

The

Parting

of the

Gods

Paul and the
Redefinition of Judaism

David A. Brondos

Full Summary

Full Summary

The Parting of the Gods

Paul and the Redefinition of Judaism

David A. Brondos



Comunidad Teológica de México
Ciudad de México

Theological Community of Mexico
Mexico City

2021

Introduction

The horrors of the Holocaust have led many Christians to recognize the urgent need to rethink the traditional Christian portrayals of Judaism as a religion characterized by petty legalism and a doctrine of works-righteousness that denied God's grace. Over the centuries, such caricatures have contributed significantly to the violence committed against the Jewish people by implying that Judaism has now been superseded by Christianity and therefore that Israel is to be replaced by the church.

In recent decades, with the help of their Jewish peers, scholars of the New Testament have not only challenged the traditional reconstructions of Second Temple Jewish faith and thought but have argued convincingly that Jesus and the earliest communities of his followers remained firmly grounded in their Jewish faith and identity and continued to observe the Torah faithfully. Rather than abandoning Judaism, they valued it deeply in the way that they always had. At the same time, however, many of Jesus' followers began to incorporate into their communities non-Jews who came to faith in Christ and to accept them as equals, while at the same time insisting that those non-Jews were to remain uncircumcised and not submit fully to the Jewish law. The claim that these gentiles were equally righteous in God's sight and were to enjoy the same status as Jewish believers within those communities inevitably raised questions regarding the purpose and meaning of Torah-observance among Jesus' Jewish followers, given that such observance supposedly did not affect one's salvation or status in relation to God. That claim, along with the belief that God was now to be defined primarily in light of his relation to Jesus his Son, also made it necessary to rethink many of the other core convictions that Jews had regarding things such as salvation, God's covenant with Israel, the identity of Israel as God's people, and God's intentions for Judaism.

Even though the understanding of the *ekklēsia* as a community that was separate and distinct from the Jewish community at large did not lead to any "parting of the *ways*" between the two communities in the decades immediately following Jesus' death, a "parting of the *Gods*" can be said to have taken place from the moment that Jesus' earliest followers began to proclaim him as risen and exalted Lord and Son of God. This becomes evident when we examine the beliefs and convictions that appear in Paul's epistles, which are the earliest sources we have for reconstructing what took place in the period in which the *ekklēsia* began to take shape. There it is clear that Paul is speaking of a God whom most Jews would not have recognized as the God of Israel, that is, a God who is known must fully through a crucified man who has been raised and exalted to God's right hand, namely, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The argument of the present work is that, if we take the approach just outlined, we can obtain a picture of the self-understanding of Jesus' earliest followers in relation to Judaism that is able to resolve many of the questions raised by recent scholarship on that subject while at the same time avoiding the caricatures and distortions of past scholarship. While there was of course a great deal of continuity between the beliefs and practices of Jesus' first followers and the Jewish matrix out of which those beliefs and practices arose, Paul's letters provide strong evidence for the conclusion that the understanding of God and God's will that existed among Jesus' earliest followers was in important regards fundamentally distinct from anything found in the other expressions of first-century Judaism known to us. Paul and those with whom he worked were well aware that the God whom they were proclaiming was in certain ways *not* simply the same God in whom other Jews believed, yet at the same time they insisted that the God they announced *was* the God of Israel of whom the

Hebrew Scriptures spoke. This is not to say, of course, that they understood the God of Jesus to be distinct from the God of Israel in a literal or ontological sense, but only that they came to view and conceive of the God of Israel in ways that distinguished them from other Jews. While they in no way understood themselves to be founding a new *religion*, they did see themselves as proclaiming a new *faith*, since the content of the faith they proclaimed on the basis of their convictions regarding Jesus had not been known previously. What distinguished this faith from that of other Jews, however, was not that the God of Jesus was gracious, merciful, and forgiving in a way that the God in whom Jews had traditionally believed was not, or that the God of Jesus saved people by faith alone instead of demanding that they earn their salvation through good works. Both of these Gods were loving and merciful and saved people by pure grace and through faith. They were also the same in that they justified people on the basis of their commitment to living in accordance with their will as they had made it known, understanding that commitment as the *essence* of faith rather than something that was merely to follow upon it. Likewise, both of these Gods regarded Judaism as a very good thing and, far from condemning or abolishing it, wanted it to continue and prosper. What made the God of Jesus' followers and Paul different from the God of other Jews was that he was now to be defined and understood primarily on the basis of his relation to Jesus his Son and wanted to see Judaism not merely *reaffirmed* or *reinforced* but *redefined* and *resignified* around Jesus. (pp. 9-10)

Chapter One: Redefining the God of Israel

Although in a sense all Jews were thought to believe in the same God, in another sense it can be said that they believed in a variety of different Gods. Some, for example, believed in a God who would raise the dead, while others did

not. The Essenes believed in a God who wanted his people to refrain from participation in the worship at the temple, while certain charismatic figures proclaimed a God who called on all Jews to follow them, yet the majority of Jews rejected these understandings of God.

