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**“Welcome One Another”: The Sociological Implications of Paul’s Justification by Faith
Doctrine in His Letter to the Romans**

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Introduction

Many scholars since the launch of the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century have emphasized the soteriological dimension of Paul's "doctrine of justification by faith." The focus of Paul's theology, for many, has been reduced to providing believers in Jesus personal assurance that they will be in heaven. A careful reading of Paul in his historical and literary context¹ shows, however, that there are ecclesiological and sociological implications to Paul's "justification by faith" teaching that have often been ignored.² This paper will argue that *Paul's concern for the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in the network of house churches in Rome, expressed in Romans 14:1 to 15:12, is closely intertwined with his teaching that "all" people are "justified by faith without the works of the law."*

The first section will review (in the book of Acts) the ongoing criticism Paul faced by fellow Jewish believers due to his open-door policy for Gentiles to join God's people. Much of Paul's letter writing to multi-ethnic churches (in Galatia, Rome, Ephesus, etc.) seems to have been necessitated by the challenges that threatened unity among Jewish and Gentile believers. Consequently, the enormous task of bringing together people of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds with their many cultural and religious differences forms the backdrop for Paul's theology of "justification by faith without the works of the law."

¹ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo point out that "Paul's own thought world was decisively formed by his Jewish upbringing.... Paul's basic concepts are drawn...from the Old Testament, and he had learned the Old Testament in the context of the Judaism of his day." They observe that Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther placed "their Catholic opponents in the guise of the Jews of Paul's day," while not fully understanding "what the Judaism of Paul's day looked like," which is "quite significant for any accurate interpretation of Paul and his teaching." Carson, D. A., and Moo, Douglas. J. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2005), 375.

² N.T. Wright, for example, argues that "Ecclesiology—Paul's main concern in Galatians—is not an alternative to soteriology. It is its public display." Wright, N. T. *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 116.

Next, this paper will examine Paul's statement to Peter, that "a man is not *justified* by the works of the law but by *faith* in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:15-21, New King James Version), in the context of the Antioch incident in which Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers (Gal 2:11-14). It will also demonstrate that in Ephesians Paul's teaching on salvation "by grace" "through faith" (Eph 2:8) is made in the context of his concern for full Gentile inclusion into the "commonwealth of Israel" (Eph 2:11-19).

Paul's concern for full Gentile inclusion, and its connection to "justification" or "salvation" by faith, seems to be present in his letter to the Romans, as well. This paper will thus review the historical context and purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans, followed by an analysis of the flow of his theological exposition leading up to Romans 14, and how his belief that "no distinction" exists between Jew and Gentile is undergirding his presentation of the gospel in this letter.

This paper will conclude with an analysis of Paul's exhortation in Romans 14:1 to 15:12 and demonstrate that his goal here is unity despite the cultural diversity that will remain between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. Paul is driving home the point that the only badge that matters for full membership in God's family is "faith [*pistis*] in Jesus."³ Thus, "welcome one another" (Rom 15:7) despite the differences that may exist among you (Rom 14:1-5).

³ When Paul uses the word *pistis* in reference to what a Gentile needs in order to be incorporated into Abraham's family, he's not talking about merely a mental assent to an abstract theological idea. He's specifically referring to trust in the God of Abraham (Eph 1:12-14), whose Messiah Jesus "gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age" (Gal 1:3).

Historical Background of Paul's Letters

The New Testament writings are essential for the formulation of Christian theology. Of the twenty-seven books, thirteen⁴ were written by Paul as letters to churches or individuals with whom he was acquainted. While it is tempting to look at Paul as a systematic theologian, especially in Romans, his letters were never written as an abstract discussion about God. Not one of Paul's letters was written as a theological treatise detached from an actual situation taking place locally. Paul was not writing as a systematic theologian, nor was he theorizing abstractly. He was writing theologically but in very concrete situations. The same is true regarding his teaching on justification by faith, mentioned most prominently in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans.

As missiologist Gordon Doss has observed, "The NT writers did theology in response to concrete issues they faced in missions." They were not biblical scholars producing "theological works in isolation." On the contrary, "Paul and the others wrote in an 'emergency situation' that grew out of missionary encounters with the world that 'forced them to theologize.' The cross-cultural mission engagement that brought converted former pagans into the church alongside Jewish believers made the profound theology of Romans, and Galatians, and the other books a necessity."⁵ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo likewise point out that "Paul wrote his letters to deal with specific issues."⁶ Michael J. Gorman concurs when he observes that Romans is "occasional," and that "its occasional and its systematic character are logically interconnected."⁷

⁴ If Hebrews was written by Paul, the number would be fourteen. The author of this paper accepts the traditional view that Paul was the author of Ephesians and various other disputed letters.

⁵ Doss, Gordon R. *Introduction to Adventist Mission*. (Silver Spring, MD: Institute of World Mission, 2018), 15.

⁶ Carson, D. A., and Moo, Douglas. J. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2005), 360.

⁷ Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 396.

Peter, Cornelius, and the Circumcision Party

The number of disciples multiplied remarkably in the years following Jesus' ascension (Acts 6:1). The early church experienced remarkable growth in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the surrounding regions of modern-day Palestine (Acts 1-8). This movement was largely made up of Jews (physical descendants of Abraham), including many from the Diaspora (cf Acts 2:5-11; 6:1). In Acts 9, Luke records the encounter Saul of Tarsus had with the resurrected Jesus, and his subsequent call to become "a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles" (vs 15).

