

Coming of Age

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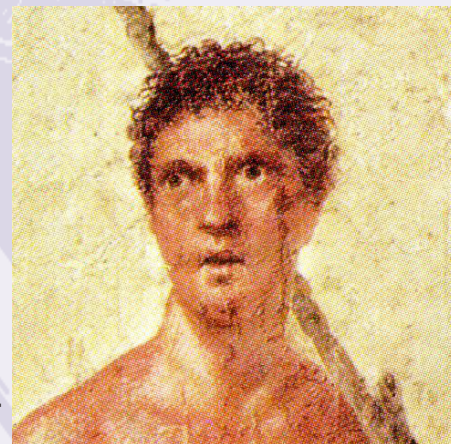
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When do you grow up? Or, to put it in Americanized terms, when do you become a legal adult? In our culture, it is determined by individual states with ages that range from 17 to 21 years old with 18 years being the most common designation. [That range](#) evidently is pretty much true in most countries in the modern world. Adulthood in the U.S. is mostly a legal status. At the entrance into legal adulthood -- the move from being a minor to an adult on the designated birthday -- one is able to do certain things within the boundaries of the legal system that were previously forbidden, such as entering into contracts without a guardian's approval.

The world of the first Christian century was light years different from this modern approach. Adulthood (*ajdria*, *pubes*) in that world almost exclusively meant "marriage-ability." The moment of adulthood arrival depended on gender and on culture. Generally common across Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures was that the female arrived at adulthood once she reached puberty in her early teen years. Interestingly, no specific terms existed in ancient Greek for a girl "in her youth" from puberty to her early 20s, while extensive terms existed for the male. The teen years and early twenties were her child-bearing years and so terms for mother and wife are applied to her. For the male, on the other hand, the situation was different. In the Roman dominated culture of the first century the ancient Roman tradition of [patria potestas](#) determined issues such as adulthood decisions. This meant, the father had sole authority to determine when his son would be declared an adult. At that point in time (Paul's term *proqesnia* in Gal. 4:2), the son would be legally declared an adult in a ceremony before a Roman magistrate. Any pre-arranged wedding contract that the father had made with the father of a girl could then be implemented. In first century Roman society, this declaration of adulthood would typically occur sometime when the young boy was between 25 and 30 years of age. But it all depended on the determination of the father. And even afterwards the son was still under the absolute control of the father as long as he was alive. The more collective oriented Semitic

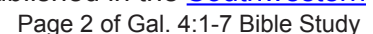


The importance of this background is pivotal to our study of Gal. 4:1-7. Paul uses the Roman custom of arriving at adulthood as the illustration to discuss implications of Christian conversion. Because that process is so utterly different than in our culture, failure to understand the Roman tradition means there's no way to correctly or fully understand how Paul uses it to discuss Christian conversion. Thus much of what he says about conversion here depends upon the details of the background image.

Previous Bible [studies in Galatians](#) that are posted under Bible Studies at Cranfordville will provide most of the background material. New material will be added to supplement that material.

External History. That Paul is responsible for the composition of this letter has remained virtually unquestioned throughout the nearly 2,000 years of interpretative history. Even the radical Tübingen School (Tübingen Schule) of the 1800s under F.C. Baur, who questioned the authenticity of all but four of the Pauline letters, included Galatians in the so-called Big Four -- Romans, 1/2 Corinthians and Galatians -- of the authentic Pauline Letters.

journey written at Corinth in Greece during the late 50s. The provincial understanding leads to two options: (1) Galatians was written at Antioch of Syria at the close of the first missionary journey about 48 AD; or, (2) it was written from Macedonia in Greece during the second missionary journey during the late 40s to early 50s. This third option is the one that I'm convinced is the correct identification, and will be the basis for the following interpretation. For more details, see my article "A Rhetorical Reading of Galatians" originally published in the [Southwestern](#)



[Journal of Theology](#) in the fall of 1994. Also helpful is the [Timeline of Pauline Ministry](#) available at [cranfordville.com](#).

Thus, Galatians is Paul's letter of concern written to the churches established on the [first missionary journey](#) (AD 46-47) after he had revisited them on the [second missionary journey](#) (AD 48-51). Somewhere in Macedonia, he received word that teachers had arrived at Galatia from Palestine and were teaching that the apostolic gospel actually demanded that non-Jews must first convert to Judaism (circumcision and Torah obedience pledge) and then put their faith in Christ in order to become Christians. This violated the agreement reached at the Jerusalem Council meeting in AD 48, as well as represented

a fatal misrepresentation of the revelation that Paul had received concerning the content of the gospel. Circumstances prevented Paul from traveling back to Galatia to confront these false teachers. So he did the next best thing; he wrote them a letter addressing the issues of his authority to preach the gospel as an apostle (1:11-2:21) and a defense of the content of the gospel message that he preached (3:1-6:10).

Internal History. The time and place markers inside 4:1-7 are focused primarily on the Roman custom of manhood in Paul's world and the implications of Christ's coming to provide salvation and how that relates to his use of the Roman custom for Christian application. Thus, they will be treated in the exegesis of the passage below.