In spite of the diversity of beliefs that existed among Jews regarding the God of Israel, however, most scholars today would probably affirm that members of each of these groups and of the Jewish community at large would have agreed that, in the end, all Jews ultimately worshiped the same God, despite the different ways in which they conceived of that God and his will. It is by no means clear, however, that they would have believed that the God being proclaimed by Jesus' earliest followers was the same God in whom they and other Jews had always believed. Had God revealed anything radically new and important about himself in recent times that he had never made known previously? Had the Jewish law or Torah ceased to be the definitive and supreme expression of God's will? Had the God of Israel sent any new prophet of the stature of Moses to speak on his behalf or established alongside himself any descendant of David comparable to David in greatness as king, ruler, or lord over Israel and the other nations of the world? Had God done anything that might oblige those who read the Scriptures of Israel to interpret them any differently than they had in previous generations stretching back for centuries? Had God of late come to relate to his people and act among them in a manner that was fundamentally distinct from the manner in which he had related to them and acted among them previously? Was it now God's desire that his people also come to relate to him in a different way and approach him through a mediator who transcended Aaron and the high priests that Israel had known up to that point throughout its history? Did God now call on his people to

live under a new or renewed covenant that went beyond the covenant he had made with Israel in the days of the patriarchs and Moses? Had God determined that uncircumcised gentiles who did not submit fully to the commandments of the Torah yet lived under that new or renewed covenant could be just as pleasing and acceptable to him as those Jews who lived faithfully as members of his people Israel in accordance with the Torah?

I would maintain that, with one exception, we know of no Jewish group or community of antiquity, including the ancient Jewish community at large, whose members would have responded to any of the questions just posed with anything but a categorical and resounding "No!" That exception, of course, was the community of Jesus' followers, whose response of "Yes!" to each of those questions would almost certainly have been equally categorical and resounding. In both cases, however, those responses would have arisen out of deeply-seated convictions that were extremely cherished, precious, and meaningful to each. (pp. 16-17)

Although there were many differences among Jews in the Second Temple period, most scholars today agree that we can speak of a "common Judaism" in that period. Certain beliefs regarding God, Israel, the Torah, and the world in general were common to almost all Jews.

For Paul, however, as a result of what God has done in Christ, it is no longer possible to conceive or speak of God independently of Jesus his Son. Throughout his epistles, Paul rarely refers to God without referring to Jesus in the same immediate context. He repeatedly relates to both God and Jesus the key terms and concepts of his gospel proclamation and ascribes to each many of the same attributes and salvific activities. This conception of God as inseparable from his Son Jesus is unparalleled in the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish literature.

For Paul, God has been redefined as the one who raised Jesus and exalted him as Lord.

Besides ascribing to Christ a position of supreme transcendence alongside God in relation to all other human beings, Paul places Christ at the very heart of the story of salvation he tells. For Paul, this story revolved around Christ as God's Son from the very beginning, and in him it will also find its consummation.

Paul's emphasis on the centrality of Christ leads him to speak of Israel, the Mosaic law, and the various figures and themes from Israel's history in ways that set him apart from other Jews. For all these reasons, many Jews would hardly have recognized the God proclaimed as the Father of Jesus Christ by Paul as the same God whom they and their ancestors had confessed and worshiped since the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Nevertheless, these differences would not necessarily have made it impossible for Paul or his fellow believers in Christ to enjoy good relations with the Jewish community and live in relative peace and harmony with those Jews who did not believe in Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

Chapter Two: Redefining God's Purposes for Israel and the World

The belief that God had created all of the nations of the world but had chosen Israel alone as his special people raised many questions regarding God's purposes for Israel and for the nations in general. The most important of these questions was whether God's blessing of Israel was an end in itself or was instead a means to bringing the other nations to enjoy the same blessings together with Israel some day.

According to the biblical texts and Second Temple Jewish thought, in order for Israel to enjoy God's blessings, it was necessary for the people to live in ways that made it possible for them to experience the well-being God desired for them. In his love and grace, God had

provided them with the guidance and instruction they needed in order to live such a life by means of the Torah, which was considered God's greatest gift to the world. In and of itself, the commandments of the Torah promoted wholeness or shalom among all the members of his people by prescribing certain behaviors that were conducive to that shalom while at the same time prohibiting other behaviors that destroyed the people's well-being. God had thus given the Torah so that there might be justice and equity among his people. However, because blessings such as freedom from plague and disease, abundant harvests, and deliverance from the nations who sought to oppress Israel depended to a great extent upon God's intervention in history, the people could only enjoy the well-being God desired for them if God remained active to bless them. In order to bring about in his people the obedience he desired for their own good, God was thought to discipline and attempt to correct them through chastisements of various types when they fell into sin and disobedience, doing things that destroyed their well-being and wholeness. This was regarded as an expression of his love for them.

At first glance, many of the commandments found in the Torah, such as those that have to do with sacrifice, purity, and the observance of certain holy days and feasts, do not appear to contribute directly to the well-being of those who obey them. Such commandments, however, promoted the well-being of the people *indirectly* by reinforcing their identity as God's people, reminding them of certain truths, and bringing them to reflect on their way of life so that they might be brought into greater conformity with God's will. The offering of sacrifice, for example, reminded them that everything that they had, including their life itself, belonged to God and was therefore to be dedicated to his service. The laws regarding purity not only contributed to the people's physical health but were also

thought to promote purity of life and keep the people separated from the idolatry and injustice that were characteristic of other nations. The Jewish feasts led the people to recall and celebrate their identity as a people set apart for God in order to be blessed by him and serve as his instrument to bless others as well.