In Acts 10-11, we read about the significant conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who was baptized along with his "relatives and close friends" (Acts 10:24). Peter was chosen by God to speak to Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile, about Jesus. The result was "the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word" (vs 44), which resulted in all of them being baptized (vs 48).

Because Peter had table fellowship with Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman centurion, he came under scrutiny by a group called "those of the circumcision" (Acts 11:3). In response, Peter simply reasoned that if the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his family the same way he had been given to the early disciples of Jesus after his ascension, who was he to remain separate from the very ones God was affirming. Peter's answer seems to have satisfied "those of the circumcision," but as the story of Acts progresses, it is evident that concern over table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentile believers does not go away.

Paul's Remarkable Missionary Success

Paul was invited to labor in the city of Antioch after having spent several years in his native city of Tarsus after his conversion (cf Acts 9:30). The story is recorded in Acts 11:19-26. The word about Jesus was preached after the stoning of Stephen “as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch,” but up until this point, with the exception of the conversion of Cornelius and the Ethiopian who was baptized by Phillip (Acts 8:26-40), the movement of Jesus’ followers was still made up of mostly ethnic Jews (Acts 11:19), with the exception of a few proselytes (Gentiles who had fully converted to Judaism prior to becoming a follower of Jesus). This changed when certain followers of Jesus “from Cyprus and Cyrene” came to Antioch and began preaching to Gentiles with success. This resulted in “a great number” among the Gentiles in Antioch believing and turning to the Lord (Acts 11:20-21).

Much like the reception of the news of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, the “news of these things [the formation of a multi-cultural community of Jesus-followers in Antioch] came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem” (vs 22). That this must have raised concern is evident from the fact that Barnabas was sent to Antioch to see what was happening. When Barnabas arrived, “he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord” (vs 23). God blessed the ministry of Barnabas, and “a great many people were added to the Lord” (vs 24).

“After some time, Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (vs 25-26). Though Paul became known as God’s chosen messenger to the Gentiles, success in preaching the message of Jesus among non-Jews began with Peter in Caesarea and in Antioch

before Paul's arrival. It seems that Paul, like Barnabas, saw the work of the Spirit among non-Jews in Antioch, and became fully convinced (if he hadn't already been) that God had justified (accepted) them because of their faith (trust) in Jesus.

Beginning in Acts 13, Luke begins to record Barnabas and Paul's remarkably successful mission to proclaim the gospel outside the boundaries of Judea, Samaria, Syria, etc. Many communities of disciples of Jesus were formed through their preaching in Asia Minor (modern-day Southern Turkey). Their success is astounding because a message about a crucified Messiah would have been offensive to Jews and laughable to non-Jews. Yet, many Diaspora Jews and Gentiles embraced the gospel and consequently became a part of various multi-ethnic house churches spread in various regions of the Roman Empire. Congregations were organized on the island of Cyprus, the cities of Lystra, Iconium, Derbe, Perga, and Antioch of Pisidia (cf Acts 14:21-28).

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, "they reported [to the church in Syrian Antioch] all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). Once again, news reached Jerusalem, resulting in the greatest theological conflict experienced thus far by the early church.

Opposition From the Circumcision Party and the Jerusalem Council

Paul's ministry to the Gentiles generated controversy among many of his fellow Jewish believers in Jerusalem because he did not require his Gentile male converts to adopt circumcision

(Acts 15:1).⁸ He seems to have developed among many believers in Jerusalem a reputation for being hostile to Torah (Acts 21:20-21), though Paul never saw himself as hostile to Moses or the Prophets (Acts 24:14). He was, however, strongly opposed to the idea that non-Jews had to adopt certain Jewish customs (become full Jewish proselytes) in order to become members of Abraham's family (cf Gal 2:1-5).

Luke records that "some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up" against Paul, and began insisting, contrary to Paul's open-door policy for Gentiles who were accepting Jesus and joining the church, that it was "necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

Because Paul was determined to continue receiving Gentile believers into communities of believers he was raising up, the church in Antioch "determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question" (Acts 15:2). This meeting that took place in Jerusalem has in hindsight been referred to as the Jerusalem council.

The question debated at the Jerusalem council seems to have been what constitutes the badge (visible evidence) that demonstrates that a person has been accepted into God's people. Peter reasoned based on his experience with Cornelius, reminding those present that "God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them (Cornelius and his house) by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by *faith*" (Acts 15:8-9). For Peter, the visible sign that demonstrates who belongs to God's people is

⁸ The actual words of the "circumcisers" in Acts 15:1 are, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be *saved*." This paper assumes the position, articulated by Andrew Remington Rillera, that the Greek word *sq̃zō*, translated here "saved," is referring to a "socio-political reality." For example, Rillera correlates the "socio-political content" of Ephesians 2:11-22, where Gentile believers in Jesus become "fellow citizens" with Jewish believers in God's people, with the *soteriological* content of Ephesians 2:1-10. (Rillera, Andrew Remington. "Tertium Genus or Dyadic Unity? Investigating Sociopolitical Salvation in Ephesians." *Biblical Research* 66. Chicago Society of Biblical Research 2021), 38.

the reception of the Holy Spirit, and not strict observance of every command in the Torah, and certainly not circumcision for male converts.

