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The Cross as Canon: Galatians 6:16

CHRISTOPHER R. HUTSON

“And whoever conforms to this canon, peace and mercy be upon them and upon the Israel of God.” Galatians 6:16¹

Which came first, the New Testament or the church? The church, of course. The first generation of disciples proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as God’s crucified and resurrected Messiah. Their preaching called forth new communities that began to write about Jesus and about life in community with Jesus people.

In later centuries, believers collected a few significant texts out of the many things written about Jesus and referred to that collection as a “canon,” that is a “yardstick.” The canon is a collection of texts that bear witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus and describe what it means to live in identity with Jesus. Those texts became the norm by which later generations could recalibrate themselves to the story of Jesus as it was first proclaimed.

But when Paul wrote to the Galatians, most of those texts had not yet been written, much less collected. So when Paul pronounced a blessing on those who conform to “this *kanon*,” he was not talking about Scriptures.²

THE CONTEXT: GAL 6:11-18

Although 6:18 is a form of Paul’s customary benediction, Galatians does not have the usual epistolary closing with travel plans and personal greetings. Instead, 6:11-18 is an autograph. The apostle takes the pen from his secretary and adds a note in his own hand (6:11; cf. Phil 19, 1 Cor 16:21, 2 Thess 3:17, Col 4:18).³ In order to authenticate the letter, he summarizes some key points from the letter body.⁴

First, he suggests that those pushing circumcision on Gentile converts in Galatia have a self-serving motive to avoid persecution (6:12-13). By contrast, Paul bears “the marks of Christ in my body” (6:17). This echoes his earlier ascription of an ulterior motive to the troublers (4:17) and his claim that he is being persecuted because he does not preach circumcision (5:11).

Second, “neither circumcision is anything nor uncircumcision” (6:15) echoes “no longer Jew or Greek” (3:28), the capstone of the letter’s central theological argument. It also recalls the theme of circumcision (2:3-12, 5:2-12).



Third, working out of an apocalyptic framework, Paul distinguishes “flesh” (6:12-13) and “the world” (6:14) from the “new creation” (6:15). This recalls the letter’s opening, in which Paul says Christ “chose us out of the present evil age” (1:4). Such an apocalyptic dichotomy operates throughout the letter: slavery to the “elements of the world” (4:3,8-9) contrasts with freedom in Christ (2:4, 5:1,13); “the present Jerusalem” (4:25) contrasts with “the Jerusalem above” (4:26); and “passions and desires” (5:16-17,24) stand opposed to “spirit” (5:13-26).

Fourth, Paul holds up the cross as the eschatological event, the turning point of the ages (6:14-15). His boasting in “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (6:14) echoes his earlier statement that “those who are of Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24).

Thus, the Christological statement in 6:14-15 summarizes the theological viewpoint of the letter. This idea is Paul’s *kanon*, the “rule” to which he wants the Galatians to conform.

PAUL’S KANON IN PRACTICE

We can describe Paul’s *kanon* more precisely by exploring his blessing upon those who “conform” (*stoichēsousin*) to it (6:16). This language echoes his earlier exhortation, “let us conform (*stoichōmen*) to the spirit” (5:25; and his command, “walk by the spirit,” 5:16). The *kanon* to which Paul conforms points to spirit rather than flesh.⁵ Furthermore, Paul says Mount Sinai “corresponds (*systoichei*) to the present Jerusalem” (4:25). By contrast, Paul’s *kanon* is associated with a “new creation” (6:14), which echoes “the Jerusalem above” (4:26).

Putting these two points together, we could say that the cross of Christ points to the eschatological reality of the spirit as opposed to the present reality of the world, of flesh. By eschatological, I don’t mean to imply a future reality. The “Jerusalem above” is a present reality, even if many people fail to acknowledge it. But Paul wants the Galatians to conform their lives here and now to the eschatological reality of the “Jerusalem above,” to the spirit.