b. Literary

Genre. The literary form of 4:1-7 needs to be seen from differing levels. Galatians is an ancient letter, and like all of Paul's letters, essentially follows the pattern of formal Greco-Roman letters in that world. Our passage comes as a part of the [letter Body](#) that runs from 1:11 through 6:10. As such it is an important part of his defense of his gospel message. The letter body essentially revolves around three themes: 1) defending his apostleship (*Narratio*, chaps 1-2; 2) defending his gospel (*Probatio*, chaps. 3-4); and 3) admonishing the Galatians to live according to this gospel (*Exhortatio*, chaps. 5-6). Gal. 4:1-7 then comes as a part of the defense of his preaching of the Gospel. The nature of an ancient *Probatio* in argumentation for a viewpoint tended to focus on presenting a series of relevant arguments that helped prove one's case. In this section of Galatians, 3:1-5:1, Paul puts together a series of arguments reflecting not only his skill with ancient Greek rhetoric, but also reflecting argumentation styles of ancient Jewish scribes, in which he was also well trained during his days as a Pharisee. In

this section of Galatians we see both his worlds -- the Greco-Roman and the Jewish -- come together as a source of thought structure to help him defend his understanding of the Gospel of Christ. 4:1-7 reflects one of those styles, where we sense his adeptness in using customs out of the Roman world to serve as a foundation for Christian teaching. He masterfully uses the Roman custom of coming into manhood as a teaching point for what happens at Christian conversion on the basis of the crucifixion of Christ on the cross.

Literary Context. The literary structure of the letter is reasonably clear, especially in light of the scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century, particularly the work of Hans Dieter Betz on Galatians in the *Hermeneia* commentary series. In the larger internet version of this study is a detailed [rhetorical outline](#) of Galatians, which I originally published in the 1980s in a massive study manual on Galatians for use in advanced Greek exegesis courses at Southwestern Baptist Seminary. Here is the *Probatio* section:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF GALATIANS

| HEADING: | STATEMENT: | REFERENCE: |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| PRESCRIPTIO | | 1.1-5 |
| PROPOSITIO (PROEM) | | 1.6-10 |
| BODY | | 1.11-6.10 |
| Narratio | 1-7 | 1.11-2.21 |
| Probatio | 8-192 | 3.1-4.31 |
| Conversion (1) | 8-52 | 3.1-5 |
| Abraham (2) | 53-139 | 3.6-14 |
| Law (3) | | 3.15-18 |
| Excursus A | | 3.19-25 |

| | | | |
|------------|-----|---------|----------|
| Baptism | (4) | 90-104 | 3.26-4.7 |
| Experience | (5) | 105-108 | 4:8-11 |
| Friendship | (6) | 109-121 | 4.12-20 |
| Allegory | (7) | 122-139 | 4:21-31 |

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Exhortatio | 140-191 |
| CONCLUSIO (ESCHOTOKOLL) | 192-204 |

5.1-6.10

6.11-18

As can be seen from this outline, 4:1-7 is the second half of argument number 4 that is focused on Christian baptism. This larger pericope, 3:26-4:7, begins with the declaration in 3:26-27: “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The implications of that experience of “putting on Christ” in conversion are substantial as Paul outlines in 3:28-4:7:

1. There is no longer Jew or Greek,
2. There is no longer slave or free,
3. There is no longer male and female;
4. For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
5. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

(continued in 4:1-7)

This is where we pick up Paul's arguments in our study.

II. Message

Literary Structure. The internal arrangement of Paul's thoughts in 4:1-7 is easy to understand. **First**, he reaches out of the Roman custom of arriving at manhood in vv. 1-2. This was a principle taken from everyday non-religious life and would have been very clear to his initial readers. He elaborates on relevant aspects of what it meant to be a "minor" (**νηπιος**) and then what it meant to reach the day of designated manhood (**προγεσνια**). Because of how he intended to apply the metaphor, he stresses the contrast in status between being a slave (**δουλος**) during the period of being a minor and being a master (**κυριος**) once the boy arrived at the designated point of adulthood. **Then**, in a twofold presentation, vv. 3-6 & 7, he applies the metaphor to a discussion of conversion. He begins with an application of the metaphor, vv. 3-6, and then draws some implications of that in v. 7.

The [Block](#) and [Semantic](#) diagrams, along with the [Summary of the Rhetorical Structure](#), elaborate on this arrangement in a more detailed analysis of the Greek text of the verses.

a. Roman manhood, vv. 1-2

Greek NT

1 Λέγω δέ, ἐφ' ὅσον
χρόνον ὁ κληρονόμος
νήπιός ἐστιν, οὐδὲν
διαφέρει δούλου κύριος
πάντων ὢν, 2 ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ
ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ
οἰκονόμους ἄχρι τῆς
προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρός.

NASB

1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.

NRSV

1 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; 2 but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.

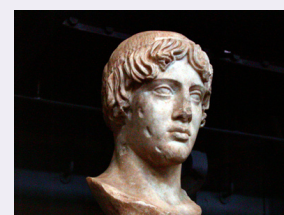
NLT

1 Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves great wealth for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. 2 They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set.

Notes:

Paul demonstrates sensitivity to the cultural world around him by turning to Roman tradition as a background illustration of what it means to “put on Christ” in conversion. As discussed above in the [Introduction](#), coming into adulthood as a Roman boy was a very different process than for a young American boy. Paul does not go into many details of that process, since his initial readers clearly understood them. Instead, he selects elements out of the process that he can apply to the parallel spiritual “coming of age” in conversion discussion that follows in vv. 3-7.

Sorting out Paul's terms and the two eras marked by the turning point be-



comes important for grasping the illustration.

Period of being a Minor.

νήπιός. The word itself, *nepios*, basically refers to a child in popular usage in ancient Greek. But Paul's use here is within a legal framework because of his illustration. Thus the meaning in such a setting becomes more the equivalent of the English word "minor." And thus "minor" stands in contrast to "adult" in legal English terms. In ancient Greek, the contrast to νήπιος would be ἀνήρ, from a legal standpoint. One difficulty is that such a legal definition of the Greek word is hard to establish in existing literature. It appears that Paul is using it as a synonym for the Latin legal equivalent of *infans*. This assumes that the apostle's illustration is drawing from general principles in the Roman legal tradition. But more about that question below.

