

God's Economy and Human Salvation: A Discussion on Apostle Paul's Account of Salvation from Galatians 3:21-24

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1. Introduction

In order to assess micro-macro interactions of the concepts of ethnicity and nations, the connection between citizens' psychological motivations and the source of national solidarity could be an important focus. This paper attempts to elucidate the historical source of ethnic solidarity originating in the individual level. More specifically, the meaning of Galatians 3:21-24 in the New Testament of the Bible, with a focus on what Apostle Paul as an evangelist and social reformer (in a sense) is talking about concerning human salvation as God's economy (i.e., His dealing with the history and us humans for salvation). Salvation is an ontological issue, yet God-less humans are "foolish" (Gal 3:1) enough to take God's ontological (i.e., meaning material here) blessing as simply "given" without acknowledgment for receipt and they try merely to maximize their own perceived earthly benefits, at the cost of relinquishing God's economy of salvation through accepting Christ Jesus not as human merit but as God's grace.

This style of human living, as corrupt as being exemplified by "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (Gal 5:19-21), could be referred to as "human economy" under which humans are trying to desperately maximize their earthly pleasure. God's economy leading to salvation, and human economy leading to destruction (that is why Paul lamented the foolishness of Galatians as human representatives), should have been contrasted by those foolish

Galatians. This paper therefore attempts to highlight the differences between God's economy and human economy through the text of Galatians 3:21-24 dealing with God's economy for human salvation, from a redemptive historical perspective. As the term economy in the modern sense of the word has literally "economic" (as in "economics", i.e., financial resource management under scarcity), discussions will also be made from the perspective of modern accounting (in a financial sense) since accounting is seen to be the core part of (earthly) human economy.

The next section makes an overview of Galatians 3:21-24 as a preparation for the following section 3 on God's economy and human economy in comparison. Section 4 briefly concludes this paper with some remark on the implication of Gal 3:21-24 for modern readers.

2. Overview of Gal 3:21-24

This section makes an overview of Gal 3:21-24 with nationalism (Judaizers) and universalism (new creation through Christ), possibly held in comparison by Paul. In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul has argued that his gospel is the true one. Now the question is: "What is Paul's gospel?" So in chapters 3 and 4, the apostle defines his gospel. In short, it is that justification (salvation), comes as a result of one's faith in Christ, not as a result of trying to obey the law. Paul argues this point by appealing to the Galatians' own experience (3:1-5), to Old Testament Scripture (3:6-14), and then to the Abrahamic covenant (3:15-18). He then addresses the purpose of the law (3:19-29), the law's temporary nature (4:1-11), and allegory (4:21-31). This is the literary context of Galatians 3:21-24 (Willmington, 1981).

Galatians 3:21 states:

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.

The violation of Israel held in view in this verse is not the responsibility of the Law but as a result of Israel being under sin as part of all creation.

Next, Galatians 3:22 states,

But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

This section begins with the conjunction “but (alla)” indicating a strong inverse, and starts to overturn unrealistic assumptions in the conditional method in the second half of the previous section. It can be thought that the whole system of the Law, that is, the social system in which the humans implement various provisions of the Law is under guilty as part of “everything.” “Everything” in this verse is a neuter plural noun, i.e., “all matters.” It is a general expression that refers to the whole of the creature. Therefore, people of all ages are being considered, including all the people and creatures in Paul’s time. That “everything” is “under sin” indicates the plight that all creation deviates from creation order as a result of mankind’s disobedience.

It is not a law (*nomos*) to have “locked all things” here but “scriptures (*graphe*).” If it is the Law (*nomos*) that locked up, it is limited to Israel, but here, broader “all things” are in view. Paul first mentioned the plight of creatures including human beings in general in chapter 3, and laid the foundation for countering the misunderstanding or overemphasis on the Law. He personifies the Jewish scripture and emphasizes the sovereignty of God in sovereignty. In Gal 3:8 the scriptures declared blessings of all the races. This verse also emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the authority of the word in the relief plan of all

humanity, i.e., God's economy.