This idea is Paul’s *kanon*, the “rule” to which he wants the Galatians to conform

Other letters of Paul confirm this. For example, Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, new creation!” (2 Cor 5:17), by which he means not “according to flesh” (2 Cor 5:16). He exhorts, “let us walk in

newness of life” (Rom 6:4), and “so that we should serve in newness of spirit” (Rom 7:6).⁶ Paul’s *kanon* in Gal 6:16 is the story of the cross and resurrection of Christ, which signals the death of Death and a new way of living in conformity to the spirit. Thus, Paul’s *kanon* in 6:16 is essentially what he calls “the gospel,” his foundational proclamation, whose basic elements he summarizes in such passages as 1 Thess 1:9-10, 1 Cor 15:3-4, and Phil 2:5-11.

Paul’s chief concern in Galatians is that “some who are troubling you want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7).⁷ But before he discusses that perversion, he sets up analogies to earlier incidents at Jerusalem (2:1-10) and Antioch (2:11-21). In Jerusalem, Paul resisted the “sneaking pseudo-brothers,” so that “the truth of the gospel” might endure for you (2:5). At that time the “pillars” agreed that the gospel did not make ethnic distinctions between Jew and Gentile, between circumcision and uncircumcision.

Later, in Antioch, Paul got in Cephas’s face because he was not “walking correctly by the truth of the gospel” (2:14) when Cephas made an ethnic distinction by withdrawing from a nonkosher table. Given these analogies, we are not surprised to learn that those who do not “obey the truth” (5:7), those “troubling” the Galatians (5:10) are pressuring Gentile converts to accept circumcision (5:12). As Martyn puts it, “the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision (6:14) pertains only to the world and is no part of the new creation (6:15), just as the distinctions Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female (3:28) are all matters of flesh and have no part in the spirit reality defined by Christ, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).⁸

So the gospel, which is Paul's *kanon*, absolutely contradicts ethnic distinctions, as represented by kosher food and circumcision. Those issues of Jewish boundary maintenance grew out of reading Torah with a strong emphasis on election/covenant.⁹ This is most likely the way Paul used to read Scripture when he was "an extreme zealot for the traditions of my fathers" (1:14). But after "God ... was pleased to reveal his son in me, so that I might preach the gospel about him among the gentiles" (1:15-16), Paul had to reread his Torah.

Reading now through Jesus-colored glasses, he finds that the central doctrine of Torah is not the election of Israel but the claim that "God is one" (3:20, quoting Deut 6:4), which suggests that humanity also is one before God.¹⁰ Now he can say that the gospel was "preached beforehand" in the promise to Abraham, "in you shall all the nations be blessed" (3:8, quoting Gen 12:3). As a hermeneutical criterion, the doctrine of election tended to push toward ethnocentric nationalism; but the criterion of the gospel pushes toward universality.

KANON IN 2 CORINTHIANS 10

The only other place Paul uses *kanon* is in 2 Cor 10: 13,15,16:

¹³ But we shall not boast beyond measure, but according to the measure of the *kanon*, which measure God measured to us, that we should come even as far as you. ¹⁴ For we did not go beyond our limit, as if we were not coming to you, for we did arrive even as far as you with the gospel of Christ, ¹⁵ for we do not boast beyond measure in others' labors, but we have hope, as your faith is growing, of being magnified in you in abundance, according to our *kanon*, ¹⁶ in order to evangelize even the region beyond you, not to boast in what has been accomplished in another's *kanon*. ¹⁷ But "Let the one who boasts boast in the LORD."

Here Paul's *kanon* is his commission to preach, which he describes in geographical terms. The closest parallel is an edict from Pisidia, dated AD 18, carved on marble in both Latin and Greek.¹¹ In it the Roman governor, Sextus Sotidius defines the terms under which the people of Sagalassos are required to furnish transportation for soldiers and imperial officials passing through their territory. He sets standards for the numbers of pack animals expected, the fee per animal that the Sagalassenes may charge, and the geographical limits of their duties. In Latin, Sotidius refers to his edict as a *formula*, and the Greek translation is *kanon*. Like Sotidius' edict, Paul's *kanon* in 2 Corinthians 10 defines the terms of his preaching.