Peter stated that no Jew has been able to perfectly observe every command of the Torah. Thus, why should we place a yoke on the neck of these new Gentile believers that “neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (Acts 15:10-11).

James also spoke in favor of Paul’s open-door policy, concluding that “we should not trouble [by requiring circumcision as a badge of membership] those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:18). So the Jerusalem council seems to have decided in Paul’s favor, thus vindicating his form of ministry among the Gentiles. He continued to raise new communities of believers in Messiah Jesus that were multi-ethnic (Jew and Gentile).

Paul also found himself constantly engaged in a ministry of letter-writing to congregations previously created to strengthen the faith of believers and also to resolve theological and interpersonal challenges among them. Many of the theological challenges had to do with the very question of Gentile inclusion. It appears that many of the “circumcisers” of Acts 15, not satisfied with the results of the council, were trying to improve upon Paul’s teachings to his Gentile converts. This seems to be the backdrop of his letter to the Galatians, for example. Before getting to his letters, a look at Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem shows that the issue still did not go away, even after the Jerusalem council.

Paul's Last Visit to Jerusalem

In Acts 21 Luke records Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. According to Luke, "the brethren [James and the elders] received us gladly" (vs 17). Paul reported what God accomplished through his work in Macedonia, Greece and Asia Minor, (vs 19), and they "glorified the Lord" (vs 20). It seems Paul was still enjoying the same support and favor with leaders in Jerusalem that he had after the Jerusalem council. However, many still viewed Paul and his work as hostile to Torah. James and the elders shared with Paul their concern, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs" (vs 20-21).

Of course, these allegations about Paul are false. There is no evidence in Acts or Paul's letters that he ever encouraged believing Jews to abandon their religious and cultural practices rooted in Torah. The only thing he was guilty of was not imposing strict Torah observance on his Gentile converts. With this James and the elders made clear they agreed (vs. 25). F.F. Bruce points out that "if a Jewish father, after he became a follower of Jesus, wished to have his son circumcised in accordance with ancestral custom, Paul had no objection."⁹

It's not clear from Acts, however, whether James and the elders believed in the validity of the rumors about Paul undermining Torah observance among Jewish believers. Whatever the case, they asked him to prove the rumors were false by paying the expenses of four young Jews who had undertaken a Nazarite vow, and associate himself with them when they discharged their

⁹ Bruce, F. F. *The Book of the Acts, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 405–406.

vow in the temple. Bruce explains that for Paul to participate, he “would have to be purified: he had just returned from a long residence in Gentile lands, and the ritual defilement which inevitably attached to him on that account had to be removed before he could take part in such a solemn ceremony.”¹⁰

Paul’s willingness to comply reveals that he was not guilty of the charge, though it is not clear from Luke’s account if the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to go through with the suggestion of James and the elders. What is evident from the ensuing events is that the whole thing resulted in disaster for Paul and thwarted his original plans to visit Rome and evangelize Spain. In the latter chapters of Acts Luke records Paul’s imprisonment in Jerusalem and subsequent trip to Rome as a prisoner. With that background in mind, now to two of Paul’s letters.

Gentile Inclusion Into Abraham’s Family in Galatians and Ephesians

The following section of this paper proposes that Paul’s statements about justification by faith in Galatians and salvation by grace through faith in Ephesians are to be understood in their literary and historical contexts. Special attention will be given to the Antioch incident recorded in Galatians 2 in which Paul reproved Peter for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentile believers. Paul’s first mention of “justification by faith” in Galatians, which is believed to be one of his earliest (if not the earliest) canonical letters, is made in his response to Peter.

¹⁰ Ibid., 406

Galatians

The Greek word *dikaioō* (often translated as “justified”) is used mostly by Paul in the New Testament.¹¹ It appears fifteen times in Romans, eight times in Galatians, once in 1 Corinthians, once in 1 Timothy, and once in Titus. It is evident that the expression “justified by faith apart from the works of the law” is unique to Paul, and is employed in only two of his thirteen letters. The idea is repeated in other letters, but with different words and metaphors (see below on Ephesians).

So what is the idea that Paul intended to communicate in his letter to the Galatians and Romans? To answer this question, it is necessary to keep in mind the broader historical context of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles (see above) and the immediate situation of his letters to the Galatians and Romans. In what context did Paul say in Galatians, for example, that “a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). Who was he addressing, and what situation called for this statement?

The Incident in Antioch

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he mentions an incident that took place in Antioch that led to him confronting Peter in front of several believers (Gal 2:11). He explains that “before certain men came from James, [Peter] would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision” (vs 12).

Before receiving the vision of the sheet of unclean animals and the subsequent encounter with Cornelius and his family (Acts 10), Peter felt restricted by Torah from having table fellowship with non-Jews. His words to Cornelius provide a window into the thinking of many

¹¹ *Dikaioō* appears 39 times in the New Testament, 27 times in Paul’s letters.

Jewish disciples of Jesus, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation” (Acts 10:28). Peter learned through that whole ordeal not only that he should no longer regard non-Jews as being “unclean,” but that “God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:34-35).

