

Galatians: Exegesis of chapter 5, verses 2-12

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Bible Version

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Galatians 5:2-12 (ESV):

² *Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.*

³ *I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*

⁴ *You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*

⁵ *For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*

⁶ *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*

⁷ *You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?*

⁸ *This persuasion is not from him who calls you.*

⁹ *A little leaven leavens the whole lump.*

¹⁰ *I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.*

¹¹ *But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?*

In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

¹² *I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!*

Introduction

The apostle Paul penned his epistle to the Galatian churches (1:1-2) in response to a serious crisis.¹

The very gospel of Christ — which they had first heard from the mouth of Paul himself — was being perverted (1:7-8). There were some in the churches — Paul refers to them as “those who unsettle you” (5:12) — who were attempting to impose upon the Gentile members Jewish rituals such as circumcision. Paul’s concern for the members stemmed from the fact that he himself had been instrumental in their conversion. He sought to renew their focus on the one true gospel — on God’s grace in Christ received solely by faith.

Note: In this essay I will refer to those who were unsettling the Galatian churches as “the agitators”.

This term accurately conveys the intent of the Greek verb translated “unsettle” by the ESV.

See comments on Galatians 5:12. (Some other possible appellations: “churners”, “stirrers”, “fomenters”.)

¹ Galatians, like other NT epistles, was an “occasional” letter written to address a unique situation. See William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson), p. 427.

Historical Context

The Galatian churches consisted predominantly of Gentiles who had turned to God from paganism (4:8).

Paul's ministry in Galatia was apparently unplanned, the result of an illness (4:13).

Responding to the gospel with great joy, the Galatians had honored its messenger as well (4:14-15).²

For a while the new Christians were making good progress (5:7). Then the agitators arrived!

They sought to win over the members, alienating them from Paul and his message (4:17).

Who were these agitators and what did they teach? Were they members of the local congregations or intruders from outside? Most commentators believe they were Jewish intruders. Williams notes: "Paul always refers to [the agitators] in the third person (1:7; 3:1; 5:7, 12; 6:12-13) but to the Galatians in the second person (e.g., 1:6, 11; 3:1; 4:8-11, 12-20; 5:2)."³ Did they originate from Jerusalem itself, claiming apostolic backing, like the "men from James" at Antioch (2:12)?⁴ At the very least they were claiming to present "the unfalsified Jerusalem gospel, which bore the stamp of the 'real' apostles" in opposition to Paul's "secondhand gospel" (Vanderwaal).⁵ That they challenged Paul's right to proclaim God's acceptance of Gentiles apart from circumcision is suggested by his counter-emphasis on the divine origin of his apostolic call and message (1:1, 11, 15). The Jerusalem leaders had themselves acknowledged both (2:3-9).⁶ The agitators' promotion of circumcision was itself an attempt to avoid persecution (6:12), no doubt from fellow Jews.

The evangelization of the south Galatian towns — Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe — is related in Acts 13 – 14. This, the first of Paul's "Missionary Journeys", is usually dated to ca. 47 AD.⁷

It's likely that Paul wrote his Galatian epistle from Syrian Antioch soon after his first Journey but prior to the Jerusalem Council of ca. 49 AD — otherwise he would likely have defended himself with the Council's decisions (Acts 15:24ff.). While that means that Paul wrote only a year or two after their initial evangelization, we note from 1:6 his astonishment at how quickly the Galatians had defected from his message.

² This despite the fact that Paul's illness was for them a "trial" (4:14). Sam K. Williams in *Galatians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, General Editor Victor Paul Furnish (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 120, comments: "Paul's 'weakness of the flesh' was so offensive that contempt and rejection would have been very understandable reactions on the part of the Galatians."

³ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 25.

⁴ F.F. Bruce in *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), p. 31, comments: "The simplest interpretation of Galatians, on the basis of its internal evidence, agrees remarkably with the statement in Acts xv. 1 that, some time after the extension of the gospel to Asia Minor ... 'certain persons who had come down from Judaea began to teach the brotherhood that those who were not circumcised in accordance with Mosaic practice could not be saved.' If such persons also visited Antioch's daughter-churches in Galatia with this same teaching ... the stage would be set for the Epistle to the Galatians."

⁵ Cornelis Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures*, Volume 9: 1 Corinthians-Philemon (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1979), p. 47.

⁶ By accepting Paul's uncircumcised companion (Titus), the Jerusalem leaders showed their implicit acceptance of all Gentiles (2:3). Moreover they "added nothing" to Paul's message but rather acknowledged his apostolic call, offering him the "right hand of fellowship" (2:6-9).

