THE LOGIC OF PAUL'S ARGUMENT ON THE CURSE OF
THE LAW IN GALATIANS 3:10-14

BY

NORMAND BONNEAU
Ottawa

Galatians 3:13 records the only occurrence in Paul's letters of the phrase "the curse of the law." Its precise meaning remains difficult to ascertain, due in great part to the highly condensed and cryptic way Paul expresses his thoughts in the immediate context of Gal. 3:10-14. At first glance, at least this much can be said: "the curse of the law," from which Christ in his death on the cross redeemed us, must be the predicament revealed in 3:10 where Paul employs the words *curse* and *law* twice each, albeit not in the form of the succinct phrase of v. 13. Any attempt to decipher the phrase, therefore, must deal at least with v. 10, and preferably include vv. 11 and 12 which form the bridge between v. 10 and v. 13. The argument in 3:10-14 itself, however, is but one moment of a much longer development reaching back to the beginning of the letter. Thus a viable proposal explaining the phrase "the curse of the law" must not only accord with the immediate context but must also show how the argument containing it flows out of the broader context of what precedes in the letter.

A number of recent studies have sought to interpret the phrase and its context.¹ Despite the wide variety, most proposals can effectively be

collected under four main categories, as C.D. Stanley has conveniently done. The first and most common interpretation maintains that in Gal. 3:10 Paul means that no one can fulfill the law fully. From this premise flows the implied syllogistic logic: “all who fail to observe the law in its entirety are cursed, no one can (or does) fulfill the law in every detail, hence all stand under God’s curse.” According to this logic, the obverse would be true: if one could fulfill the law in its entirety, one would be justified, not cursed. But, as Stanley explains, the ability or inability to fulfill the law is not the point of Paul’s argument. Paul’s “real concern is to show that keeping the commandments could not produce ‘justification’ and ‘life’ even if the law could be fulfilled in its entirety (vv. 11-12).”

A second proposal, initiated by Bultmann, maintains that the issue is not one’s ability to fulfill the law, but rather “that the law by its very nature drives people to do things in their own power rather than looking in faith to God.” This is the traditional portrayal of Judaism as a legalistic religion of works-righteousness—one earns righteousness through the performance of good works. Yet this runs counter to what Paul writes in citing Deut. 27:26, that a curse falls “not on those who do the law, but on those who fail to do it.”

A third proposal was originally proposed by Martin Noth. According to the larger context of Deuteronomy 27-28 from which Paul cites only 27:26, failing to observe the law meant that Israel had forsaken its covenant loyalty. Since Israel had failed, it had incurred the curse, and the curse was to continue in effect until the Messiah came. “Paul interpreted the current subjugation of Palestine by the Romans and the observable ‘hardness’ of the Jewish people to his gospel (Romans 9-11) as the present manifestation of the curse pronounced by God in Deuteronomy 27-28 upon his unfaithful people.” By removing the curse incurred by the chosen people, God then allowed the promise made to Abraham that the nations would be blessed in him to come to pass. But this, too, has its difficulties. The curses of Deuteronomy apply to individuals, not to the nation as a whole; the entire nation being under


2 C.D. Stanley, “‘Under a Curse’: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3: 10-14,” 482-486. Although J.M. Scott (“For as Many as are of Works of the Law are under a Curse,” 188-194) lists eight, some are in fact but variations on the four main ones Stanley presents.

3 Stanley, “‘Under a Curse’: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3:10-14,” 482.

4 Stanley, “‘Under a Curse’: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3:10-14,” 483.

5 Stanley, “‘Under a Curse’: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3:10-14,” 484.