Based on his words at the Jerusalem council about God “giving them the Holy Spirit” (Acts 15:8) and “purifying their hearts by faith” (vs 10), Peter seems to have been freed from Torah-induced restrictions regarding table fellowship with Gentiles. However, according to Paul, apparently for pragmatic reasons, Peter “withdrew.” Peter’s reasons must not have been theological. He had not changed his mind and wavered on his conviction that God has cleansed Gentile believers on the basis of their faith rather than on their obedience to certain Torah regulations. However, those whom Peter was trying to appease, perhaps the very ones who were trying to pressure Titus to adopt circumcision (Gal 2:1-5), were driven theologically. For these “circumcisers,” uncircumcised believers like Titus and other Gentile Christians of Antioch did not belong at the same table with believing Jews (cf Acts 11:1-3).

This theological confusion about who belongs at the table is what drives Paul to write his letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:6-9; 6:11-13), and it is what called for his passionate reaction to Peter.¹² It is in Paul’s theological statement to Peter that we find his “not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” statement. The question Paul is seeking to settle in this incident with Peter at Antioch, according to N.T. Wright, is: “Did ex-pagan Messiah-believers have to get circumcised to belong to God’s people, or not? And, if the answer is no, why were

¹² N.T. Wright explains why Peter’s behavior would have been so problematic for Paul: “If Jewish believers then withdraw and eat separately from gentile believers, the message to the gentile believers is obvious: You belong in an outer circle, rather like the Court of the Gentiles in the Jerusalem temple. If you want to come into the heart of things, you need to become Jewish.” Wright, *N.T. Galatians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 114

some Jewish Messiah-believers, including Peter in Antioch, no longer eating with gentile Messiah-believers?¹³ Wright points out that the issue Paul is addressing in Galatians 2:15-21 is, “Who are Abraham’s true children? And the answer is, Not those who are circumcised, but all those who share *pistis* [in Jesus].”¹⁴

“Gentile Sinners”

Paul describes his disapproval of Peter’s withdrawal from the table (Gal 2:11-14a) and then proceeds to tell the Galatians what he said to Peter, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?” (Galatians 2:14b). N.T. Wright explains that Peter, “by separating from gentile fellow believers, is effectively telling them that they need to become fully Jewish.”¹⁵ But considering Peter’s previous experience with Cornelius and his eating with Gentile believers in Antioch, it appears he had abandoned the normal Jewish restrictions and was thus not observing Torah strictly. Peter’s action, though motivated by a desire to appease and maintain peace with this Jerusalem circumcision party, therefore made no sense and was massively counterproductive in terms of promoting unity and peace in Antioch.

Paul continues addressing Peter, “We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we [Jews] have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law; for by works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal 2:15-16). Before

¹³ Wright, N.T. *Galatians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 120.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wright, N.T. *Galatians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 114.

addressing “justification by faith” in this statement to Peter, we need to understand Paul’s use of the words “sinners of the Gentiles.”

When Paul uses the expression “sinners of the Gentiles” in Galatians 2:15, he is most likely speaking in a way that would have been familiar to a Jew living in the first century. A helpful source to understand this phrase in its first-century context is a key Pharisaic text of Paul’s day, the Psalms of Solomon. These writings provide a window into how Jews would use the expression “sinners of the Gentiles.” In the Psalms of Solomon, Jews see themselves as *dikaioi*, “righteous,” and their opponents, whether pagan or renegade Jews, are *hamartōloi*, “sinners.”

For example, Psalms of Solomon 1:1-2 say, “I cried to the Lord when I was afflicted completely, to God when *sinners* [*hamartōloi*] made an attempt against me. Suddenly a cry of war was heard before me. He will hear me, because I was full of *righteousness* [*dikaiosynes*].”

The historical context of this Psalm of Solomon text is the Roman invasion of Judea in 63 BC. The Psalm continues, “Bless God, you who fear the Lord, in understanding because the mercy of the Lord is on those who fear him, with judgment, to separate between *the righteous* and *the sinner*, to repay *sinners* forever according to their works, and to have pity on *the righteous* one because of humiliation by *the sinner*, and to repay *the sinner* because of the things he did to *the righteous one*” (Psalm of Solomon 2:37-39).

Psalm of Solomon 3:1–8 is a description of the humble piety of the *dikaioi*; 3:9–12 is about the multiple sins and ultimate destruction of the *hamartōlos*. As can be observed from the above, Paul lived in a world divided into camps of “the righteous [*dikaioi*]” and “the sinners

[*hamartōlos*].” This historical understanding of these terms is important for understanding Paul’s “justification [declared *dikaioi*] by faith [*pistis*] statements in Galatians.

Paul believed that the only badge that makes one worthy of being a part of God’s family and thus one of the *dikaioi* (righteous ones) is this thing he refers to as *pistis*. This idea would have been difficult for a faithful Second Temple Jew to digest, even one who was a follower of Jesus, because to be part of the *dikaioi* would have been associated with circumcision and other Jewish boundary markers associated with Torah observance. This is why Peter would have had such a difficult time fellowshipping with Cornelius had not God given him a vision.

As can be seen from Moses’ writings, the canonical Psalms¹⁶, and many other sources in Second Temple Judaism, the people of the world, for a Jewish thinker, would have been divided into two categories: (1) the righteous and (2) the sinners. For some, this could simply boil down to the (1) Jew (righteous) and (2) Gentile (sinners; cf Gal 2:15) categories. But of course, it was more complex than this.

Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax collector, may have been a legitimate descendant of Abraham, but he wouldn’t have been regarded by many Jews as part of the “righteous.” Even John the Baptist warned against assuming that being a physical descendant of Abraham automatically made one righteous (Matt 3:9). Jesus also challenged the notion that being “Abraham’s descendant automatically made one righteous (Jn 8:32-41). But what marker does determine who is legitimately part of the *dikaioi* (righteous)? Paul’s answer would be *pistis* (faith) in Jesus.

¹⁶ In Psalm 1:106, the “ungodly” and “sinners” are contrasted with “the way of the righteous [*šaddiq*]. The Hebrew *šaddiq* is translated *dikaioi* (righteous ones) in the LXX. In Psalm 125:1-3, the righteous (*šaddiq*) are those who trust in Yahweh. These contrasted with “the workers of iniquity.” In Exodus 23:7 *šaddiq* is used in contrast to people who are *rāšā’*, often translated “wicked.” The words *šaddiq* (righteous) *rāšā’* (wicked) and are also contrasted in Abraham’s dialogue with God about Sodom (Gen 18:23-28).

N.T. Wright points out that “when Paul constructs an argument whose key terms are *pistis* [faith] and *dikaiosynē* [righteousness] and their cognates, we should *expect* that he is not talking about how people acquire a meritorious legal status before God so that they can go to heaven after all, but is talking about the formation and maintenance of a community in which, through the forging of quite new social relationships, the sociopolitical landscape is changed.”¹⁷ This way of interpreting “justification by faith” seems to correspond well with the immediate literary context of Galatians, as well as with the broader context of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles with all of the controversy that his manner of labor generated among certain Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

“Abraham’s Seed”

When Paul comes to a climax in his exposition of “justification by faith” in Galatians 3, he states that “you are all sons of God through faith [*pistis*] in Christ Jesus” (vs 27). Notice that the criteria for joining God’s family is *pistis*, rather than the “works of the law.” Paul has been arguing in this chapter that Abraham himself was “justified [declared righteous] because of his faith, and not because he was circumcised or observed any other Torah regulation. “Therefore, Paul had said earlier, “only those who are of faith [*pistis*] are sons of Abraham” (vs 7). In Galatians 3:26, Paul is saying the same thing, only he says “sons of God. Then he continues, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all [Jews and Gentiles] are one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed [sons of Abraham, sons of God, welcome at the table, etc.], and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

¹⁷ Wright, N.T. *Galatians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 125.

It's important to note based on the flow of the argument in Galatians 2 and 3, that Paul's ultimate goal is not to teach the Galatians how to get to heaven, though he alludes to eternal life when he says those who believe in Jesus are "heirs according to the promise," and when he says that those who walk in the Spirit "inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:21). But what is continually repeated in Paul's letter, and stated clearly here at the end of Galatians 3 in a climactic point in his theological exposition, is that those [Jew or Gentile] who have *pistis* in Jesus are "Abraham's seed. The badge or test for membership in God's people (Abraham's family, "the Israel of God"; cf Gal 6:16), in other words, rather than circumcision or some other ethnic, religious or cultural Jewish marker, is *pistis*."

Ephesians

The Greek word *dikaioō*, mostly translated as "justified" in the New Testament, does not appear in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.¹⁸ In Ephesians, we find Paul's familiar statement on salvation, "For by grace you have been saved [*σῴζομαι*] through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8-9). What did Paul mean when he used the word *σῴζομαι*, and who was he addressing? The proposal will be made below that in Ephesians 2, Paul is arguing for full Gentile inclusion in God's people without "circumcision made in the flesh by hands [works]" (vs 11). The climax of his exposition on salvation by grace through faith rather than by works is found in Ephesians 2:19, where he says, "Now, therefore, you [Gentile believers] are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens [because of

¹⁸ The Greek word *dikaioō* appears twenty-seven times in Paul's letters (translated "justified" twenty-four times in the English Standard Version). It appears fifteen times in Romans, eight times in Galatians, once in 1 Corinthians, once in 1 Timothy, and once in Titus.

God's grace, not because you were physically circumcised] with the saints and members of the household of God."

Made Alive By Grace

In Ephesians 1, Paul is addressing Gentile believers in Jesus. When he speaks of "we who first trusted in Christ" (vs 12), he is speaking of believing Jews. Then, in the very next verse, he says, "In Him you [Gentile believers] also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation [*sōtēria*]" (vs 13). These Gentiles, Paul continues, after trusting in Jesus and embracing the good news of his salvation, were "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." Being "saved [by grace] through faith" seems to be another way of saying that these Gentile (as well as Jewish) believers were "sealed with the Holy Spirit." This seal is "the guarantee of our inheritance" (vs 14), but is not the inheritance itself.

In Ephesians 2 Paul continues speaking of the salvation (deliverance) of these Gentiles by saying that "you [Gentiles] He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (vs 1). They used to walk "according to the course of this world" (vs 2), but now they have been delivered, saved, made alive. The reason they no longer live "as the rest of the Gentiles...in the futility of their mind" (Eph 4:17) is because they have been "sealed with the Holy Spirit." Salvation for Paul in Ephesians has more to do with being delivered from a past life of sin and integrated into the commonwealth of Israel than with actually receiving eternal life ("our inheritance"). Salvation and being "made alive" in Ephesians 2, according to Andrew Rillera, are also "sociopolitical realities concerning the peace between two specific formerly estranged groups now reconciled in a dyadic union."¹⁹

¹⁹ Rillera, Andrew Remington. "Tertium Genus or Dyadic Unity? Investigating Sociopolitical Salvation in Ephesians." (*Biblical Research* 66. Chicago Society of Biblical Research, 2021), 39.