⁷ Concerning the Galatians' identity, Bruce in *Galatians*, pp. 5-18, and Donald Guthrie in *Galatians*, The New Century Bible Commentaries, General Editors Ronald Clements and Matthew Black (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1973), pp. 16-27, provide helpful evaluations of the so-called "North Galatian" and "South Galatian" hypotheses. The southern hypothesis seems preferable, since we know from Acts 13 – 14 that this region was evangelized early. Moreover, in the epistle Paul assumes that his readers are familiar with Barnabas (2:1, 9, 13), who was his mission partner on his First Missionary Journey.

Literary Context

Williams regards the preceding verse (5:1) — Paul’s command to “stand firm” in the freedom that Christ gives — as the very center of Galatians.⁸ Such freedom, an essential component of the “truth of the gospel” (2:4-5), is the main concern of the foregoing Sarah-Hagar allegory (4:21-31).

Therefore, 5:1 may be seen as either the conclusion to Paul’s allegory, or the start of a new section.

Paul, having defended the authenticity of his gospel of grace (chaps. 1 – 2) and examined the Old Testament (OT) witness to that gospel (chaps. 3 – 4), now moves on to address their present predicament — their need to stand firm and resist the agitators (5:1-12).

Paul’s subsequent ethical focus in 5:13 – 6:10 (living by the Spirit, not indulging the flesh, doing good to all, etc.) represents an outworking of 5:6, “faith working through love.” Freedom in Christ (5:1) must not be abused; rather, believers must serve one another in love (5:13). If Paul’s earlier concern was with one’s (vertical) relationship with God (justification), his later concern is to show how genuine faith issues (horizontally) in love for others.⁹

Overview

Williams notes:

[Paul in 5:2-12] reinforces his plea [not to revert to their former slavery] in two ways: first he appeals to his hearers’ own spiritual self-interest (vv. 1-6), and then he takes a final slap at the agitators An unusual concentration of sentences without conjunctions or transitional particles marks verses 7-10. Nevertheless, the assertions and questions that make up this section are not disjointed.¹⁰

5:7-12 emphasize the need to deal with the agitators. Paul ends on a note of sarcastic humor that barely conceals his anger towards the agitators (cf. 1:8-9).

Exegesis

5:2: *Ide egō Paulos legō hymin* — literally, “Look, I, Paul say to you.” The public reading of this would serve to forcefully “intrude Paul’s presence into the gathered congregations.”¹¹ Bruce’s suggestion, that Paul may be appealing on the basis of their past friendship rather than his apostolic authority,¹² seems unlikely given the serious warnings that follow.¹³

Paul now explicitly mentions circumcision, indicating that it had been part of the “package” that the agitators had been pushing all along. (Galatians 2:12 and 4:10 suggest that Jewish dietary laws and religious festivals were also involved.)

⁸ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 132.

⁹ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 143.

¹⁰ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 135.

¹¹ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 136. Paul was present “in spirit” (cf. 1Cor 5:3-4; Col 2:5). Paul’s epistles, like letters generally, served as a substitute for his own presence with those being addressed.

¹² Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 229.

¹³ Earlier, in 4:12-19, Paul had indeed appealed to the members on that basis.

Paul's present tense here implies that his readers have not yet succumbed to the rite¹⁴ — *ean peritemnēsthe*, 2nd person plural, present middle subjunctive from *peritemnō*, to circumcise, with the middle voice being permissive¹⁵ — “if you allow yourselves to be circumcised.”

Paul states (in this, his first “self-interest” appeal) that, for those undergoing circumcision, *Christos hymas ouden ōphelēsei* — literally, “Christ you nothing will profit.” You will derive no benefit at all from Christ!

5:3: *martyromai de palin* — literally, “And I testify again.” A few manuscripts omit *palin*,¹⁶ but its inclusion merely “repeats and reinforces the warning of [5:2].”¹⁷

Paul now individualizes his warning: *panti anthrōpō(i) peritemnomenō(i)* — literally, “to every man who lets himself be circumcised” — again present tense and middle voice (permissive).