Many Jews in the Second Temple period looked forward to a new age in which God would enable his people to enjoy his blessings of life, shalom, and salvation fully. He would act to enable them to live in accordance with his good and loving will, yet he would also judge the world in order to deliver it from those who insisted on practicing evil, injustice, and oppression. Only in that way could peace and well-being for all prevail in the age to come. Among Jews there were many different beliefs regarding the salvation of gentiles. Some anticipated the destruction of all of the gentile nations, while others believed that many people from among those nations would join Israel in serving the one true God and living in accordance with the commandments he had given out of love for all.

Paul's letters reveal that, by means of his ministry, he pursued an objective that was distinct from that of most other Jews. Rather than attempting to promote greater obedience to the Torah among his own people, Paul sought to bring Jews and non-Jews to live as part of a community that he called the *ekklēsia*. What defined this community was not merely its faith in Christ as crucified and risen Lord but also the commitment of its members to the values, attitudes, and behaviors that Paul associates with Christ throughout his letters. All were expected to renounce the kind of sinful, unjust, and oppressive behaviors that characterized the life of those who did not know God in order to live in the type of love and solidarity that Paul describes in passages such as Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 5-6, and Philippians 2.

Paul looked forward to a day in which God would act through Christ to bring people of all nations to share in the life of the age to come. While Paul believed that God's love for Israel was special and unique, he did not regard God's love for Israel as being greater than God's love for all the nations. While those gentiles who came to faith retained their own ethnic and national identity in the *ekklēsia* rather than coming to form part of Israel, together with Israel they too came to be regarded as God's own people and his "beloved" (Rom 9:24-26).

Finally, it is important to stress that Paul conceives of the *ekklēsia* or community of believers as something that is by nature very distinct from Israel. Unlike Israel, the *ekklēsia* is not an ethnic or political entity, and much less a nation or a race of people. Similarly, the gospel had not been designed to govern the lives of believers in Christ in the same way that the Torah had been given to govern all aspects of the political, social, and economic life of God's people Israel. Whether they were Jewish or gentile, those who came to faith in Christ and the gospel were not expected to abandon or set aside their own ethnicity, customs, traditions, and way of life except insofar as those things might compromise or run contrary to the values and principles of the gospel and the faith associated with it. Instead, both Jews and non-Jews who came to faith in Christ were to live out that faith in the context of their own communities, customs, and cultural identity.

In essence, then, the gospel and the Torah were two very different things that had been designed for different purposes, although in some ways those purposes might overlap, just as certain aspects of the laws of other peoples overlapped with the type of life prescribed by the gospel. For that reason, Jews who came to faith in the gospel were not to abandon observance of the Torah, just as gentiles who came to faith were not to deny or abandon their own identity in order to become Jews

and submit to the law and customs of Israel. Instead, as Paul insists in 1 Cor 7:17-24, all believers were to live the life to which they had been called by God and assigned by Christ as Jew, gentile, slave, or free: "Each of you, sisters and brothers, is to remain with God in the condition in which you were called." Because the *ekklēsia* was not the same type of entity as Israel and the Torah was something of a different nature and order than the gospel, in Paul's thought neither was the *ekklēsia* to replace, supplant, or supersede Israel, nor was the gospel to replace, supplant, or supersede the Torah. (p. 82)

Chapter Three: Redefining How God Saves

Because Jews in the Second Temple period regarded the Torah as the means by which God granted his people the blessings of shalom and salvation that he desired for them, his saving activity was understood in terms of acting in history to bring his people into conformity with the Torah. This activity included providing his people guidance through religious figures such as priests, prophets, and teachers and raising up kings and military leaders to deliver his people from their enemies. The ultimate goal was that his people be able to dwell in peace in the land God had given them, enjoying his blessings as they lived in accordance with his will as he had made it known in the Torah.

According to Paul, however, it is through Christ rather than the Torah that God intended to bring to pass the blessings and salvation that he had promised to his people in Israel's Scriptures. While in a sense Paul regards all of God's activity through Christ as salvific, in his epistles he especially points to Christ's death as the means by which God's saving purposes are accomplished. Rather than ascribing to Jesus' death some type of "salvific effect," however, Paul understood Jesus' crucifixion as the consequence of his commitment to establishing the community that Paul refers to as the *ekklēsia*.

Paul repeatedly compares the hardships and afflictions that he endures as a result of his own efforts to establish the type of community that constituted God's objective in history to the sufferings and death that Jesus himself had endured as a result of his dedication to that same objective. According to Paul, what is salvific is not Jesus' death per se but the fact that, in obedience to his Father's will, Jesus was willing to give up his life in order to attain that objective.

In the thought of Paul, therefore, the reason that Jesus had died was not because there was no other way in which God might forgive human beings their sins or destroy the forces of evil. Nor had Jesus died in order that others might come to participate in his death in some mysterious fashion or reproduce that same death in themselves. Rather, the reason that Jesus had died was because he had dedicated himself to the establishment of the type of community of which Paul speaks throughout his epistles, a community in which all would give themselves to one another and to others with a love that knows no limits and holds nothing back. What had been impossible without Jesus' death was not the forgiveness of sins or the destruction of sin and death, but the type of community that God has now brought into existence by sending his Son and handing him over to death when his efforts to make that community a reality led to the threat of the cross.