Paul makes a powerful point that is often overlooked. After referring to these believing Gentiles in the pre-saved experience as “sons of disobedience,” he declares that “we [Jews who have believed] all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (vs 3). This sounds a lot like Romans 1 and 2, where Paul speaks of the moral failures of Gentiles and Jews. Paul, both in Romans and Ephesians, is placing “all,” Gentiles and Jews, in the same broken condition (cf. Rom 3:23). His goal is to say that “[Jews also] were dead in trespasses,” and so God, “who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which he loved us” (vs 4), has “raised us up together [Jews and Gentiles]” (vs 6). Then comes Paul’s “by grace you have been saved through faith” statement, followed by a “therefore.”

One New Humanity

“Therefore [since you, Gentiles, have been delivered, or made alive, by grace] remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time [when you were dead] you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now [that you have been saved] in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:11-13). Notice that for Paul, being “saved” results in these Gentile believers being “brought near.” To what? To the “commonwealth of Israel,” to which they were once “strangers” and “aliens.”

This coming together of believing Jews and Gentiles into one family is what Paul refers to as “one new humanity out of the two” (Eph 2:15, New International Version), which is possible because Jesus broke down “the middle wall of separation” through his death (vs 14).

Paul is driving home the point that “both [Jew and Gentile believers] have access by one Spirit to the Father” (vs 18). Then comes the punch line: “Now, therefore, you [Gentile believers] are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

No Longer Strangers

Paul’s message of salvation by grace through faith has brought encouragement and peace to many believers through the centuries, especially for those who have been taught (wrongly) to believe that their moral behavior can earn God’s love. But if the focus remains on individual standing with God and eternal life, Paul’s intent is misunderstood. Ephesians 2 should be interpreted in the light of the larger context of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles and his ongoing debate with the “circumcisers” who insisted that uncircumcised believers did not fully belong to God’s people.

Paul’s message is that those who have “trusted” in Jesus after hearing “the word of truth” have been “sealed with the Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13-14) and are thus “no longer strangers and foreigners” (2:19). This was the very issue being addressed at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), which, based on Paul’s experience during his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21), did not go away after the council. This is the very issue Paul confronts Peter about in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). This is most likely what caused concern in Jerusalem over what was happening in Antioch, which resulted in Barnabas being sent to check things out (Acts 11:22). This is what Peter was questioned about after his ministry to Cornelius and his family (Acts 11:1-3). Notice how Peter’s answer, “If therefore God gave them the same gift [the Holy Spirit] as He gave us when we

believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17), resembles Paul’s statements about God justifying Gentiles on the basis of their faith in Galatians.

For Paul, those who have been sealed by God’s Spirit, who are no longer dead in trespasses and sins, are no longer strangers, even if they have not fully adopted certain Torah-prescribed practices like circumcision.

Exposition of Romans 14:1 to 15:13

Many commentaries on the book of Romans treat the latter chapters (9-15) as if this section was detached from Paul’s theological exposition on “justification by faith.” At best, most commentaries see them as practical applications of “justification by faith,” or pastoral “exhortations” unrelated to the “theological treatise” of Romans 1-8.²⁰ The following section of this paper will seek to show that Romans 14:1 to 15:13 is the climatic section of Paul’s theological exposition in this letter. As N.T. Wright observes, “Paul urges an ethnically mixed and potentially fractious network of churches to welcome one another. *At the climax of Romans*, Paul exhorts the churches to ‘Welcome on another, therefore, as the Messiah has welcomed you, to God’s glory (Rom. 15.7).’”²¹

Michael Bird believes that Paul, in his letter to the Romans, “explores how the gospel creates a community of worshipers from Jews and Gentiles who are united in the Messiah.”²²

²⁰ Michael Gorman places a significant emphasis “on the second half of Romans (chi. 9-16, esp. 14-15) for understanding the entire letter” (Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 399.

²¹ Wright, N.T., and Bird, Michael F. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 526.

²² Bird, Michael F. *Romans. The Story of God Bible Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), xvi.

Gorman observes, “If there is Jewish-Gentile conflict in the community, then the profound theology about Jew and Gentile [Romans 1-8] must surely have as one of its primary goals the resolution of that conflict [Romans 14-15].”²³

The following section of this paper will argue that Paul had learned about disputes that were threatening the unity of the network of house churches in Rome over food and days, and confronts the destructive attitudes of both groups toward one another. While there is no question that there is a variety of reasons for Paul writing Romans (a personal introduction, a plea for support for his mission to Spain,²⁴ an appeal for support for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem, a summary of Paul’s teaching, etc.), bringing unity to the Roman churches, composed of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus, is certainly one of his primary goals.²⁵

Historical Situation of the Roman Church

According to N.T. Wright, “There were Jews living in Rome at least as early as the mid-second century BC...”²⁶ Dunn agrees when he observes that “a strong Jewish community had become established in Rome, particularly as a result of the many Jewish captives brought back to

²³ Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 399.

