opponents.
- Associated with the rhetoric, is the importance of Paul's *apocalyptic approach* in the letter. The role of apocalyptic must be accounted for. Although much has been done to stress Paul's use of apocalyptic, my impression is that it has not been reflected adequately enough in the debate concerning *freedom* in Galatians. If Paul wrote in apocalyptic fashion, as will be argued, what was his aim? Had he abandoned a salvation-historical approach to theologising with its emphasis on continuity in favour of the

¹ This I regard as important, because an early date enhances the importance of the letter as well as the urgency with which Paul approached the matter.

² Helping to shape the contours of Paul's rhetoric and arguments.

discontinuity of apocalyptic? What are the hermeneutical implications? Paul seems to play to the tune of the advent of Christ having been a very defining point in the history of salvation. Something radically new came about, so that faith and ethics would never be the same again. An apocalyptic deliverance took place. A paradigm-shift occurred. The present evil age was irreversibly invaded by new creation. It will be argued in *Chapter 2* that Paul made use of apocalyptic to reframe the Galatians' mindset. There could be no smooth continuity from one age to the other without both soteriology and ethics being profoundly transformed.

In *Part II* we will investigate the meaning of *present evil age* (Gl. 1:4) and its constitutive elements. It goes without saying that throughout the examination of this subject one will have to take Paul's *symbolic universe* into account. This symbolic universe is not only about apocalyptic. It involves the broad spectrum of theological matters concerning Second Temple Judaism, as well as a vast array of theological, sociological and anthropological elements unique to the ancient Mediterranean people, and without which we cannot dream to be accurate in our assessments.

- As mentioned earlier, my thesis is that the freedom of which Paul speaks is primarily freedom from the domination by *flesh*. For this reason, *Chapter 3* will discuss *flesh* as primary characteristic of the present evil age from which Christ delivered believers.
- *Chapter 4* will reflect how the *elements of the world* (Gl. 4:3, 9) and *law* in its totality emphasise the human plight of slavery to the flesh, and its resulting curse.

In *Part III*, our main section, we move on to clarifying the extremely important so-called parenetical section (Gl. 5:1-6:10) where Paul brings *freedom* into very sharp focus, both in terms of its indicative basis and its imperative intention.

- *Chapter 5* brings us to the heart of the matter, namely Paul's climactic concluding exclamation: **For freedom Christ has set us free!** (Gl. 5:1). Freedom is christologically defined in Galatians. Although *flesh* is in the background in this chapter of the dissertation, it will be dealt with more strongly, and in juxtaposition to Spirit, in Chapter 6. Here the emphasis will be on standing firm in the christologically obtained freedom, by not reverting to law. It will be argued that law as such no longer has a directive role to play in either the Christian's coming to life, or living his life. The believer has been oriented away from law to Christ as the promised seed, the One who rang the death knell for *flesh* and law – the *christological indicative*. There can be no mixing of the two aeons.
- *Chapter 6*, returning to the matter of *flesh*, will deal with the very heart of the Christian ethic. The latter is in no way characterised by a life in the *flesh*. The christological indicative above has brought an end to the dominating slavery of *flesh*. After having explained that law had come to an end, but very aware of the fact that *flesh*, although having lost its dominat-

ing power, was still part of this life, it deals with the implied question of how the Christian ethic should be lived. The present evil age dominated by the flesh had been replaced by the *new creation* characterised by the *Spirit*. In the old order external directives were needed and, in many cases, tragically misused and ineffective. There was no fear that the Christian ethic could in any way be characterised by a new onslaught of the flesh, because of another indicative, namely the advent of the Spirit. The *pneumatological indicative* would not provide Christians with a new set of external directives. The Spirit would live in them, fulfilling the promised solution to the OT plight. He would create in the Christian a new heart. It would be like fruit being produced almost automatically from being in Christ and his Spirit. It will be strongly emphasised that love of the neighbour, as God originally intended, would be the touchstone for determining whether the truth of the gospel had been concretised in the lives of believers. It would be a love leading to sacrificing service to one another. It would be imperative upon Christians to live this newfound life. It will be emphasised that the flip-side of being **free from the present evil age** and all its characteristics, is the Christian's being **free in order to love and serve**.

- This leads to Gl. 5:25-6:10 which will be discussed in *Chapter 7*. The emphasis will be on *accountability* and *responsibility*, and the role of the *community*, as decisive elements of Christian ethics. Paul has no inclination towards a *laissez-faire* ethic. He strongly emphasises the responsibility of the individual believer to “test his own work” (Gl. 6:4) and to remember that he is dealing with God who is not mocked (Gl. 6:7). He lays an equally heavy emphasis on the individual's responsibility for others and especially for those of the household of faith (Gl. 6:10). In the same vein, he places a very heavy emphasis on the community of faith to bear with one another and to bear one another's burdens. Instead of being characterised by the very fleshly attitude of boasting about their deeds (Gl. 6:13), they were to follow the spiritual route of restoring one who had been overtaken by sin (Gl. 6:1).

Finally, taking cognisance of the very relevant criticism of D.J. Smit,¹ we will move on to drawing a few *conclusions*. He argues that dogmaticians, in their systematic labour and endeavours to answer to ethical challenges, are often accused of faulty exegesis by NT scholarship. Because of academic specialisation it is not always possible to pay specialised attention to exegetical matters. For this reason systematic theologians and theologians in other fields have to rely on biblical scholarship to provide them with relevant material. He argues that biblical scholarship does not always provide relevant exegetical and biblical theological material for systematic theologians to use. In this respect

¹ D.J. Smit, 1992, 320-325. One is also reminded of an article by Fuller, 1989, 574-579, in which he stresses the dangers of both N.T. scholarship and exegesis being prescribed to by ecclesiastical considerations, and of exegetes monopolising the task of the dogmatician.

the disciplines will do well to be in dialogue with one another.¹ Obviously one could not endeavour to bridge the exegetical and hermeneutical divide between Paul and theological reflection of the twenty-first century in general. There are too many loci of theology and too many fields of study involved. It is hoped that theologians from fields other than that of NT Studies would find the subject intriguing enough to pursue its application to their own fields of study. I would be overjoyed and humbled if this study could be a small building-block in such endeavours to practical application.

This is a matter of grave importance. Paul had no word of thanksgiving to offer with regard to the great works of God in the lives of the Galatians. Because they considered circumcision, Paul feared that they were jeopardising their freedom in Christ. He feared that, despite their profound sincerity, they were unwittingly severing themselves from Christ. If Christianity, Christian communities and scholarship across the vast spectrum of theological disciplines fail to persistently deal with the matter of how to celebrate their freedom in Christ in every new situation and time, they run the risk of plucking the heart out of our faith.

It is humbly hoped that this dissertation will assist communities of faith, vastly expanded since the time of Paul's writing to the Galatians, and equally more variegated, to grasp the enormity of our freedom in Christ and embrace it with appreciation, joy and enthusiasm, and celebrate it as they walk in step with the Spirit (Gl. 5:25).

If we are to take Paul seriously, however sincerely our convictions and deeds are meant, if we do not live the freedom that we confess to have in Christ, we revert into the bondage of the old age, severing ourselves from Christ, or something dangerously close to it!

¹ Fuller, 1989, 577. Scroggs, 1988, 29-30, stresses that the text remains primary in bridging the gap between past and present and that there may not be any "genuflection to dogmatic theology."