In American culture, and in ancient Jewish culture as well, the transition point from one era to the other was based on the age of the boy. In the US, typically that transition occurs on the boy's eighteenth birthday. In ancient Jewish culture, it was on his thirtieth birthday. The Greek society was somewhat oriented the same way with the transition point generally coming at the boy's thirtieth birthday. But in Roman society that functioned under the *pater familias* legal system, that transition point was determined exclusively by the father, or the legally appointed guardian if the father was no longer alive.

Puberty played an important role, but in different ways for the male and for the female. For the girl, puberty transitioned her from childhood directly into adulthood. But for the boy, puberty moved him from childhood to youth which then lasted until the move into formal adulthood.

In Paul's analogy, this period of being a "minor" signaled a very low status. Something he mentions in vv. 1b-2. The young Roman boy as a minor was no better off than a slave: οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου. In fact, his status was actually lower than some of the household slaves, as Paul goes on to declare: ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ οἰκονόμους. That is, he was subject to the authority of some of the administrative slaves who had charge of running the household.

In the online [Wikipedia article](#) on "*pater familias*" the following characterization is given:

The pater familias was the highest ranking male in a Roman household. The term is Latin for "father of the family." The form is irregular and archaic in Latin,



preserving the old genitive ending in -as; see Latin declension.

The power held by the *pater familias* was called *patria potestas*, "paternal power." *Potestas* is distinct from *auctoritas*, also held by the *pater*. Under the laws of the *Twelve Tables*, the *pater familias* had *vitae necisque potestas*—the "power of life and death"—over his children, his wife (in some cases), and

his slaves, all of whom were said to be *sub manu*, "under his hand." For a slave to become a freedman, he would have to be delivered "out of the hand" of the *pater familias*, hence the terms *manumissio* and *emancipatio*. At law, at any rate, his word was absolute and final. If a child was unwanted, under the Roman Republic the *pater familias* had the power to order the child put to death by exposure.

He had the power to sell his children into slavery; Roman law provided, however, that if a child has been sold as a slave three times, he is no longer subject to the *patria potestas*. The *pater familias* has the power to approve or reject marriages of his sons and daughters; however, an edict of the Emperor Caesar Augustus provided that the *pater familias* could not withhold that permission lightly.

Only a Roman citizen could enjoy the status of *pater familias*. There could only be one holder of the office within a household. Even male adult children remained under the authority of their fathers while he still lived, and could not acquire the rights of a *pater familias* while he was yet alive; at least in legal theory, all their property was acquired on behalf of their fathers, and he, not they, had ultimate authority to dispose of it. Those who lived in their own households at the time of the father's death succeeded to the status of *pater familias* over their respective households.

For a more detailed examination of family life in ancient Rome see the publication [Daily Life in Ancient Rome](#) by Florence Dupont.

δούλου. Slavery in ancient Rome was significantly different than from the American experience in many ways. For one thing, it was not based on race. Most slaves were captives taken in battle. Typically slaves in the [Patrician Roman](#) households lived a much better life than the [Plebeians](#), the working class people. During the first Christian century over two-thirds of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. They were essentially the vehicle enabling Roman society to exist, as well as the Empire itself.

The following depiction at the [United Nations of Roma Victrix](#) web site highlights some of the basics and more relevant points to Paul's allusion to slavery in our passage:

Slavery in the ancient world and in Rome was vital to both the economy and even the social fabric of the society. While it was commonplace throughout the Mediterranean region, and the Hellenistic regions in the east, it was not nearly so vital to

others as it was to the dominance of Rome. As the Romans consolidated their hegemony of Italy and Sicily followed by the systematic conquest of western Europe, countless millions of slaves were transported to Rome, the Italian countryside, and Latin colonies all over Europe.

Though slavery was prevalent in households throughout the city itself, it was on the farms and plantations where it had its greatest effect. The Roman conquests of Carthage, Macedonia and Greece in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC altered what was once a luxury and privilege for the ruling elite into the predominant factor driving both social and economic policies for the Republic as a whole. The mass influx of slaves during this time period first was a sign of great wealth and power, but later destabilized an already fragile Roman class system. Farms originally run by small business families throughout Italy were soon gobbled up and replaced by enormous slave run plantations owned by the aristocratic elite. Cheap slave labor replaced work for the common man and the roles of the unemployed massive grew to epidemic proportions. These issues had a great destabilizing effect on the social system which had a direct role in the demise of the Republic. As the rift between Senatorial elite (*optimates*) and social reformers (*populares*) grew, the use of the unemployed, landless, yet citizen mobs were an overwhelming ploy grinding away at the ability of the Senate to govern. Though there are many factors involved in the Fall of the Republic, slavery and its effects rippled throughout every aspect of that turbulent time period.

One important aspect in the larger households with large numbers of slaves was the administrative organization of the slaves into groups with specific duties. That becomes important to Paul's analogy with the two following terms, which designate upper level administrative duties of certain slaves. Typically the division of responsibilities revolved around work outside and inside the home of the landed estate owner. The structure might differ in a purely urban center where mercantile business operations were the chief source of income.

Certain slaves were assigned to work the fields, herd the cattle, sheep and goats etc. They were



under the authority of designated supervisory slaves. Slaves assigned to the house revolved around assignments to cook and serve the food (*διάκονοι*; *deaconoi*), to supervise the education of the sons of the master (*παιδαγωγός*; *paidogogos*, cf. Gal. 3:25); slaves responsible for keeping the house repaired and clean; slaves assigned guard duty et als. In the structured organization of multiple slaves, more well educated slaves were trained as doctors, lawyers, accountants etc. At the top of the organizational pyramid were the slaves who functioned as “executives” with the responsibility of overseeing the complete operations of the estate. Paul seemingly names two groups of these in his analogy.