²⁴ Paul states his purpose to visit Rome and to evangelize Spain with the support of the Roman Christians in both the beginning and end of his letter to the Romans (Rom 1:13-15; 15:23-24). Most scholars agree that “one of Paul’s purposes in writing to the Romans was to **prepare for his mission to Spain**. A church-planting enterprise so far from Paul’s home base in Antioch would create all kinds of logistical problems. It would be natural for Paul to try to enlist the help of the vital and centrally located Roman community for this mission” (Moo, D. J. *The Epistle to the Romans. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 17.

²⁵ N.T. Wright and Michael Bird believe “‘Romans was written for several overlapping and converging reasons’ (509). (1) ‘lend practical support to [Paul’s] mission in Spain; (2) ‘draw Jewish and gentile Christians in Rome together’; (3) help them navigate ‘the perils of Roman culture [Rom 12-13]’” (Wright, N.T., and Bird, Michael F. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 509.

²⁶ Wright, N.T., and Bird, Michael F. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 526.

Rome by Pompey in 62 B.C.”²⁷ He adds that “the best estimate of the number of Jews in Rome in the middle of the first century A.D. is about 40,000-50,000, most of them slaves and freedmen.”²⁸ Jews from Rome who were present during Pentecost and accepted Peter’s appeal most likely returned and planted a community of followers of Jesus in cosmopolitan Rome (cf Acts 2:10).²⁹

What happened in Rome in the years prior to Paul’s writing of Romans provides important insight into Paul’s appeals for unity in Romans 14-15. In 49 an edict of Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. The expulsion of Jews (including Jewish followers of Jesus like Aquila and Priscilla, cf Acts 18:1-2) from Rome, and their subsequent return, left the Christian church in Rome as dominantly Gentile. With the lack of Jewish believers for several years, Gentiles constituted a majority in the Roman churches. Upon the death of Claudius and the return of the Jews to Rome, the various house churches in Rome most likely experienced multicultural conflicts.

Michael J. Gorman thinks “one possible key to the letter [to the Romans] may be the likelihood of some friction between the Gentile and Jewish believers in Rome.”³⁰ He argues that the “divergence and resulting tension [that would have existed after Jews returned to Rome] is described by Paul in Rom 14 and 15.”³¹ Moo agrees when he observes that “...the letter as a

²⁷ Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 1-8*, Volume 38A, *Word Biblical Commentary*. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), xlv.

²⁸ Ibid, xlv.

²⁹ “The church in Rome may well owe its origins, at least in part, to Roman Jews who, visiting Palestine for feast like Passover or Pentecost, learned about Jesus and then returned to Rome; and also to traveling tradespeople such as Priscilla and Aquilla [Acts 2:10-11; Rom 16:3]” (Wright, N.T., and Bird, Michael F. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019, 506.)

³⁰ Gorman, p 397

³¹ Gorman 398

whole, focuses on the Gentile Christians, who are becoming arrogant toward the striking minority Jewish Christians.”³²

It seems from Romans 14 and 15 that Paul was aware of the situation among the several multi-ethnic house churches with significantly different viewpoints in Rome. According to Romans 16, Paul was acquainted with a large number of believers in Rome, many of whom were of Gentile background. Paul’s warnings to Gentile believers not to be arrogant in Romans 11:19-25 also provide insight into the possible tensions and Paul’s concern for unity in Rome. Various attitudes among both Jewish and Gentile Christians would have threatened the unity of the Roman followers of Jesus.

The Flow of Paul’s Theological Exposition in Romans

Gorman believes that Paul’s “presentation of his gospel [in Romans] might have been quite different if the churches had consisted only of Gentiles, or only of Jews.”³³ As one reads through Romans, it becomes evident that Paul has on his mind tensions between Jews and Gentiles (Rom 1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9; 3:29; 9:24; 10:12). Notice, for example, Paul’s words after declaring that “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:28). In the very next sentence he states, “Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised by faith” (vs 29-30).

Paul begins the letter by explaining that both Jews and Gentiles have fallen short of God’s glory (Rom 1-2). Consequently, all (including uncircumcised Gentiles) are justified and

³² (406, Moo)

³³ Gorman 398

reconciled to God by his grace and mercy (Rom 3). Paul points to the fact Abraham was justified by God before he was circumcised, thus illustrating that uncircumcised Gentiles may also be included among his children (Rom 4). The fact that Gentiles are not required to adopt circumcision and other Jewish cultural boundary markers does not mean that their lives will not reflect the righteousness that the Torah required (Rom 5-8). Furthermore, Gentile believers included in Abraham's family are cautioned not to be arrogant as many of Abraham's descendants became arrogant (Rom 9-11). And finally, Roman Christians are given practical counsel to help them navigate the perils of Roman culture (Rom 12-13).

The "Weak" and "Strong" in Romans 14:1 to 15:13

Paul begins his appeal for unity by addressing a group he refers to as the "strong" (cf Rom 15:1). To the strong he says to "welcome" "the one who is weak in faith" (Rom 14:1, English Standard Version). The "strong" "believes he may eat all things," while the "weak" eats only vegetables" (vs 2). The "weak" "esteems one day above another" while the "strong" "esteems every day alike" (vs 5). The "strong" should not despise (but "welcome") the "weak," and the "weak" should refrain from judging the "strong." Paul doesn't identify these two groups as Jewish or Gentile, but based on the flow of the letter up to this point, and based on his mention of the two groups towards the end of this section in Romans 15:8-9, it is evident that he has in mind cultural and religious tensions between believing Jews and Gentiles.