Paul used in Gal 1: 4 the expression “current evil era” (αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστώτος πονηροῦ) to express his apocalyptic worldview. Mankind departed from creation order as a result of their disobedience, and its effect covered not only human beings but also the entire era. Therefore Paul later states that under the power of sin, all creations have been moaning and waiting for the redemption (Roma 8: 22). This is indeed Paul's expression of God's economy. Paul refers to a more universal plight in solving the misunderstanding in the previous section, as a foundation of the defense of the Law (which is not the source of sinfulness) while revealing the relationship among sin, flesh and the Law in Rom 7.

Paul, with his eschatological focus, expresses the power which dominates the present evil era by the singular noun “sin” (hamartia), while plural forms (sins) are common in the Jewish tradition.

Then Galatians 3:23 goes as follows.

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.

Paul's focus returns from the plight of the mankind in general and liberation from it to his original theme of the purpose of the Law. The role of the Law resides in the period “[b]efore this faith comes.” The “Faith (*ten pistin*)” with an article refers to the faithfulness of Christ as expressed in the previous verse, that is, the integrity of Christ before God as elucidated on the cross. Paul further expresses in the second half of this verse the arrival of this faith as: “the faith to come is revealed”.

“Righteousness”, i.e., the right relationship with God in an eternal covenant is not brought by the Law. The discussion of “Who is the people of the covenant” presented by Paul between himself and his opponents reminds us of seeking the establishment of a

national state which the modern history, not God's people but an autonomous human kingdom, faced. This pursuit for human autonomy fostered nationalism. If we understand nationalism as an attitude of requesting that the nation state as an organization of order maintenance agree with ethnic units, its success is to assimilate those who deviate from under the illusion of a single nation.

The deep involvement of ethnic identity in this discussion makes us feel that the theology of Paul is giving clues in considering the national propensity of the modern society, or "human economy." Paul's understanding on the redemptive history was in an ambivalent context of justifying his own Gentile ministry while belonging to the community of Jewish Christians as belonging to the Jewish "Nazarene" school (Longenecker, 1990). The vision of fulfillment of God's covenant was a bold embodiment of universal desire which was smoldering in the Jewish tradition. The blessing of God's covenant extends through Abraham, but to the whole human race in a way that maintains the characteristic ethnicity of each. Regarding a community in which there is one "multi-ethnic" group in God's coming governance, the expression "one person" and "one" refers to fairness and harmony in which all discriminatory fence is removed. This was the universalism which Paul felt God envisioned, that was part of God's economy of redemption of all who believed.

The term "reveal, to uncover" (*apokalyphtenai*) is used to describe Paul's transformation experiences that the Son of God is revealed and his argument is backed by his own personal apocalyptic experience on the road to Damascus (in Acts 9). This signifies his understanding as well as experience of God's redemptive history, as part of God's economy. In the midst of the present evil days, it was revealed that the faith of

Christ brought about the fulfillment of the eternal covenant.

The “We”, which is talked about in relation to the Law, is naturally taken as referring to the Jews. Paul describes the plight peculiar to the Jews, using “repeatedly confining (*ephrouroumetha*)” used in the previous section to express the plight of the general population of humankind and also using “to detain (*synkleiomenoi*)”. The combined use of these verbs is also seen in the Book of Wisdom, which shows how Egyptians who persecute Israel are imprisoned in God’s judgment: In the Book of Wisdom 17: 2, Egyptians who do not have the Law to harm Israel are confined under judgment, while in Gal 3:23 Jews with the Law are confined under judgment. The latter is the worldview peculiar to Paul, which cannot be found in Judaism of and before his era. From the combined use of these two words, the Law tends to be taken negatively; Paul however does not show a negative understanding of the purpose of the Law. In the next verse he explains the function of the Law itself, using the metaphor of the Roman educational system.

Next, Gal 3:24 states:

So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

As in the previous verse, “We” refers to Jews. The word “guardian (*paidagogos*)” refers to a slave or liberated former slave, who mainly attends to educating and supervising the master’s children¹, but he also had a wider responsibility than just being a caretaker for the children. Plutarch, a historian in almost the same age as Paul’s, talks about the folly that uses poor slaves for child’s discipline while using good quality slaves for other

¹ They were distinguished from teachers at elementary schools, grammar schools, rhetorical schools and others, but some cultured slaves were involved in primary education for children.

housework and family businesses. Paul noted the binding force as possessing the role of a guardian's protection and supervision and the fact that the guardian is responsible for directing the young person toward adulthood, and used it as a metaphor for explaining the purpose of the Law. Paul's primary concern in this verse is to "sketch the progress of salvation history", i.e., "he meant that the Law brought mankind into, and kept mankind under, an objectively desperate situation, from which there was no escape until the revelation of faith as a new possibility" (Fung, 1953: 169).