Furthermore, according to this interpretation of Paul's thought, Jesus' death did not save or redeem anyone. Strictly speaking, it did not have a purpose or an objective. God had not designed or orchestrated Jesus' death in order to "effect" something by that death. What saves human beings is not Jesus' death but his faithfulness and dedication to the task of establishing the type of community of which Paul repeatedly speaks, since it is by coming to live as part of

that community that believers attain the salvation or wholeness that God desires for them. Throughout his epistles, Paul never affirms that Jesus' death, his blood, or his cross saves, justifies, or redeems anyone or reconciles them to God. Instead, what he says is that believers are justified, redeemed, and reconciled to God *by means of Jesus' death or blood*, that is, by means of his unbending commitment to the creation of a community in which they might come to live under him so as to attain there through him the justification and redemption he sought for them and experience the joy of living in peace with God and one another as God's friends rather than his enemies (Rom 5:6-10).

In the thought of Paul, all of these things had constituted God's objective when he sent his Son and subsequently handed him over to death. What God had wanted was not that his Son die but that he consecrate himself fully to the task of forming the type of community Paul describes in his epistles, that is, the *ekklēsia*. However, both God and his Son had known ahead of time that Jesus' consecration to that task would result in his death. In spite of this knowledge, they had chosen for Jesus to undertake that task and thereby had embraced fully the consequences of that task at the same time. From the perspective of Paul, only by giving himself fully to human beings in love by sending his Son to bring about in them his same love could God accomplish that objective. When his Son's efforts on behalf of that objective led to conflict and the threat of the cross at the hands of the rulers of this age, according to Paul God gave up his Son rather than sparing him such a death out of love for the sinful human beings he sought to save, who were not only undeserving of such a love but actively opposed to it. By embracing the cross rather than shunning it, however, God and Jesus his Son had made it possible for a community to exist in which all now live in that same love so as to be reconciled with God

and one another and to live in peace with God and others there.

It is these ideas that Paul appears to have in mind when he affirms that “God shows his love for us in that, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” and that “when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:8, 10). As Paul’s use of the Greek preposition *dia* in this latter verse makes clear, what has now made that reconciliation possible was Jesus’ willingness to give up his life so that the type of community that he and his Father sought to bring into existence from the start might now become a reality throughout the world. It is the community of which Paul speaks in Rom 8:29, composed of those who are being conformed to the image of God’s Son so as to constitute a new family together with him. Yet, as Paul states in 2 Cor 5:18-21, it is not Jesus’ faithfulness to death alone that has made such a reconciliation possible, but *all* of the saving activity that God has carried out not only through Christ but through his ambassadors such as Paul as well. Because not only God and his Son Jesus but others such as Paul willingly embrace the consequences of their efforts to bring others to live in love under Jesus in the context of that community, both that community and the type of love embodied by Jesus and God in the death of his Son have now become a reality in the *ekklēsia*. As a result of what God has done through his Son, any who are not committed to living in that same love cannot rightly claim to form part of that community or truly call Jesus their Lord. Both that community as a whole and the individuals who belong to it are now stamped forever by the cross as that which defines them above all else, just as it forever defines the Lord under whom they live. (pp. 110-111)

If Paul looked to Isaiah 53 in order to interpret Jesus’ death, he would have interpreted that passage on the basis of these same ideas. Like the servant of whom Isaiah 53

speaks, Jesus had dedicated himself to a ministry aimed at bringing God’s people to leave behind their sins and commit themselves to living in accordance with God’s will. His dedication to that ministry had led to a great deal of suffering and a violent death at the hands of others, yet his faithfulness to the task given him by God had enabled the people to be delivered from their sinful ways and attain the healing and wholeness God had sought for them.

These ideas lie behind Paul’s allusions to the love of God in Rom 8:31-39 and the type of love that Paul associates with Christ in Phil 2:1-11. In the thought of Paul, it is through Christ rather than through the law independently of Christ that God brings about in believers that type of love and enables them to live in communities whose primary characteristic is that same love.

Chapter Four: Redefining God’s Will

Virtually all Jews in antiquity regarded the Torah as the supreme and definitive expression of God’s will for his people. The need to interpret the commandments of the Torah on the basis of core values and principles such as love for neighbor and care for the needy was also generally recognized. The belief that God had given the Torah to his people as a gracious gift out of love for them and wanted them to obey it for their own well-being precluded the notion that they might merit or earn God’s grace and favor through its observance. For the most part, it was thought that God had given the Torah to Israel alone. For that reason, efforts to bring gentiles to submit to the law as proselytes to Judaism were relatively uncommon and often considered undesirable.

In order to define God’s will for the communities to which he addressed his epistles, Paul does not look to the Torah but instead points his readers to Christ and the love for all

that he manifested in life and death. He also grounds his paraenesis in his understanding of the relationship of believers to Christ as their Lord.