As Dunn observes: "For Jews, not least in the diaspora, the boundaries which marked them off in their distinctiveness as the elect people of the one God were most emphatically and

visibly drawn in the daily lifestyle expressed in diet and festivals.”³⁴ Being “weak” in Romans 14 is referring to a lack of assurance that God permits one to do certain things. On the other hand, “It is the characteristic temptation of those who see themselves as ‘strong’ [more mature and secure in their relationship to God] to *despise* those whose they regard was ‘weak.’”³⁵

Thus the most logical conclusion is that Paul is referring to differences over (1) Jewish dietary scruples (food) and (2) observance of Jewish festivals (days). These differences should not lead Gentiles to despise Torah-observant Jews, or Jews to judge non-conforming Gentiles (Rom 14:2-6), because both groups are accountable to God in matters of conscience (14:7-12). The “weak” are mostly ethnic Jews, but may have included, according to Dunn, “Gentiles who had previously been attracted to Judaism (proselytes and God-worshippers),” and the “strong” refers to Gentile converts, but would have “included Jews like Paul himself.”³⁶

It is not within the scope of this paper to identify specifically what Paul meant by “food” and “days.” Fitzmyer explains why some Jewish Christians in Rome might have adopted a vegetarian diet:

Although there was per se no prohibition of eating meat in Judaism of the time, it is known that some Jews abstained from meat and wine, especially those who lived in pagan environments in the diaspora.... The practice among Jewish Christians may stem from the fear of eating meat that was “unclean” (*koinon*) or that had been offered to idols.³⁷

³⁴ Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 9-16*, Volume 38B, *Word Biblical Commentary*. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 797.

³⁵ Ibid, 802.

³⁶ Ibid, 802.

³⁷ Fitzmyer, J. A. *Romans*. Vol. 33, *The Anchor Yale Bible*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 687.

Reading Romans 14, one is given the impression that Paul would have been familiar with circumstances in the network of house churches in Rome. There appears to have been tensions between those who (1) saw themselves as the right ones because they observed distinctive Jewish customs (the “weak”) and (2) those who shared Paul’s understanding that “faith” in Jesus transcended Jewish particularity (“the strong”). Love for fellow believers and the unity of the church should determine how each one behaves in relation to food and days (14:13-23). Following Jesus’ example of unselfish love is the key to unity (15:1-8). The prophets foretold the unity of God’s multi-ethnic people (15:9-13).

“Welcome One Another”

In his theological exposition on justification by faith in Romans, Paul has sought to redefine the boundaries which define God’s people. Faith (*pistis*) in Jesus, and not “works of the law,” is what determines one to be in right standing with God. For this reason, believers are to “welcome” one another and allow each one to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5) regarding differences that threaten the unity of God’s people (Jews and Gentiles in Rome).

Paul is still addressing an issue that appears throughout the early chapters of Romans—the boundary-defining role of the law. He’s stressing that a much greater diversity of opinion and practice can now be envisaged within the people of God because what “justifies [determines one to be in the right in God’s sight]” is not the “works of the law,” but faith (*pistis*) in Jesus. Paul’s critique of the “weak” in Romans 14 for their critical attitude towards Gentile believers and their false trust in their ethnic Jewish identity, expressed in the outward signs of circumcision, Jewish dietary practices, and observances of festivals, has its theological foundations in his earlier statements about justification by faith. It is evident that Paul had the goal of appealing for unity

in the churches of Rome regardless of differences on Torah observance all along as he was emphasizing “justification by faith with the works of the law.”

A believer’s right standing with God (justification) does not depend on adherence to Jewish food laws or the observance of Jewish festivals. Dunn, commenting on Romans 14:5, states: “Here clearly implied is Paul’s firm recognition that Christians will disagree with one another on important issues, and yet each can be convinced of the rightness of his or her position. They can disagree, and *both* be *right* (that is, accepted by God, or justified).”³⁸

Conclusion

Paul envisioned one church in the city of Rome made up of several multi-ethnic house churches. It would have been easier for the church to exist in unity if Christian Jews worshipped together in separate house churches from non-Jewish Christians. Given the complexities of bringing people of different cultures together, whether it be by marriage or church relations, who are of different ethnicities with different assumptions, customs, and worldviews, many have concluded that it is best for God’s mission to operate mono-cultural rather than multi-cultural churches. If that would have been Paul’s solution, he wouldn’t have written Romans 14-15, and the entire letter would probably have been much shorter, perhaps not necessitating his theological exposition on “justification by faith.”

But for Paul, being of one mind did not require mono-cultural house churches. In other words, it wasn't necessary to have one house church that was purely Jewish and another house church that was purely Gentile for unity to exist. Paul believed that there could be unity, even

³⁸ Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 9-16*, Volume 38B, *Word Biblical Commentary*. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 814.

table fellowship, between Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Jesus, who were a part of the same house-church family. This was possible only through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

For this unity to exist in Paul's multi-ethnic house churches, believers in Jesus (both Jew and Gentile) would need to understand how broken the human condition is, and recognize that it is ultimately up to God to judge who is right in his sight.

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