But in what sense does this *kanon* define Paul's mission? Elsewhere, he speaks of his mission in ethnic terms, to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; Rom 11:13,25), and it knows know geographical limits (Rom 1:13). Even in 2 Corinthians 10 he understands his mission in spiritual terms, not fleshly (2 Cor 10:3-4). So perhaps the *kanon* here prescribes not where or how Paul should preach but what he should preach (Jesus Christ who "was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God," 2 Cor 13:4) and to whom he should preach (Gentiles). If so, then perhaps Paul's use of *kanon* in 2 Cor 10:13-16 is not so far from his usage in Gal 6: 16.¹²

EARLY CHRISTIAN ADAPTATIONS OF PAUL'S KANON

Christian writers in the second and third centuries followed Paul's usage of "the gospel" as the criterion for evaluating theological questions. For example, the gospel is the criterion for faithful living (or faithful dying) in emulation of Jesus: "We wish you well, brothers, as you conform (*stoichountas*) to the word about Jesus Christ which is according to the gospel ..."¹³

W. R. Farmer has suggested that early Christians began referring to this gospel message as a *kanon* (Latin, *regula*), developing Paul's idea in response to Marcion's misreading of Galatians 6:16.¹⁴ According to Tertullian, the beginning point for Marcion's heresy was his separation of law from gospel, with the theological consequence that he distinguished the God of the Old Testament from the Father who sent Jesus:

Forasmuch then as it is on all accounts evident that there was from Christ down to Marcion's time no other God in the rule [regula] of sacred truth's than the Creator, the proof of our argument is sufficiently established, in which we have shown that the god of our heretic first became known by his separation of the gospel and the law.¹⁵

Farmer suggests that Marcion misread Gal 6:16 as referring to two different groups—those who conform to this *kanon* (Christians) and the Israel of God (Jews). In reaction to Marcion, early Christians began showing that the *kanon* does not support an antithesis between law and gospel or between the creator and the father of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Irenaeus, for example, argues that “the rule of truth” (*regula veritatis*) affirms, “but one God, the Creator of this universe, who sent the prophets, who led forth the people from the land of Egypt, who in these last times manifested His own Son.”¹⁷

Once they started down a path proving the identity of Jesus with the creator God, it is easy to see how early Christians developed the *regula* into a statement on the nature of the Trinity,¹⁸ moving toward the fixed creedal formulations of the fourth century. But before all that, early Christians employed Paul's idea of *kanon* as the criterion for interpreting Scripture and making ethical judgments.

For Clement of Alexandria the *kanon* functions, as it did for Paul, as a criterion for interpreting scripture:

The liars, then, in reality are not those who ... do not quote or deliver the Scriptures in a manner worthy of God and of the Lord; for the deposit rendered to God, according to the teaching of the Lord by His apostles, is the understanding and the practice of **the godly tradition**. “And what ye hear in the ear “ -- that is, in a hidden manner, and in a mystery (for such things are figuratively said to be spoken in the ear) -- “proclaim,” He says, “on the housetops,” understanding them sublimely, and delivering them in a lofty strain, and **according to the canon of the truth** explaining the Scriptures; for neither prophecy nor the Saviour Himself announced the divine mysteries simply so as to be easily apprehended by all and sundry, but express them in parables. ... “But all things are right,” says the Scripture, “before those who understand,” that is, those who receive and observe, according to the ecclesiastical rule, the exposition of the Scriptures explained by Him; and **the ecclesiastical rule** is the concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord.¹⁹

Again like Paul, Clement used the *kanon* to evaluate moral questions. For example, in discussing sexual ethics, he employs language from Galatians to renounce “those who conform (*stoichesantes*) to everything other than the gospel *kanon*, which is in accordance with the truth.”²⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Paul's *kanon* is Christocentric. It is the story of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' victory over death marked the end of “this age,” of a way of living in slavery to the fears and desires of flesh. The resurrection marked the inauguration of a “new creation”—or a re-creation of what God intended all along—a way of living according to spirit, of living in submission to the reign of God, free from enslavement to the tyranny of fleshly concerns. This story is the criterion by which he assesses ethical questions and by which he interprets the scriptures of Israel.