According to Paul, God had given the law so that it might lead people to Christ. It was to serve as a *paidagōgos* to hold sin in check until Christ might come (Gal 3:23-25). While Paul believed that God intended for Jewish believers in Christ to continue to observe the law, they were now to do so in a spirit of freedom and maturity rather than being confined and constrained by its commandments in the way they had been previously. At the same time, Paul insisted that it was both senseless and wrong for gentile believers in Christ to submit to the law, since in their case a life under the law would constitute a needless burden and would profit them nothing.

Chapter Five: Redefining Judaism

In the Second Temple period, Jews had many different views regarding God's will for Judaism. Many thought that God merely wanted the practice of Judaism to be reaffirmed or reinforced. Others claimed that God intended for Judaism to be reformed, restored, redeemed, radicalized, or revolutionized in some way. The Jewish elites maintained that God wished for the status quo to be maintained and thus sought to keep Judaism "refrigerated" by preserving everything as it was and taking steps to make sure that the political situation did not "heat up" in any way. There were also Jews who believed that the practice of Judaism should be relaxed. As the book of 1 Maccabees indicates, at least some Jews thought that Judaism should be replaced by something else. It has often been claimed that Paul taught that God intended for Judaism to be replaced by the Christian faith he proclaimed.

Paul's vision for Judaism cannot be reduced to any of these categories. While he undoubtedly

wanted to see Judaism reaffirmed and reinforced, he also claimed that God wished to see Judaism *resignified* around Christ and the gospel. Paul's affirmation in 1 Cor 5:7 that "Christ our passover lamb has been sacrificed" indicates that he believed that the practice of the commandments and customs prescribed in the Torah was profoundly meaningful in that it pointed both Jews and non-Jews to Christ and witnessed to the new reality that God had brought about through his Son. Likewise, the sacrificial worship offered to God at the Jerusalem temple prefigured that which God had intended to accomplish through Christ. For that reason, Paul considered it important for Jewish believers in Christ to continue to observe the Mosaic law, not only for the reasons they had done so previously, but also because such observance constituted an act of love for others, including both their fellow Jews and those non-Jews who would be pointed to Christ by means of that observance.

In the end, then, as Paul himself insists in his epistles, he valued deeply the Torah and its observance and considered such observance on the part of Jews not only good but also important and perhaps even necessary. By no means did Paul wish to see Judaism disappear or become abolished, since it was the means by which God continued to bring to pass all of the promises he had made of old by directing people to Christ. In fact, it would probably be correct to affirm that the God proclaimed by Paul wanted Judaism to be reaffirmed and reinforced, and even to be reformed, redeemed, radicalized, and revolutionized in some sense, though not in the ways that many of his fellow Jews envisioned, advocated, or expected. For Paul, all of these things could happen in the way that God desired and intended only if Judaism as it had come to exist in his day was first *resignified* by looking to Christ as the one through whom the purpose and goal of Judaism and the Torah were now fulfilled. (p. 195)

Chapter Six: Redefining God's People

The belief that uncircumcised gentiles who came to faith in Christ were to be accepted on equal terms with Jewish believers within the *ekklēsia* raised difficult questions regarding the identity of God's people. Among most Jews, that designation was reserved exclusively for Israel. Because the covenant that God had established with Israel was thought to be unique and irreplaceable, it was not expected that it would be superseded by a new covenant. Although recent studies have shown that interaction between Jews and gentiles was not as uncommon as was previously thought, the practice of circumcision and the observance of the Torah were believed to have the purpose of maintaining the distinctions between Israel and the other nations.

The idea that Jews and gentiles who came to faith in Christ were now to live as equals within the community of believers and enjoy table fellowship with one another there raised new problems and challenges for members of both groups. Such fellowship required that each group make concessions on behalf of the other. Members of both groups would often be forced to make difficult and painful decisions as to whether to identify more closely with their brothers and sisters in Christ or their family and acquaintances who were not believers in Christ. At times, they might even be ostracized and condemned for preferring to associate with people who belonged to an ethnic or social group that was distinct from their own. As greater numbers of non-Jews were incorporated into the communities of believers in Christ, eventually it would become more difficult for those communities to gather in Jewish spaces and maintain their Jewish identity.

Paul's letters indicate that he did not believe that circumcision should be abolished among Jewish believers in Christ. On the contrary, he insists that circumcision is to be valued (Rom 2:25; 3:1-2). When he affirms in 1 Cor 7:19 and

Gal 5:6 and 6:15 that in Christ circumcision and uncircumcision are "nothing," he probably does not mean that for believers circumcision and uncircumcision are now meaningless or unimportant. Instead, he may have maintained that, just as circumcision was to be understood as a "seal of the righteousness of faith," as it had been for Abraham, so also uncircumcision could be meaningful for gentile believers in Christ as a sign or seal of the righteousness of faith that had been Abraham's when he was not yet circumcised (Rom 4:11-12). Their uncircumcision might therefore serve to remind them that by virtue of their faith in Christ they were children of Abraham, just as circumcision reminded Jews that they were children of Abraham according to the flesh.

In recent years, scholars have debated the reasons why Paul insisted that gentile believers in Christ were not to submit to circumcision or be brought to live under the Jewish law. While those such as James Dunn and N. T. Wright have claimed that Paul criticized circumcision and the observance of the Torah because those things confined God's grace to Israel alone, others such as Paula Fredriksen and Mark Nanos have argued that Paul insisted that it was necessary for the gentiles who would be saved at the *eschaton* to worship God as gentiles rather than as Jews. Both of these views, however, are problematic.