In this connection, Plutarch parallels laws and guardians, and states that alcohol releases human reasons from the detention (by legal systems). Paul expresses here the constructive role of the Law as "towards Christ (*eis Christon*). The Law keeps the Jews under its supervision in the process of reaching the fulfillment of the agreement that Christ brings, as the youngster goes to adulthood and the caretaker serves as protection and supervision. The Jewish unfaithfulness resulted in bringing them to a destructive curse, but the Law itself is not evil. The purpose of the Law as revealed in this verse is "to rely on faith so that we are made righteous." And the "faith" bringing about "righteousness" is the "faith of Christ" mentioned as in the previous verse.

3.Human economy from the perspective of Pauline epistles and accounting

This section compares God's economy as envisioned by Paul and human economy held by Paul's contemporary thinkers from the perspective of modern accounting.² Figure 1 shows the accounting (in the form of a standard "T account" of "Asset" referring to righteousness for salvation, debt (sin) and merit (human salvation by God or through self-

² It is said that medieval Christians in Europe actually had the sense of this sort of accounting in mind, in their daily faith life.

righteousness if at all). There is a need to “write off” the debt (or “sin”); God’s economy as revealed by God to Paul points to “grace” of the blood of Christ, while all the other ways of thinking, i.e., human economy, advocate “earning” the merit (or capital in the modern accounting sense) to match the “Asset” (on the left hand side of the T account) of salvation.

Figure 1. Accounting of Asset (for salvation), debt (sin) and merit (human salvation)

Asset	Debt
	Merit

Source: Made by the author.

Table 1 shows an accounting-oriented comparison of human “salvation” (albeit nor really, from the literal sense of the word salvation), on the basis of the “accounting” in Figure 1. Paul’s point is, of course, justification by faith alone, i.e., sin-indebted humans have no “net asset”, while human economy thoughts, both critical and conservative, are critical about it.³

From Paul’s perspective, even the self-righteousness including sacrificed animals and the human capacity for good-looking works were given by God as a grace (since the land belongs to the Lord, as the only source of capital assets, and human thinking faculty was also from God). Human economy perspectives, however, opposes Paul’s view, without notice or with intentional neglect because of the human corrupt nature.

³ Fredrickson (2010) discusses that Paul’s resistance to circumcising Gentiles precisely preserved the distinctions according to the flesh, which were native to Jewish restoration eschatology even in its Pauline iterations and that Paul required pagans not to worship their native gods, as a *ritual* and a Judaizing demand. This means that his mission was not a Law-free mission but Law-completion mission.

Concerning human faculty, in passing, the modern-day moral philosopher Adam Smith writes in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 1759). Smith (1759: 20), under the intellectual influence of Scottish Enlightenment, thus states: “Mankind, though *naturally* sympathetic, never conceive, for what has befallen another, that degree of passion which *naturally* animates the person principally concerned.” (italics added). The word “naturally” implies the enlightenment, God-less spirit of human economy characterized by human autonomy.⁴

Table 1. Balance Sheet of “salvation” (or purpose of life) in Pauline epistles compared

	Increase of Asset (and/or Decrease of Debt)	Increase of Debt (and/or Decrease of Asset)
Paul's New Man (in his Epistles) which is God's economy	Justification asset (which can only be increased by faith in Christ alone, not by observing the Law)	Original sin (as debt) Christ's redemption
<i>Types of human economy (below)</i>		
Judaism	Justification asset (which can be increased by observing the Law)	No original sin (no debt) Net (self) righteousness
Judaizers	Justification asset (which can be increased by observing the Law)	Original sin (as debt) Self-righteousness Christ's redemption
Greek Philosophers: aestheticism	No need to increase “justification asset” since that simply does not matter	No original sin (no debt to repay)
Greek Philosophers:	No need to increase	No original sin (no debt to