ἐπίτροπος. Many scholars take this term and the following one as synonyms, and as virtual synonyms of *παιδαγωγός* in 3:25. Thus all three terms refer to those entrusted with guardianship responsibilities of the son for a deceased father. But this is largely based on the more detailed data that emerges about Roman life from 500 AD forward, and makes an unlikely assumption about the death of the father. This doesn't fit Paul's analogy at all, and thus is not likely to be what Paul had in mind.

Much more likely for a first century setting the *ἐπίτροπος* was a slave with administrative responsibilities since the term in places such as Mt. 20:8 comes very close to our term “foremen” and designates an individual supervising workers; cf. Louw-Nida *Greek-English Lexicon* topic 37.86. An alternative meaning (L-N topic 36.5) places the meaning very similar to the *παιδαγωγός* (*paidogogos*), mentioned in 3:25. But the pattern here seems to indicate a different person in a higher supervisory role.

οἰκονόμος. This term literally means “the law of the house” and would designate the slave or small group of slaves who oversaw the total operations of the ancient Roman household. J.B. Lightfoot is probably on target when he sees these two terms used together as designating slaves in charge of supervising people and property. As general terms, rather than precise legal titles, Paul designates the supervisory role of the two groups of individuals in the Roman household.

Turning point.

τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρός. Most likely the phrase reflects the long standing Roman tradition of the *pater familias* where the father had sole authority to determine the date of transition into manhood for



the son. Later Roman law after the first century began limiting that authority in some areas. In the case of the probation of a will from a deceased head of the family, later Roman law specified that a son would be in the custody of a *tutor* until his fourteenth birthday and then under the control of a *curator* until his twenty-fifth birthday when he became free of external control. But this is not the scenario that Paul has in mind, and thus Paul reflects an earlier Roman pattern.

Thus several NT commentators err when they apply this later Roman law, called either *tutela impuberis* ("guardianship of a minor") or more precisely *tutela testamentaria* ("guardianship established by testament or will") to Paul's words. No evidence suggests these laws were in place in the first century. These laws also assume that the father is deceased and his will is being probated by the *praetor urbanus*, city magistrate. Such is not the case in Paul's analogy.

Adulthood. In "manhood" the Roman son gained certain rights and privileges. Most important was the implementation of a pre-existing wedding contract that the father had previously made with the father of a young girl. Paul focuses only on those privileges that are relevant to the spiritual application of his illustration.

ὁ κληρονόμος. The son, particularly if he were the first born or the only son, stood to inherit the entire estate of his father. Or, the share specified in his father's will, *testamentum*. With many of the first century [Patrician class](#) aristocrats, this could amount to massive amounts of [land](#) and possessions. By the beginning of the Empire just before the first Christian century most farming, even on the Italian peninsula, was done on large Patrician

estates that had goobled up the small family farm operations of previous centuries. Often the owner lived in the city most of the time but maintained an elaborate home on the farming property as well.

κύριος. This Greek term designated the Patrician head of the family in Paul's illustration, and alludes to the Roman *pa-*

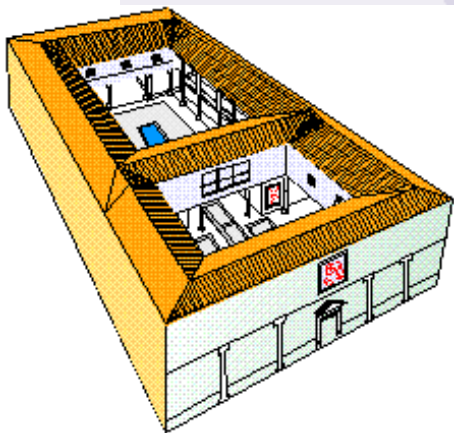
ter familias tradition as the background of Paul's illustration.

The above senario is built on numerous assumptions, not all of which can be easily substantiated by ancient Roman and Greek documents. The wide variations in Roman law from province to province coupled with indications in the literature of different levels of enforcement by regional governors creates a diverse picture which is difficult to accurately describe as a unified system and structure. In some interpretative traditions considerable debate arises over attempting to apply Paul's analogy to known Roman laws of guardianship. The problem with this, as mentioned above, is that details of these laws are know only after the NT era and it is doubtful that many, if not most of them, were in place during the first century. Also, some of Paul's terms do not equate to Latin terms with known legal definition, e.g., ἐπιτρόπος. Thus the challenge of precise identification is more difficult.

A common approach since the pioneering work of William Ramsay in the late 1800s has been to suggest that Paul may have had Syrian provincial legal traditions in mind rather than Roman laws. Cf., Betz, *Hermenia*; Longenecker, *WBC*; Bruce, *NIGTC* et als. Or, that the boundaries of his application dictated the shape of his illustration. To me, the more likely understanding is that Paul made generalized reference to basic patterns of Roman law as he understood them without any particular concern to precisely define the legal code through the use of formal Greek legal terminology. Some of his terms did possess the capability of legal definition, but were not limited to legal meanings.

What a study of the intepretative history of these two verses underscores is the caution necessary in trying to describe in precise legal terminology a scenario for which we posses very limited primary source information. Thus interpretive conclusions based upon the developed understanding must remain tentative. This is no place for arrogant dogmatism! This, in spite of the fact of such dogmatism existing in a few commentaries, particularly the more summary type where space does not allow detailed treatment of a passage.

Also what I observed in the examination of a large number of commentaries is the appaulling lack of interpretive skills in handing an ancient text appropriately. Either through lack of training, or having written in a day before the development of some of the approaches, a few commentators just flat out missed what was going on in the text. The Jamison,



b. Adoption, vv. 3-7

Greek NT

3 οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὅτε ἤμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἤμεθα δεδουλωμένοι· 4 ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον, 5 ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ, ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν. 6 Ὅτι δὲ ἐστε υἱοί, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν κρᾶζον· ἀββα ὁ πατήρ. 7 ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰ δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ.