I would therefore argue instead that Paul's concern was primarily *practical* in nature. If gentile believers in Christ who were male were required to become circumcised in order to form part of the *ekklēsia*, the number of gentiles who would be willing to undergo the extremely painful procedure of circumcision would be very low. In that case, most non-Jewish male believers in Christ would have remained uncircumcised and simply participated in the *ekklēsia* as persons who did not fully belong to it in the same way that many pious gentiles attended the synagogue

and adopted some Jewish customs without actually becoming Jews and submitting fully to the Torah. For uncircumcised male gentile believers to be denied full membership and inclusion within the *ekklēsia*, however, would involve making distinctions of the type that Paul rejected.

Furthermore, if uncircumcised gentile believers in Christ already possessed the only circumcision they needed, as Paul claims in Phil 3:2-3 and Rom 2:26, for them to undergo physical circumcision would not only be senseless but would also represent a denial of that truth. In effect, any who would become circumcised would be denying or calling into question the notion that uncircumcised believers in Christ could be regarded as “the circumcision.” By their actions, they would be implying that those believers in Christ who were not physically circumcised were lacking something and that those who were circumcised only spiritually were in some way inferior to those who were circumcised not only spiritually but physically as well. Paul clearly rejects such an idea and instead insists that within the community of believers in Christ physical circumcision does not make one superior in any way to those who are circumcised spiritually but not physically. Physical circumcision is only a sign given for the sake of God’s people Israel and in itself does not affect one’s relation to God. Nor was it to affect one’s status within the community of believers, since all were to regard one another as equals and show no favoritism on the basis of whether one was physically circumcised or not.

One can only imagine the confusion and turmoil that would begin to reign in the communities of believers in Christ that included gentiles if some of them started becoming circumcised. In addition to asking what motivation they could possibly have for doing so, everyone would begin to ask and wonder whether those gentile believers who underwent circumcision thereby became

superior to the uncircumcised members of the community in some way. If not, then it would not be clear why any gentile believers would choose to undergo circumcision. For some gentile believers to do so would communicate the idea that there was some advantage to being circumcised, either because it made one more acceptable to God or because it enabled one to gain a greater status or level of acceptance within the community. If such was the case, all the male gentile believers within the community would feel pressured to become circumcised so as to belong to the group of believers that was more acceptable to God or enjoyed special status within the community of believers. In this way, the type of distinctions that Paul found so objectionable and fought against so vigorously would be introduced into the community. For any to claim that those believers who had been circumcised and were law-observant enjoyed a privileged status in God’s eyes or were to be more fully accepted within the *ekklēsia* would destroy the unity among the members. Conversely, those uncircumcised were not to be considered less acceptable to God or of a lower status within the community. According to Paul, no type of favoritism was to be shown to any on the basis of whether they were circumcised or not. Circumcision or law-observance was not to be regarded as a condition for exercising greater power or influence within the community or being placed in positions of leadership or authority that were denied to the uncircumcised. Such distinctions would make it impossible for the members to live as one in full fellowship and equality with one another.

For all of these reasons, Paul’s gospel and his understanding of the nature of the *ekklēsia* led him to adopt the position that he articulates in 1 Cor 7:18-20: both those believers who were circumcised and those who were not should remain in the same condition that they had been in when they

came to faith. For them to do otherwise would not only create serious problems within the *ekklēsia* but would also “pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:7), since it would inevitably lead to distinctions within the community that ran contrary to the gospel. The community would cease to be one in which all accepted one another fully just as they were, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, and circumcision and uncircumcision would become points of contention and division. (pp. 218-219)

When Paul speaks of a new covenant in 1 Cor 11:25 and 2 Cor 3:6, there is no reason to suppose that he believed that God intended for it to replace the covenant he had made previously with Israel. Instead, he appears to have thought that the covenant established through Christ built upon the covenant with Israel and complemented it. While gentile believers in Christ were not to be brought to live under the covenant with Israel, it was expected that Jewish believers live under both the old covenant and the new covenant established through Christ and his death.

According to Paul, the *ekklēsia* does not replace Israel but instead incorporates within its ranks Jews who form part of Israel and gentiles who continue to belong to other nations. In Romans 9-11, Paul uses the term “Israel” in different ways, yet he clearly sees gentile believers in Christ as forming part of a single people of God together with Israel.

While most of the conflicts that Paul describes in his letters were confined to the community of believers in Christ, those letters also provide some evidence of conflicts between the community of believers and the Jewish community at large. The precise cause and nature of those conflicts is not entirely clear, yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the relations between the community of believers in Christ and the Jewish community at large were always acrimonious and antagonistic. On the

contrary, there are indications in Paul’s letters that the two communities often related amicably to one another and that many Jewish believers, including Paul himself, continued to be well-received among Jews who were not believers in Christ.