⁴ Smith (1759: 22-23) continues:

Society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility, if, at any time, it has unfortunately lost it; as well as the best preservatives of that equal and happy temper, which is so necessary to self-satisfaction and enjoyment. “Self-satisfaction” is a replacement for “salvation.” And he continues his discussion on how the human faculty of achieving self-satisfaction on the basis of mutual “sympathy.” In this enlightenment discussion, there is no explicit place for the God of grace and salvation.

stoicism	“justification asset” since that is not spiritually valuable	repay)
Roman pragmatism (in Paul's time)	Accept the “Christian faith” if pragmatically useful for ruining the Roman empire	Not clear about this

Source: Made by the author.

In connection to justification and regeneration, Chester (2009) discusses that Traditional Protestant accounts of Paul's theology are sometimes criticized for their inability to relate justification by faith and the participatory categories of Paul's thought, i.e., regeneration as an internal lifelong process. In this sense, “good work” as a result of regeneration seems to go along with justification; the two however, should be distinguished clearly, and Paul in Galatians 3:21-24 is making clear that salvation can only come from Christ, and not from Law keeping. In his exegesis of Paul, he nonetheless connects justification by faith and participation in Christ.

Thus, there were (and are) many schools of thoughts concerning “salvation” through merit or through a mediator of some sort, yet the only “school”, echoing Paul's metaphor of Law as being a guardian (or “schoolmaster”), is the world itself in which he lived (and in which we live). In the redemptive history made clear in Christ's first coming is the only source of “salvation accounting”, as shown in Galatians 3:21-24.

4. Implications of Gal 3:21-24 for the modern world

This section briefly discusses implications of Gal 3:21-24 for the modern world as an extension for interpreting the passage. The purpose of the Law is to show us how sinful we are. And for Paul it was indispensable to know and then show through revelation that sin leads to self-righteousness where there was no place for Christ who was crucified as

our justification “asset.” The Law is not contrary to God’s promise. The Law leads us up to Jesus Christ. There is nothing good for us, and just to know that salvation is in Christ is actually coming from God’s grace, personally and from the perspective of redemptive history, or under God’s economy.

With modernization and secularization taking place in our contemporary society, God’s economy (His dealings with us humans) and human economy (humans’ autonomous and anthropocentric life style which is God-less and at times felt comfortable since there is no one monitoring our behaviors) have been diverging from each other. This paper has made an attempt therefore to put God’s economy for our salvation and human economy in comparison, through Apostle Paul’s text on salvation in Galatians 3:21-24.

The Jewish people in Paul’s time had lost sight of the purpose of the Law. When they thought they violated the law, they raised animals and sacrificed them for removing sin. The priest placed his hand on its head and the priest cut down the sacrificed animal’s throat, shed blood, sprinkled it on the altar, and the meat was burned on the altar. And that was their source of their “self-righteousness.” While looking at these sacrifices, the Law should have been remembered so that the people of Israel would crave for the one to remove their sin. The true Messiah was implied in their sacrificing ceremony.

However, many of Paul’s contemporary Jewish people thought that they had to live by the Law, for salvation. They did not have match their own long-held view on the coming of their messiah (possibly an earthly king to rule the earthly kingdom of God) with Jesus who rescued us from our sin. The kingdom of Christ I would think is characterized as possessing harmony of “diversity in Christ”, i.e., Jewish and gentiles alike, as long as they share the harmony of belief in Christ. This was done by the grace

of Christ as our only merit for salvation, and God has this grace as well as sovereignty to give us grace. There is no place of salvation in “human economy” which includes the contemporary and secular economy which is capitalism oriented by and large, since for secular-oriented citizens there is simply no need for it. Christians, however, need Christ as the only “asset” or “capital” in the salvation “accounting”, and that is revealed in the history of redemption as Paul mentions in Galatians 3:21-24 via comparison of the Law and Christ. As the concept of nation building is being awakened at the beginning of the 21st century e.g., the United Kingdom planning to leave the European Union as a grouping of European nations, the origin of the concept of nations as generated through the individual (micro)-nation (more macro) interactions should be studied more from trans-disciplinary perspectives.

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