Notes:

Quite clearly the first three words in verse three signal an application of the illustration in vv. 1-2 to Christian principles: “So also with us” (οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς). The way Paul applies is creative and determines where he goes with his application. By taking the basic elements in the illustration we can

NASB

3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

NRSV

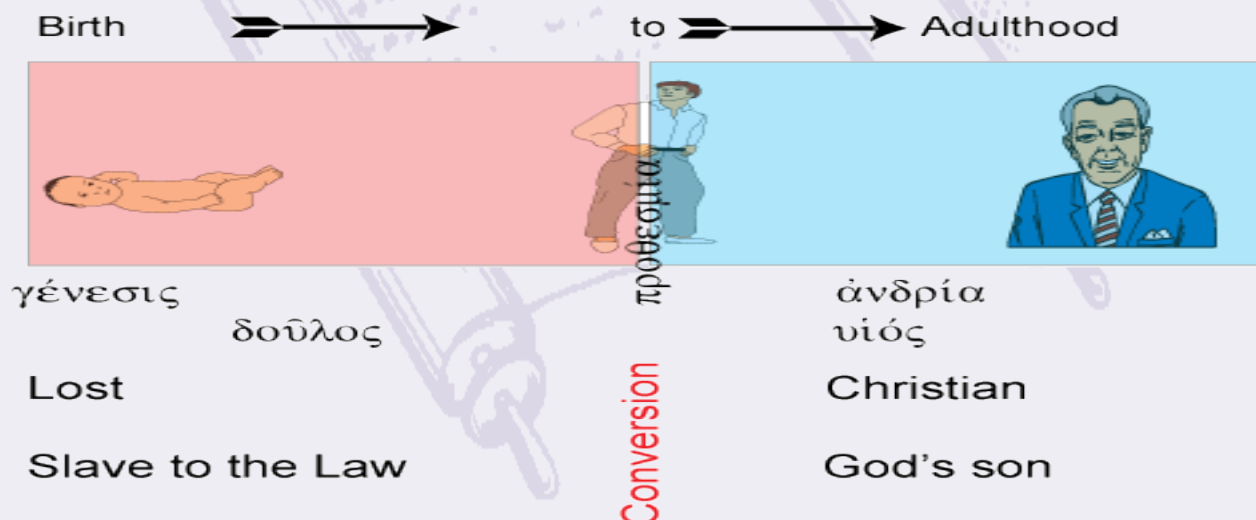
3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

NLT

3 And that's the way it was with us before Christ came. We were slaves to the spiritual powers of this world. 4 But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. 5 God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. 6 And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father. 7 Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you.

sense who and what they compare to in the application. Central is the “appointed time of the father” (ἡ *prosquesmē tou patros*). This becomes Christian conversion, which Paul designates as υἰοθεσία (“sonship,” “adoption”). Thus the person

Life Cycle in Ancient Greco-Roman & Jewish World



under consideration is first not a Christian, and then becomes a Christian. For Paul, the era of being a “minor” (νήπιος) is spiritually the era of being enslaved (ἡμεῖς...ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι). The moment of adoption (ἀπολάβαι υἱοθεσίαν) makes the individual a son (υἱός).

Paul refers to this individual by a series of references: “we” (ἡμεῖς); “you” plural (ὕμεις); “you” singular (συ); “son” (υἱός); “heir” (κληρονόμος). Prior to conversion the individual is a slave (δούλος), but adoption (υἱοθεσία) makes him a son (υἱός).

For Paul the central theological question is how this spiritual adoption can take place. Here the central role of Christ steps forward to center stage. Paul describes Christ’s saving power in a variety of ways in these verses.

His use of “we” and “you” has occasioned considerable discussion because of some rather astounding implications present. Earlier Paul had used the “we” / “you” contrast to mark Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles; cf. 3:23-29. Difference of opinion exists over whether Paul continues that contrast into 4:1-7. Most likely he does, but with some shifts. The second person plural “you,” the Gentile Christian reference, only shows up once in verse 6 and in a very minor role. The other instances of “you” in verse 7 are singular, and reflect an individualizing reference, rather than a group designation.

What becomes astounding is Paul’s use of “we” in verse 3 particularly. The shift is most likely away from “we Jewish Christians” to “all us Christians.” This takes on surprising tones because Paul sees Jews as well as Gentiles enslaved to the “the elemental spirits of the world” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). Typically, a first century Jew would have readily acknowledge the Gentile, i.e., the pagas, to be enslaved to false gods and any spiritual power they may have possessed. But Paul asserts here that both Jews and Gentiles existed in that enslavement prior to Christ coming into their lives.

The internal thought structure of verses 3-7 is arranged in two sections: 1) vv. 3-6, and 2) v. 7. In the first part Paul applies his analogy to the spiritual situation. In verse 7, he shifts to an individualized focus and draws conclusions from the application that reach back to the illustration.

In the first sub-section Paul makes three core declarations in applying his illustration:

1) We stand enslaved [ἡμεῖς...ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι] (v. 3).

2) God sent His son [ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ] (vv. 4-5)

3) God sent the Spirit of His son [ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ] (v. 6)

These three foundational theological assertions are expanded with rich expression.

1) We stand enslaved [ἡμεῖς...ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι] (v. 3). Two primary expansion elements enlarge the core idea:

When we were minors

(ὅτε ἦμεν νήπιοι)

Here Paul reaches back to the language of his analogy to set up an applicational link to the era before manhood in his illustration. That period when the son was little more than a slave is comparable to the individual spiritually before conversion. We are spiritual slaves prior to accepting Christ.