Williams notes Paul's “solemn legal-sounding language” and comments:

... the present tense of participle (“who lets himself be circumcised”) and verb (“is”) make the apostle present as if the rite were being performed, and there he issues this stern warning whose purpose is precisely to prevent that from actually happening.¹⁸

Williams further comments that, whereas 5:2 shows what would be lost by being circumcised (the “profit” or “benefit” of freedom in Christ), 5:3 shows what would be gained — an obligation (or debt) to obey the entire law! Moreover, the magnitude of this exchange is subtly reinforced by the similar sound, in Greek, between *opheiletēs* (“a debtor”) and the *ōphelēsei* (“will profit/benefit”) of 5:2.

5:4: *You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.* *katērgēthēte* (“You are severed”) is from *katargeō* (Strong's G2673), “to inactivate, abolish, sever”. *tēs charitos exepesate* — literally, “the grace you fell from.”

What is Paul's logic here?

How was submitting to circumcision an attempt at justification by law?

How was it a fall from grace?

Why was there a concomitant requirement to obey the entire law (5:3-4)?

The Greek word translated “grace” (*charis*, Strong's G5485) carries a number of meanings but for Paul it usually denotes “God's unmerited favor”. Grace and works are antithetical principles (Romans 11:6).

Thus, God's grace (favor) is shown to the undeserving — as exemplified in Paul the persecutor (1:15).

The total lack of human contribution is seen in the way Paul elsewhere links grace with predestination:

[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace [charis] which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

(2 Timothy 1:9, my translation, based on the KJV; cf. Romans 9:11-12.)

¹⁴ Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina series, Volume 9, General Editor Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 181.

¹⁵ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*. Volume 2: Romans-Revelation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), p. 168.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 228; Matera, *Galatians*, p. 181.

¹⁷ Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 229.

¹⁸ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 136.

God's ability to show grace is tied to the atoning work of Christ — without Christ, grace would be impossible. To choose justification by law-works is to therefore reject God's grace in Christ. Such self-righteousness evidently characterized first-century Judaism (Romans 10:3):

For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness [in Christ].

It seems that, like the Judaizers in Antioch (Acts 15:1), the Galatian agitators regarded circumcision as necessary for salvation — though perhaps to complete the work of Christ rather than replace it.¹⁹

From their reading of the Old Testament, they saw the law's rituals as demarcating Israel as the privileged and holy people of God in contradistinction to "Gentile sinners" (2:15). Circumcision served as the badge and guarantee of God's favor. Food laws prevented table-fellowship with Gentiles — with clean and unclean foods symbolizing the contrasting status of Jews and Gentiles (Leviticus 20:24-26; Amos 7:17; Acts 10:12-15, 28).

Likewise, Sabbath observance functioned to demarcate Israel as God's holy people (Exodus 31:13).

But the law also permitted Gentiles to be incorporated into Israel via circumcision (Exodus 12:48).

The imposition of circumcision was indeed an attempt to make Gentile converts "holy" and justified.²⁰

The agitators' focus on ceremonial rules shows they were in essence Pharisees who neglected God's moral laws (cf. Matthew 23:23-26; Mark 7:3-4; Luke 18:17). But, as Paul notes (5:3), commitment to the principle of works-righteousness requires obedience to the entire law — moral stipulations included — and such an approach, doomed to failure, places one under God's curse (3:10).

This is as good a place as any to discuss the so-called "New Perspective on Paul", popularized in the lectures and writings of N.T. Wright and James Dunn.²¹ Building on the work of earlier scholars, Wright and Dunn claim that Protestant theologians have misunderstood Paul — that Paul's opposition to "works of the law" for justification (in Galatians 2:16, etc.) relates not to moral works, but only to certain outward Jewish "identity markers". Supposedly Paul wasn't concerned with how sinners are declared right before God, but only with the standing of Gentiles within the covenant community; he wasn't objecting to moral works *per se* for justification, but only to ceremonial works such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance that promoted Jewish exclusivism.²²

The New Perspective's problem is that it uncritically interprets "law" in Paul's writings not as he himself intended, but in terms of his Galatian opponents' focus and understanding. The Galatian context is emphasized at the expense of Paul's overall theology.

¹⁹ Bruce, in *Galatians*, p. 160, suggests the agitators probably at least understood that the law's sacrificial rituals had been rendered obsolete by Christ's death.

²⁰ Relevant to this discussion is the way Peter, at the Jerusalem Council, explained how God had "cleansed" the Gentiles through faith (Acts 15:9).

²¹ See N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997). See also James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Manchester on 4 November 1982: <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html>.

²² Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have largely been supportive of the New Perspective because it aligns closely with their understanding of Paul. In agreement with the New Perspective, Catholic scholar Frank Matera maintains that "works of the law" in Galatians 2:16 "refers primarily to circumcision, dietary regulations, and Sabbath observance In my view Paul was not arguing against legalists who required righteousness by works so much as he sought to integrate Gentiles and Jews by pointing to the Christ event as the fulfillment of God's promises." Matera, *Galatians*, p. ix.

But Paul's view of God's law is much broader than the narrow focus of the Galatian agitators. Hence his rejoinder (in 5:3) concerning their obligation to obey the entire law.

Likewise, in 3:10-11, he contrasts justification by faith with obedience to "all things written in the Book of the Law." Moral law is included, and it is no doubt also intended in 5:14, 5:18, 5:23 and 6:2.

Throughout his epistles Paul consistently contrasts "works" with faith and grace and God's call.

Justification by faith is God's answer to mankind's universal sin problem (Romans 3:21-24).

Such faith — a resting in, or reliance upon, God's promise of forgiveness in Christ — is the very antithesis of works (Romans 4:4-6).²³

5:5: *For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.*

elpida dikaiosynēs apekdechometha — literally, "[the] hope of righteousness we eagerly await" — has eschatological significance (cf. Paul's use of *apekdechomai* in Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 3:20). That hoped-for righteousness that Paul and the faithful Galatians ("we") look for is "God's verdict of acquittal at the last judgment."²⁴

Such hope isn't vague or uncertain,²⁵ but is fostered by the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:23).

Stott comments, "We do not *work* for [future salvation]; we *wait* for it by faith."²⁶

5:6: Circumcision, though important under the law to demarcate God's people, is irrelevant for the diverse groups united "in Christ" (cf. 3:28). What matters is *pistis di' agapēs energoumenē* — literally, "faith through love operating." *energoumenē* is the present participle, middle voice from *energeō* (Strong's G1754).

The verb means "to be active, be mighty in, work effectually in" — perhaps a modern equivalent would be "to energize". The middle voice gives the sense of "faith that expresses itself through love." Passive voice would alter the meaning to "faith energized (produced) by love."²⁷ Paul had earlier employed this verb in connection with God's work (2:8, 3:5), and it's used in James 5:16 of prayer that accomplishes much (see LEB, MEV, NASB). As Lightfoot comments, "These words [*di' agapēs energoumenē*] bridge over the gulf which seems to separate the language of St Paul and St James. Both [see faith as] a principle of practical energy, as opposed to a barren, inactive theory."²⁸ Love is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit (5:22), by which believers fulfill God's law (5:14; 6:2). Note, also, Paul's triad here of faith, hope and love (5:5-6).

5:7-8: Paul now introduces an athletic metaphor: *Etrechete kalōs* — literally, "You were running well."

He had employed the same metaphor in connection with his own missionary activity (2:2), but here it's related to the Christian life looking to the final reward (cf. 5:5).

Paul follows with a rhetorical question: *tis hymas enekopsen* — literally, "who interrupted/hindered you?"

What's being hindered is obedience to *tē(i) alētheia(i)*, "the truth"²⁹ — the truth of the gospel (2:5, 14).

²³ For more detailed critiques of the New Perspective, see the following:

John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A response to N.T. Wright* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008);

Peter Barnes, *Galatians*, Evangelical Press Study Commentaries (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), pp. 18-35.

See also my article on this website: *The New Perspective on Paul*.

²⁴ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 137. *Dikaiosunē* can be both "hoped-for" (as in 5:5) and a "present state of being right with God" (cf. 3:6).

²⁵ Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 232.

²⁶ John R.W. Stott, *Only One Way. The Message of Galatians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), p. 134.

²⁷ Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 232.

²⁸ J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London and Cambridge: MacMillan and Co., Second Edition, 1866), p. 201.

²⁹ Some important manuscripts omit the definite article.

The Greek word for “obey” (*peithesthai*) derives from *peithō*, “to persuade” (Strong’s G3982). Here in the passive voice it could denote: “to be persuaded, listen to, obey, yield to, comply with, rely on, trust”. Note the word-play in 5:8: the subtle “persuasion” (*peismonē*, also from *peithō*) leading them astray comes not from God who calls them (cf. 1:6), but from the agitators.

5:9: Paul evidently now quotes a proverb:³⁰

Just as a little leaven influences a large batch of dough, so also the agitators’ teaching, if left unchecked, will permeate and radically alter the churches.

Paul employs the identical metaphor in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 in connection with the need to expel an immoral brother. Here, also, it’s a call to deal with the agitators.

