



# The Epistle to the Galatians

*Ronald Y.K. Fung*

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## **The Epistle to the Galatians** Ronald Y.K. Fung

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## **The Epistle to the Galatians Details**

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## **Zak Metz says**

I know not everyone reads commentaries cover-to-cover, but I do. I just completed a close study of Galatians, with this commentary coming on the tail end of that. While there's a lot of repetition, it's impossible to come away from the volume with any question about what Paul is saying about justification by faith, the adoption to sonship, reception of the Spirit, and the beginning of a new life...which God has effected in Christ." Worth the price: The breakdown of the fruit of the spirit with deep dives into each word.

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## **Spencer says**

Not a bad commentary. I used it for teaching through Galatians. It is more on the technical side and a bit dry.

Commentaries like this have a tendency to fail to see the "forest through the trees." It offers a lot of precise exegesis, but fails to ask, "So what does this mean for the church today?" I realize that that was really not what the commentary set out to do, but if Scripture is the book of the church, commentary must be done with preaching and discipleship in mind.

I found his insights on the nature of law, obedience, and gospel to be somewhat encumbered by his Reformed assumptions. He has not particularly taken even some of the most basic conclusions of the New Perspective on Paul to heart. It simple does not look like Paul has a problem with obedience to God's law as a prerequisite for salvation.

The questions are thus: What kind of obedience to what kind of law for what kind of salvation? Paul has a problem with "works righteousness" but it does not seems like Paul has any problem saying baptism is a necessary action to know one is saved (6:7-8). It was not, as Reformed theology states, that circumcision was the "ceremonial law" that is null and void, since baptism has its root in ceremonial washing (i.e. mikveh washing rituals in Lev. 15:13) and communion has its root in sacrificial rituals also. From his confrontation with Peter, we see that Paul actual has no problem with Jewish believers still practicing circumcision (2:7), but has a bit problem in making it a rite for non-jews. It seem like "works righteousness" is not obedience to the law for knowledge of salvation, but rather arrogant, self-justifying confidence in one's own righteousness that the conservative Jewish believers had. These conservative Jewish Christians tried to oppress the new Gentile Christians, making them second-rate disciples unless they underwent circumcision. Circumcision became status quo and oppressive.

Paul, using an Christo-centric "Love Hermeneutic" (5:14) concluded by a revelation (2:2) that circumcision, even through it was an "eternal law" according to Genesis, was no longer functioning as something loving or conducive to bringing all people to Christ. It is not that Paul has something against rituals or laws, but rather he has a critical lens (Christ's example and interpretive summary of the law) for interpreting and apply the law in a new context. If a law is not loving, function to bring people to Christ, than the letter must be transgressed for the sake of the spirit (2 Cor. 3:6: Jesus did so regarding divorce, oaths, sabbath law, purity law, and even, more radically, his claims as a human to be one with God). Why is Paul justified abolishing circumcision? He is merely following Jesus' example. How can non-circumcised believers know they are apart of God's people without undergoing the rite? Their inclusion into the people of God and into knowledge of salvation is based on their trust in Jesus's work and teaching (which has to be obeyed as an act

of trust), thus, justification by faith. Some have pointed out that there is a kind of "justification by love" theme in the fruit of the Spirit (5:22), even though it is not worded that way. Paul offers the works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit as criteria of discernment for understanding whether love is virtuous and life giving or vice-ridden and destructive: if it produces fruit "there is no law against such things" (5:23).

This view of the law-gospel relationship, I think take a stronger view of the OT law. God's law, as E. P. Sanders has shown, was not understood as cumbersome, but fundamentally a new possibility of grace: "Do not murder" was essentially a call to a life better than murder. The OT covenant does factor in the fact of radical failure of God's people to live their obligations and so Christ is merely an extension of how the Law and Prophets understand themselves: "I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it" (Mat. 5:17).

I should point out that, as a baptist, this relationship between the law and gospel, grace and obedience is actually nothing new. The New Perspective is actually not all that different from the Anabaptist thinkers that saw obedience as part of the grace to take up new life in Christ. The law in Hans Denck was interpreted through Christ's law of love, so the Anabaptists, by their close reading of the literal text, actually concluded things way before the historians did.

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