As an ethical criterion, Paul means for this *kanon* to have immediate, practical consequences. The cross critiques those who discriminate on the basis of fleshly distinctions (ethnicity, social class, gender) and those who practice “works of the flesh.”

As a hermeneutical criterion, Paul's *kanon* guides the way he interprets scripture. If we approach questions with the criterion of canon, we ask, Is it scriptural? But that is broader than the question Paul asks, because everything depends on the interpretive lens through which one reads scripture.

For Paul, the operative question is, Does your interpretation of scripture conform to the *kanon* of the cross? Paul's criterion is what God did through Jesus Christ at the cross, and he works out from there.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, translations from the New Testament and other texts are by the author.
- 2 I shall use the English word "canon" to refer to the collection of texts that are foundational for Christians. Because Paul uses the same word but in a very different sense, I shall use the Greek word *kanon* to express Paul's idea.
- 3 On epistolary closings in Paul, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTSup 101; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 110-13; H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 312-13.
- 4 See also J. A. D. Weima, "Gal. 6:11-18: A Hermeneutical Key to the Galatian Letter," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 90-107.
- 5 Where Paul wrote, "conform to the same thing" (*tō autō stoichein*) in Phil 3:16, scribes in the fourth century began writing "conform to the same *kanon*," apparently influenced by Gal 6:16. This is consistent with early Christian understanding of Paul's *kanon* as discussed below.
- 6 Cf. the "new person" in Eph 2:15, 4:24.
- 7 "Of Christ" here is an objective genitive: the reference is to Paul's gospel *about* Christ.
- 8 J. Louis Martyn, "Apocalyptic Antinomies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 410-24; repr. in idem, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 111-23.
- 9 See, for example, Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95-122; repr. in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: WJKP, 1990), 183-214; idem, "4QMMT and Galatians," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 147-53; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- 10 N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 157-74.
- 11 G. H. R. Horsley, "The Regional *kanon* for Requisitionary Transport," *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1976* (North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University, 1981), 36-45; James F. Strange, "2 Corinthians 10:13-16 Illuminated by a Recently Published Inscription," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46.3 (1983): 167-8.
- 12 Contra Betz, 321, n. 91.
- 13 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 22.
- 14 W. R. Farmer, "Galatians and the Second-Century Development of the Regula Fidei," *Second Century* 4.3 (1984): 143-70.
- 15 Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.21 (trans., A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ANF 3, p. 286); cf. 1.19.
- 16 G. K. Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Galatians 6,16b 1," *Biblica* 80 (1999): 204-223, demonstrates that "the Israel of God" in Gal 6:16 refers to all Christians, both Jewish and Gentile converts.
- 17 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.35.4 (ANF 1, p. 514); cf. 1.22.1; 3.11.1. Irenaeus here opposes Valentinian Gnostics, who were a step removed from Marcion.
- 18 Irenaeus, 1.10.1 (trans., Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 13; *Against Praxeas* 2; Origen, *On First Principles* 1. pref 3-4)
- 19 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.15 (ANF 2, p. 509). Cf. the 4th-century *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.5.4, where the bishop should "be able carefully to interpret the Scriptures, expounding the Gospel in correspondence with the prophets and with the law; and let the expositions from the law and prophets correspond (*stoicheitosan*) to the Gospel" (ANF 7, p. 307).
- 20 *Stromata* 3.9.66.1; and cf. the quotation of 2 Cor 5:17 (3.9.62.2). Note that Clement is also using the *kanon* here to evaluate the *Gospel According to the Egyptians* as heretical (3.9.63-67).