5:10a: Paul expresses confidence “in the Lord” (i.e., owing to their common allegiance to Christ)³¹ that they will eventually agree with him on the need to expel the agitators.

(He had already hinted at such in 4:30: “Cast out the slave woman and her son ...”)

5:10b: *ho de tarassōn hymas bastasei to krima, hostis ean ē(i)* — literally, “but the [one] troubling you shall bear the judgment, whoever he may be.” The singular (*ho de tarassōn* and *hostis ean ē(i)*) is to be taken as a generic singular (cf. the plural *tarassontes* in 1:7) rather than as a reference to any particular ring-leader: Anyone who troubles them will bear his (individual) judgment.

“Judgment” might refer to God’s final judgment³² (cf. Paul’s pronouncements of *anathema* in 1:8-9), or, more likely, to their expulsion from the churches.³³

5:11: *But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.*

Paul’s statements here are somewhat enigmatic. What is his meaning?

Paul addresses the members of the gathered congregations as *adelphoi* — from *adelphos* (Strong’s G80), “brother”. “Brothers” evokes a sense of belonging to a common family.

The agitators evidently alleged that Paul himself “still” (*eti*)³⁴ sometimes preached circumcision.

But Paul shows the absurdity of their claim — ongoing persecution from militant Jews proved just the opposite! *ti eti diōkomai* — literally, “why still am I being persecuted.” *diōkomai* is present passive indicative, 1st person singular, from *diōkō* (Strong’s G1377), “to pursue, hunt down, persecute”.

Paul’s persecution stemmed from his message of “the cross” being offensive — a scandal or stumbling block (*skandalon*) — to the Jews (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23).

His proclamation of salvation-for-all through Christ’s death (3:1) — through faith and apart from circumcision — implied that Israel’s privilege as God’s chosen people had been terminated.

Nothing provoked Jewish hostility more than the notion that Gentiles were received by God on an equal basis!

³⁰ Some Bible versions (e.g., NIV) accordingly enclose 5:9 with quote marks.

³¹ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 140.

³² Matera, *Galatians*, p. 184.

³³ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 140.

³⁴ Some manuscripts omit this first *eti* for stylistic reasons owing to its proximity to the apodosis *eti* (Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 236).

Had Paul's message included circumcision ("in that case", *ara* — literally "then" [Strong's G686], a particle denoting an inference), with the implication of continuing Jewish privilege, the gospel's offensiveness (for Jews) would have been "removed" (*katērgētai*, from *katargeō*, "to abolish", etc.; cf. the verb's use in 5:4). The agitators themselves imposed circumcision so as to avoid being "persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12), but Paul's scars (6:17) marked him out as a preacher of the authentic (offensive) gospel!

5:12: *Ophelon kai apokopsontai* — literally, "I wish also will cut off themselves."

Ophelon is "a fixed form functioning as a particle to introduce unobtainable wishes."³⁵

But with the future indicative *apokopsontai*, from *apokoptō* (Strong's G609), "to cut off, amputate", it becomes an obtainable wish. Paul has in mind a "botched circumcision" where the knife slips to sever the whole penis! (Castration is not intended.)³⁶

Ironically, the law would exclude such a person from Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1).

Paul hopes his readers "might realize the absurdity of holding that one cut of the knife can incorporate a person into the people of God while another can exclude him."³⁷

The objects of Paul's anger and frustration are *hoi anastatountes hymas*.

Present participle, active voice of the verb *anastatoō* (Strong's G387) — literally, "those who are unsettling you."

The verb properly means to turn something over (up → down).

Thus it denotes "to turn upside down" (Acts 17:6), "stir up" (Acts 21:38), "unsettle" (Gal 5:12), "to upset, disturb, trouble". Here the disturbance is that of the mind — a result of religious error.

The term "agitators" that I have employed throughout this essay captures the meaning of the verb quite well.

Contemporary Application

Paul's letter shows the need to uphold and proclaim the authentic gospel, focusing on God's grace in Christ received by faith. Freedom from works-based justification liberates us to love God and serve others.

Indeed, true faith "energizes" such action. So also does God's indwelling Spirit.

Accordingly, all forms of legalism are to be strenuously resisted.

For example, some traditions require Sabbath-keeping, tithing, or tongues-speaking.

Some require particular views about baptism or creation or eschatology.

Contemporary examples might be the imposition of a particular Bible version, or of gender-inclusive language.

But all of these are distractions from what is important.

³⁵ Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, p. 170.

³⁶ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 142.

³⁷ Williams, *Galatians*, p. 143.

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