Chapter Seven: Redefining Righteousness

In Second Temple Jewish thought, it was widely recognized that the life of righteousness that God desired to see in all of his people for their own good was from beginning to end a gift of God. God was believed to bring about such a life in his people by pure grace through the Torah and his ongoing activity in relation to them. As E. P. Sanders argued decades ago, in Jewish thought perfect obedience to the law was neither expected nor believed to be possible. The law itself anticipated that the members of God’s people would fall into sin and thus prescribed means of atonement by which they might seek and obtain God’s forgiveness. What was believed to characterize the righteous was not sinless perfection but a firm commitment to living in conformity with God’s will as he had made it known in the Torah. Jews would have agreed fully with Paul that justification was by faith, since true faith and trust in God inevitably led one to seek to live in accordance with God’s will and to look continually to him for the strength, guidance, and knowledge necessary to do so.

Since the period of the Protestant Reformation, it has been customary to claim that in Paul’s thought there are two grounds for the justification of believers: Christ’s death and their faith. Such a view raises numerous problems that have long divided Christians and have led many scholars to mistakenly attribute to both Jews and Roman Catholics the idea that God’s grace and salvation must be earned or merited by means of good works.

In Paul's thought, faith involves trusting fully in God not only for forgiveness but also for the new life of righteousness that God brings about in believers by sheer grace through Christ and the Holy Spirit. That righteousness becomes a reality in the lives of believers as they live "out of faith" (*ek pisteōs*). The reason that such faith justifies is that, by its very nature, it leads one to be fully committed to living righteously in the way that God desires and commands out of love for all. Like other Jews, however, Paul did not understand righteousness to consist of sinless perfection. Both saving faith and the obedience, righteousness, and love that allow people to be made whole are therefore a free gift of God rather than something that believers produce in themselves or merit through their own effort or works. In Paul's thought, however, God brings about that righteousness by means of the gospel, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the community of believers rather than by infusing something into them or effecting some type of mysterious ontological transformation in them through their participation in Christ or his death.

Pauline interpreters have debated extensively what Paul means when he refers in Romans and Galatians to the "righteousness of God" and the "faith of Christ" (*pistis Christou*). The understanding of righteousness and justification presented in the present chapter suggests that Paul may have used the phrase "righteousness of God" to refer, not to a forensic status or to God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, but to distinguish the righteousness that he associates with life in Christ from the righteousness that comes through the observance of the Jewish law and the works it prescribes. Similarly, rather than intending the phrase *pistis Christou* to be understood as an allusion to "faith in Christ" or Christ's own faithfulness, Paul may have used that phrase to distinguish the faith or "Christ-faith" that revolved around Christ and the gospel from the

general faith in God that was common to all Jews.

Chapter Eight: Redefining the Basis for Forgiveness

Among biblical scholars, it is common to claim that in Jewish thought it was necessary to make atonement by means of sacrificial offerings in order to obtain from God the forgiveness of sins. Neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor the Second Temple Jewish writings we possess, however, provide any clear or explicit evidence for the idea that sacrifices in themselves were thought to atone for sins or obtain God's forgiveness through some type of *modus operandi*. Instead, what was believed to make atonement and obtain forgiveness from God was the spirit of repentance that those who offered sacrifices for sin manifested by means of their sacrificial offerings. In addition to promoting repentance and the way of life God desired to see in them for their own good, those sacrifices served as means by which his people could manifest in visible and tangible ways their desire to receive his forgiveness and their renewed commitment to living in the way he had commanded out of love for them.

On the basis of passages such as 4 Maccabees 6:27-29 and 17:20-22, it has also been common to claim that Jews believed that the suffering and death of the righteous could atone for the sins of others. A careful analysis of these passages in their original context, however, demonstrates that what is said to have pleased God and put away his wrath at his people's sins was not the suffering and death of those who remained faithful to his law in the midst of the terrible tortures they endured, but the renewed obedience to the law that the faithfulness of those figures helped to bring about in their fellow Jews. While the idea of vicarious death appears in many Greek and Roman writings from antiquity, that idea was associated with

certain conceptions of the gods that were very different from the Jewish understanding of God.

Contrary to many interpretations of Paul's thought, nothing in his letters indicates that he understood the human plight in terms of the need for sinful human beings to be delivered from punishment and condemnation at the hands of a God whose holy and righteous nature did not allow him to forgive sins freely. While Paul certainly believed that those who practiced sin and injustice were subject to God's wrath, he understood the plight of both Jews and gentiles in terms of the need to be delivered from the sinful and destructive way of life that made it impossible for them to attain the salvation and wholeness that God desired for all, both in the present world and the world to come. The purpose for which God had sent his Son, therefore, was not to die on a cross in order to make atonement for human sin but to establish a community in which all might be brought to live in love and righteousness by means of their relation to Christ, his Spirit, and one another. Jesus' dedication to that task had led to his death, yet at the same time it had led to the establishment of that community and had defined it forever as a community in which all would be committed to the same type of love seen in Jesus himself.