The other significance of this temporal clause is that it marks the era before adoption. In the second core declaration Paul will position another similar temporal clause to mark the adoption era: “**when the fulness of time came.**” These two temporal clauses serve together as inclusio markers to define the “before” and “after” eras so central to his illustration. Together they mark the spiritual “**appointed time of the father**” (τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρὸς) in verse 2.

under the elementary spirits of the world

(ὕπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)

Paul’s point here is to define our master (κύριος) during the pre-conversion era. The phrase is somewhat ambiguous in its precise meaning, and possessed a wide range of meanings in the ancient world. Daniel Arichea and Eugene Nida (*Helps for Translators*, Logos Systems) provide a helpful summation of this phrase:

Paul uses the word “elements” three times (twice in this chapter and once in Col 2.8), and in these occurrences it may refer to one of three things: either (1) knowledge, with special reference to the Law; (2) the spirits or lesser deities which control human destiny; or (3) the physical universe, with special reference to the sun, moon, and other celestial bodies. The first of



these would have reference to the pre-Christian religious experiences of those who had put their trust in impersonal moral principles, as defined by the Law. It is more likely, however, that a combination of the second and the third represents rather accurately what Paul is talking about. Not only was there widespread belief at that time in spiritual forces that rule the universe, but the celestial bodies were talked about as “spirits” endowed with power over man’s destiny. It is clear from what Paul is saying that these powers (meanings 2 and 3) were contrary to God’s will, since they put man in bondage and in a state of fear. The implication seems obvious: in Christ these powers are defeated, and mankind is no longer held in bondage.

In a number of languages the closest equivalent of ruling spirits of the universe is “spirits which control the world,” or “spirits which command things in the world.” These would, of course, be references to so-called “demonic” spirits, but it may be difficult to say that people are “slaves of such spirits.” It may be more appropriate to restructure the sentence to read “the spirits that ruled the world had made us their slaves,” or “...had caused us to serve them like slaves.” If there is a term which would specify not only the “world” but the entire “universe,” this would be very appropriate, since the underlying Greek expression refers to the entire cosmos. It may not, however, be possible to say that being slaves of the ruling spirits of the universe is precisely the same as the relationship of an heir to his guardian (the one managing his affairs), even though the son in some respects is treated like a slave before he inherits all that legally belongs to him.

Thus as spiritual “minors” we are enslaved by and to things contrary to God. To spiritual powers we don’t recognize but which powerfully impact our lives. The front page of just about any newspaper any day of the week graphically illustrates that point in our day.

2) God sent His son [ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ] (vv. 4-5).

The sending of the Son by God is stated as a decisive action referring to the coming of Jesus into this world as Savior. The idea of sending in ἐξαπέστειλεν is that of commissioning. God authorized and



sent out His son with a mission to accomplish.

Again the expansion elements to the verb “sent” and to “Son” provide the rich theological insight. First the verb ἐξαπέστειλεν.

when the fulness of time came

(ὅτε ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου)

First, this expression most likely represents pre-form Christian tradition. Paul has already made substantial use of such material in his

letter; cf. 1:4; 3:1, 13, 26, 27-28. As a part of the material commonly used to teach new converts especially, the significance of the term would have been both meaningful and authoritative to Paul’s Galatian readers.

Second, it highlights the purpose of God, as Richard Longenecker (WBC, Logos Systems) observes:

The idea expressed in the clause “when the fullness of time came”—i.e., that the coming of Christ was fixed in the purpose of God—was common in early Jewish Christianity. It was part of Jesus’ consciousness (cf. Mark 1:15; Luke 1:21), appears in the Church’s early preaching (cf. Acts 2:16ff.; 3:18), and is particularly prominent in the Gospels of Matthew (cf., e.g., the evangelist’s use of πληρῶ, “fulfill,” at 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9, ten of these being his distinctive introductory “fulfillment formulae”) and John (cf., e.g., the evangelist’s seven editorial quotations: 2:17; 12:15, 38, 40; 19:24, 36, 37). Paul shares in this understanding (cf. Acts 13:27; Rom 3:26; 5:6; Eph 1:10), though his usual way of expressing fulfillment to a Gentile audience is simpler, more direct, and without the word πληρῶ (cf. G. Delling, “πληρῶ,” TDNT 6, esp. 296–97; note Paul’s ten introductory formulae in Galatians: 3:6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16; 4:27, 30; 5:14, with πληρῶ appearing in only the last one).

Third, the phrase emphasizes the planning of God for human redemption. When the appropriate point of time arrived, God sent His son. He alone understood the appropriateness of the moment when Jesus was born into this world.

in order to redeem those who were under the law

(ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ)

This is the first of two purpose statements and has generalized thrust. The OT language of “redeem” underscores the Jewish heritage of Paul. To be redeemed was to be bought as a slave from the stoicheia of the world (v. 3) and thus set free from their control. In 3:13, Paul made a similar declaration: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”

so that we might receive adoption as children.

(ἵνα τὴν υἱοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν)

This second purpose clause moves the thought forward to the believer’s experiencing that redemption because of Christ’s work on the cross. God’s Son came to give us adoption (τὴν υἱοθεσίαν) into the Father’s family. The Roman practice of adoption was extensive in the first century with most of the emperors having adopted sons into their family. The seriousness of it centered in the transfer of the *patria potestas* from the birth father to the adopting father. Adoption ended all ties to the previous life and gave the boy a brand new beginning. Seven witnesses were required to be present in the symbolic “selling” of the *patria potestas* to the adopting father before a magistrate.

This Son whom God sent defined in two rich Greek participial expressions.

born of a woman

(γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός)

Here Paul affirms the incarnation of Christ through being born to Mary, but implies nothing about Paul’s awareness of the “virgin birth” narratives in Matthew and Luke. The use of the Greek verb γίνομαι as a quasi-passive voice expression of γεννάω is not unusual for the Greek of Paul’s day. Jesus as the incarnate God came into this world in human form. Later Paul will elaborate on this through the use of the Christus-Hymnus material in Phil. 2:5-11; cf. 2:5b-7a

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος)

born under Law

(γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον,)

In the second expansion, Paul affirms both Jesus’ Jewishness and his obligation to suffer from the law as key to redeeming folks out from under its curse (cf. 3:13-14). His objective for coming under the Law was to liberate folks enslaved under it. Thus



liberated, they would no longer need the tutelage of the Law as their guardian (παιδαγωγός); cf. 3:21-25.

3) God sent the Spirit of His son

[ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ] (v. 6). In this repetition of the subject and verb Paul inserts a different direct object.

God sent His son, but God also

sent the Spirit of His Son. The role of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s view was profound. In Gal. 5:16-26, he will elaborate in detail on this to the Galatians. Here he limits the expression to two expansion elements.

because you are sons

(Ὅτι ἐστε υἱοί)

Once we are adopted into God’s family, the Holy Spirit comes into our lives to bring the presence and power of Christ actively into our living. The Spirit’s coming is based on Christ’s coming and complements it. Our position as members of God’s family enables us to experience that divine presence.

into our hearts crying, Abba, Father

(εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν κρᾶζον· ἀββα ὁ πατήρ)

Now as sons of God we are privileged to know the Heavenly Father in the intimate way that the only begotten Son knows Him. Abba is the Aramaic expression roughly equivalent to our Dad, over against the more formal Father. The privilege attached to this permission is profound, and properly understood would never be abused.

In verse seven, Paul draws conclusions (ὥστε) based on his introductory illustration: “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (ὥστε οὐκέτι εἶ δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ). The Greek sentence follows a rhymatic flow from “not this but that, and since that also that 2.” And he shifts to a second person singular “you,” thus personalizing his pronouncement.

Each believer has moved in conversion from slave to son. And as son, heir of God. No matter our social status in this world, as a child of God we are rich beyond measure. Rich with the things that matter and will last through eternity. What a wonderful promise to every believer! As Paul asserted in 3:29, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” What God promised to Abraham, we inherit as those who belong to Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Even more astounding is Paul’s declaration in Rom. 8:16-17, “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact,

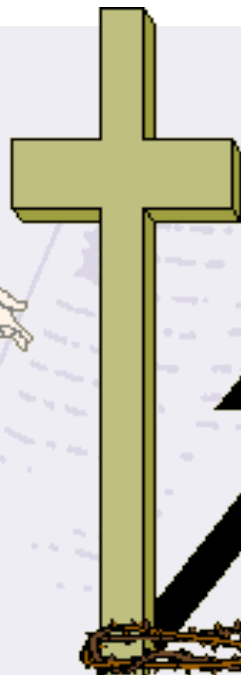


we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

Thus the apostle Paul passionately appealed to his initial Galatian readers to remain firmly committed to the apostolic gospel message that he had preached to them in the beginning. The Judaizing heretics had "cast an evil spell" over them in attempting to convince them that Christ alone wasn't enough for their salvation (3:1): "[You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!](#)" But Paul knew that the message given to him in divine revelation from Christ himself was their only hope of eternal life (1:6-7): "[I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.](#)" And so he sought to convince them of the correctness of their initial faith commitment and its adequacy for salvation, despite the efforts of those who were insisting that conversion to Judaism had to be a part of the salvation requirements as well.

Just this set of affirmations in 4:1-7 should be sufficient to convince anyone that Christ is fully capable of bringing a marvelously unique experience with God, and that such an experience comes only through self-surrendering faith in Christ. But as we discussed in the [Literary Context](#) section above, this passage is but one small part of a series of arguments that Paul set forth to the Galatians believers on the adequacy of the apostolic gospel.

For most of us as believers today this seems so simple. How could anyone deviate from the



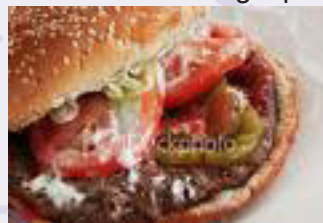
plain message of the Gospel about salvation? And yet? In our so-called enlightened world the voices of confusion and perversion of the Gospel are loud and influential. Some of those voices come from highly educated individuals whose intellect has become their god and gives them a false sense of superior understanding of the "gospel." They know more than God does! Radical theologians, such as [Thomas Altizer](#), over the past three centuries have taken a simple gospel message and reformulated it into religious non-sense.



Some of these voices come from highly uneducated [religious charlatans](#) who use the gospel for their own money-making purposes. Through a charismatic personality and quasi-hypnotic preaching skills, they make false claims of material prosperity with religious commitment. The gospel is twisted into a cult oriented loyalty to the preacher that opens its pocketbooks finance the material enrichment of the preacher in the vain hope that they will get wealthy off their religion as well.

Some of the voices make no pretense at being Christian. In their "broader view," elements of all religions are pulled together into a hodge podge of religious baloney with a "feel good" basis. They preach a "[new age](#)" of tolerance and believing in nothing as the "enlightened path" for the more astute of our day.

The great tragedy of all this is that we sinful human beings continue to refuse to accept the filet mignon spiritual steak that God offers us in the gospel of



Christ. Instead, we choose any old greasy hamburger that comes along, no matter how destructive it is to our spiritual health and destiny. The Judaizers of Paul's day were offering up their greasy hamburger. Paul pleaded with them to choose God's steak instead.