Paul expected that the short formulas he uses throughout his epistles to refer to the salvific significance of Jesus' death would be easily and readily understood by his readers on the basis of the narrative concerning Christ and his death that was known to all within the communities of Jesus' followers. According to that narrative, when Christ's efforts to create the type of community that God desired to see led to conflict and the threat of the cross, rather than acting to spare his Son such a death or having him put an end to those efforts, God handed him over to that death (Rom 8:32). The reason that God had done so, however, was not that Jesus' death had been necessary for God to

forgive sins or enable human beings to participate in that death, but because only by giving up his Son could God establish the type of community he intended to create from the start, a community in which the lives of all would be characterized by a love that knew no limits or bounds and was willing to give of itself fully on behalf of others. In this way, they would be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

It is these ideas that Paul had in mind when he wrote that Jesus died for others and that believers have been justified, redeemed, and reconciled to God through Jesus' death or blood. Paul's affirmations that believers have died and been crucified and buried with Christ should be understood in the sense that, as believers identify fully with the love that Jesus manifested in his death, they cease to be the persons they were previously in order to become a "new creation." Like Paul, they become crucified to the world in that they no longer identify with the world and its values but instead come to live to God together with Christ, their risen Lord, who in a sense remains forever crucified as a result of the love for others that led him to give up his life for them.

When Paul affirms that Christ died or gave himself for the sins of others, his words should not be understood in the sense that he died in order to make it possible for God to forgive human beings their sins. Rather, Paul's idea is that Christ died as a result of his dedication to making it possible for others to be delivered from their sinful ways and actions. By giving up his life rather than seeking to save it, he brought into existence a community in which that objective is now accomplished. Christ can be said to have obtained God's forgiveness on behalf of believers in the sense that all who now live as members of his community can have full assurance that they are accepted and forgiven by God. The basis for this forgiveness, however, is not Christ' death per se but the new life of love

and righteousness that God brings about in believers by pure grace through Christ and the gospel. From the perspective of Paul, only such a life could ever please God and put away his wrath at the sin and injustice that destroy the lives of human beings and prevent them from attaining the salvation and wholeness he desires for all.

Conclusion

No matter what date one may assign to any “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, what we have seen in this study makes it clear that a “parting of the Gods” between those Jews who believed in Jesus as the Christ and those who did not had taken place by Paul’s day. Even before Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, the conviction that God had raised his Son and exalted him to his right hand had led Jesus’ earliest followers to a conception of God that was distinct from that of other Jews. What distinguished the God proclaimed by Paul and his fellow believers in Christ from the God in whom Jews had traditionally believed was not only that he was inseparable from Jesus his Son but also that he now called on people of all nations to live under Jesus as members of the community established through him and his death. Within that community, uncircumcised gentiles who lived as followers of Jesus but did not form part of Israel and did not observe the Torah were now to be accepted on equal terms with those who did, since God himself had accepted them on those terms. The righteousness that God desired to see in all was to be defined on the basis of faith in Christ and could be brought about independently of the observance of the Torah.

In many ways, however, the God proclaimed by Jesus’ earliest followers was the same God in whom Jews had always believed. He called on all to live in accordance with his will, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs*. At the same

time, he called on all to look to him in faith so that he might be active to create in them by pure grace the new life of righteousness that made it possible for them to experience the salvation and wholeness he desired for all. According to the first believers in Christ, however, it was through Christ and his Spirit rather than through the Torah that God brought about that new life in believers.

In Western Christian thought, this understanding of God eventually gave way to one that was in important ways very different. It was claimed that God had given the law and commanded that human beings obey it for the sake of his own holy and righteous nature rather than for the sake of human beings themselves. This view of God led not only to an understanding of Christ’s death and the justification of believers that was very different from Paul’s, but also to an understanding of the human plight that was foreign to the thought of Jesus’ earliest followers and Judaism in general. According to the latter, what was necessary was not that sin be punished in order that God’s justice might be satisfied but that human beings be enabled to leave behind their sinful way of life and be brought into conformity with God’s will so that they might attain the blessings of life and salvation that he intended to be theirs. According to Paul, this is what God had accomplished through Christ and his death.

In the thought of Paul and the first believers in Christ, there was nothing wrong with Judaism and the law. On the contrary, it was good for Jewish believers in Christ to continue to practice Judaism and observe the law. The *ekklēsia* did not take the place of Israel or the Jewish community but simply brought Jewish believers in Christ to form part of a new community or family together with gentile believers. To live under Christ’s lordship and the law of Christ was by no means thought to be incompatible with living under the Mosaic law, as long as it was practiced with freedom and

love rather than being used to confine and constrain people. The law and the covenant with Israel fulfilled a good purpose in relation to God's people Israel, yet they had never been designed to lead to the type of community that God had now established through Christ. What motivated Paul to seek to bring both Jews and non-Jews to faith in Christ was his desire that they might find within the community of believers the same type of life, well-being, and wholeness that Paul himself had found there.

The reason why the notion that the *ekklēsia* has replaced Israel in the affections of God is foreign to Paul's thought is that he believed that God loved people of all nations equally. While his love for Israel was special and unique, the fact that he now reached out to people of all nations in order to bring them to live as his own within the *ekklēsia* made it clear that he regarded those people as his chosen and beloved as well.

Because neither Paul nor his fellow believers in Christ understood God's will in terms of practicing a religion, they had no intention of founding a new religion, even though they did proclaim a new faith. While in some ways it is problematic to refer to Paul and the faith he proclaimed as "Christian" due to the fact that such a designation is anachronistic, in other ways it is entirely appropriate. Even though in a sense the God of Paul and his fellow believers in Christ was distinct from the God in whom Jews had traditionally believed, ultimately what made both of those Gods the same was their commitment and dedication to making it possible for people of all nations to attain the blessings of wholeness and salvation that God intends for all.