May we have enough sense to take God's offer as well!

Greek NT

1 Λέγω δέ, ἐφ' ὅσον χρόνον ὁ κληρονόμος νήπιός ἐστιν, οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου κύριος πάντων ὧν, 2 ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ οἰκονόμους ἄχρι τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρός. 3 οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὅτε ἦμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἦμεθα δεδουλωμένοι. 4 ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον, 5 ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ, ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν. 6 Ὅτι δὲ ἐστε υἱοί, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν κρᾶζον· ἀββα ὁ πατήρ. 7 ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰ δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ.

NASB

1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

NRSV

1 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; 2 but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. 3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

NLT

1 Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves great wealth for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. 2 They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. 3 And that's the way it was with us before Christ came. We were slaves to the spiritual powers of this world. 4 But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. 5 God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. 6 And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father. 7 Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you.

Greek NT Diagram

- 4:1 δὲ
1 λέγω,
ἐφ' ὅσον χρόνον ὁ κληρονόμοι νήπιόι ἐστιν,
οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου
κύριος πάντων ὧν,
- 4:2 ἀλλὰ
2 ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους
ἐστὶν
καὶ
οἰκονόμους
ἄχρι τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρός.
- 4:3 οὕτως
καὶ
ὅτε ἡμεν νήπιοι,
3 ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου
ἡμεῖς...ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι.
- 4:4 δὲ
4 ὅτε ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου,
ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ,
γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός,
γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον,
- 4:5 ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ,
ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν.
- 4:6 δὲ
5 Ὅτι ἐστε υἱοί,
ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ
εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν
κρᾶζον, Ἀββα ὁ πατήρ.
- 4:7 ὥστε
6 οὐκέτι εἰ δούλος
ἀλλὰ
7 (εἰ) υἱὸς.
δὲ
8 εἰ υἱὸς,
καὶ
κληρονόμος (εἰ)
διὰ θεοῦ.

Semantic Diagram

| | | | | | | | | | |
|------|--------|---|-----------|-------|------|-----|---|---|---------|
| I-- | A----- | 1 | δὲ | Pres | Act | Ind | 1 | S | (ἐγὼ) |
| | | 2 | αἰ 1 α; | Pres | --- | Ind | 3 | S | (αὐτὸς) |
| | | 3 | οὕτως καὶ | Pres | Pass | Ind | 1 | P | ἡμεῖς |
| II-- | A-- | 4 | δὲ | 1 Aor | Act | Ind | 3 | S | θεὸς |
| | | 5 | δὲ | 1 Aor | Act | Ind | 3 | S | θεὸς |
| | B-- | 6 | ὥστε | Pres | --- | Ind | 2 | S | (σου) |
| | | 7 | ἀλλὰ | (Pres | --- | Ind | 2 | S | (σου) |
| | | 8 | δὲ | (Pres | --- | Ind | 2 | S | (σου) |

Summary of Rhetorical Structure

The core thought structure of the passage is clear. Paul puts an illustration out of Roman family tradition on the table (statements #1-2; vv. 1-2) and then applies it theologically to Christian experience (#s 3-8; vv. 3-7). In the application two aspects are emphasized. First is the “coming of age” transition from minor to adult (#s 3-5) which is conversion based on Calvary. Second is the status consequence of this transition (#s 6-8). In this section he returns to the core point of his illustration: coming of age means moving from a slave to a son status.

The expansion elements of most all the core statements, especially in the application section of #s 3-8, provide the rich theological insight of this text.

Appendix 5:¹
STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF GALATIANS

| HEADING: | STATEMENT: | REFERENCE: |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| PRESCRIPTIO | | 1.1-5 |
| Superscriptio | | 1.1-2a |
| Adscriptio | | 1.2b |
| Salutatio | | 1.3-5 |
| PROPOSITIO (PROEM) | 1-7 | 1.6-10 |
| BODY | 8-192 | 1.11-6.10 |
| Narratio | 8-52 | 1.11-2.21 |
| Thesis | | 8-11 1.11-12 |
| Evidences | 12-52 | 1.13-2.21 |
| 1 Conversion | 12-16 | 1.13-17 |
| 2 1st Jerusalem Visit | 17-20 | 1.18-20 |
| 3 Return Home | 21-24 | 1.21-24 |
| 4 Later Jerusalem Visit | 25-35 | 2.1-10 |
| 5 Antioch Confrontation | 36-41 | 2.11-14 |
| Conclusion | 42-52 | 2.15-21 |
| Probatio | 53-139 | 3.1-4.31 |
| Conversion (1) | 53-59 | 3.1-5 |
| Abraham (2) | 60-69 | 3.6-14 |
| Law (3) | 70-78 | 3.15-18 |
| Excursus A | 79-89 | 3.19-25 |
| Baptism (4) | 90-104 | 3.26-4.7 |
| Experience (5) | 105-108 | 4.8-11 |
| Friendship (6) | 109-121 | 4.12-20 |
| Allegory (7) | 122-139 | 4.21-31 |
| Exhortatio | 140-191 | 5.1-6.10 |
| Admonition 1 | 140-159 | 5.1-12 |
| Admonition 2 | 160-173 | 5.13-24 |
| Admonition 3 | 174-191 | 5.25-6.10 |
| CONCLUSIO (ESCHOTOKOLL) | 192-204 | 6.11-18 |
| Seal | 192 | 6.11 |
| Synopsis | 193-201 | 6.12-16 |
| Request | 202-203 | 6.17 |
| Benediction | 204 | 6.18 |

¹Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, A Study Manual of Paul's Letter to the Galatians: English Text (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing, Inc., 1982), 159. All rights reserved.