

The Relation between Justification and Identity as Key to Evaluate the Radical New Perspective on Paul

Philip du Toit

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7353-9176>

- School of Christian Ministry and Leadership, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
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Abstract

According to prevalent approaches to the Pauline corpus, the concepts of justification and salvation are often interpreted as constituting a believer's legal and salvific status before God in distinction from such a person's ethnic identity. In the so-called Radical New Perspective on Paul, Judaeans believers in Christ are envisioned to keep their nomistic identity in distinction from gentile believers, which is then differentiated from their legal and salvific status before God. In this contribution, the relation between justification and identity is defined more closely in order to evaluate the tendency to distinguish between justification/salvation and identity. This is done especially by analysing texts in the Pauline corpus in which the concepts of justification, salvation and identity overlap.

Keywords: Justification; Identity; Ethnicity; Pauline Theology; Radical New Perspective on Paul; Paul within Judaism

Introduction

In his discussion on Paul's relationship to the Torah and his "Jewish" identity, John Collins (2017:172) argues that according to Paul, "Jews could continue to observe their traditional customs, but this would not 'justify' them before God or bring them to salvation". Collins thus interprets Paul as distinguishing between justification, which coheres with salvation, and (ethnic) identity. Another implication of Collins' interpretation is that in Pauline terms, full observance of the Torah only pertains to one's cultural identity and not to one's status before God. A similar approach is followed by proponents of the so-called Radical New Perspective on Paul (RNPP), also referred to as the Paul Within Judaism approach. In this approach, it is argued that according to Paul, Judaeans¹ followers of Christ, including Paul himself, should fully retain their Judaeans identity by adhering to all the stipulations of the Torah, including circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance, whereas gentile followers of Christ are advised not to fully observe the Torah but only adhere to a minimum set of requirements that are normally associated with the Apostolic Decree (Ac 15). In this interpretation, a fundamental distinction is thus drawn between Judaeans and gentile followers of Christ

¹ In order to hermeneutically differentiate between the first century Ἰουδαῖοι and contemporary Jews, the term "Judeans" is preferred (see Du Toit 2019:31–39).

with respect to their identity and their relationship with the Torah (e.g., Campbell 2008:89-93; Eisenbaum 2009:252; Fredriksen 2022; Nanos 2012:123-124; Tucker 2011:62-114). In this contribution, the relationship between justification and identity in the Pauline corpus in relation to the law is revisited. The main question that is asked in this article is whether a distinction between identity and justification is warranted in light of the Pauline discourse on justification and identity. A subsequent question that will be considered is how a distinction between identity and justification serves to evaluate the RNPP. Lastly, the idea that Paul's references to the law or the "works of the law" pertain to one's cultural identity will be reconsidered. The discussion of these questions will especially be done by probing passages in which the themes of justification, salvation and identity overlap.

Defining justification in Paul

Throughout history, the concept of justification or righteousness (*δικαιόω/δικαιοσύνη*) as it comes to the fore in the Pauline corpus, has been debated. In the Reformation versus Catholic debates, one of the main points of contention was whether justification was to be understood only as a forensic declaration of forgiveness by God or whether it also included a transformed life, which is normally associated with sanctification. The tendency among Reformers was to distinguish between justification and sanctification whereas the Catholics tended to merge the two ideas and envisioned a transformed life as part of justification.² On another level, it is debated whether righteousness or justification is essentially a divine quality or a human quality. In other words, does the "righteousness of God" (*δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*, see Rm 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22; 10:3; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9), for example, point to a divine attribute, to human righteousness, or a combination of these? (see Du Toit 2024b). In the so-called New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP), there has been a tendency to accentuate the social dimensions of justification, highlighting its horizontal dimensions rather than its vertical dimensions. According to N. T. Wright (2013:945, 961), for example, justification involves "that the social standing of the person within the community has been 'put right', sorted out, re-established", and that "[t]hose who are declared or accounted 'righteous' . . . constitute the single covenant family which the one God has faithfully given to Abraham". In this contribution, the intention is neither to flesh out all the intricacies of the concept of justification nor to formulate a final definition of what exactly it entails in the Pauline corpus. The two aspects that are relevant to the current discussion are the vertical and horizontal dimensions of justification. In other words, the focus of the discussion on justification is on how it affects one's relationship with God as well as with other people. Both of these aspects can be identified in the Pauline discourse (Rm 3:21–31; 6:6-8; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Gal 2:15–16, 20–21; 3:26–29; Phil 3:3–9, see Du Toit 2024a).

Defining identity in Paul

The idea of identity is more of a contemporary, Western concept than it is intrinsic to the first century. It is especially the application of social identity theories derived from the social sciences to biblical interpretation that has brought this concept into focus (see,

² For a good overview of the history of reflection on justification, see Beilby, Eddy and Enderlein (2011:13–82).

e.g., Campbell 2008; Esler 2003; Tucker & Baker 2014). Most of social identity theory revolves around group categorisation, in which the ingroup differentiates themselves from the outgroup (Esler 2014:14). In its application in the New Testament, discussions about identity mostly revolve around the various ethnic groups that are represented in the in-Christ identity. I have argued elsewhere that for someone in Christ, identity is a broader concept that involves more than one's relation with other people, that it involves also one's relation to God. In fact, in Pauline theological terms, a believer's relationship with God seems to be primary and determinative of his or her relationship with other people (Du Toit 2024a). In other words, identity can be understood as a complex set of interrelationships that define who a person is or perceives to be. In the Pauline corpus, identity can thus be understood as constituted by how a person relates to both God and other people groups. In terms of identity theory, a Christ-believer's relationship with other people can largely be explained by utilising social identity theories whereas a believer's relationship to God falls beyond the scope of social identity theories and has to be defined theologically. In what follows, the relationship between identity and justification in the Pauline corpus will be pursued with an eye on evaluating notions of differentiation between Judaeans and gentile believers in Christ, which are typically highlighted in the RNPP. The following passages will come under discussion: Romans 3:20–31; 6:6–8 (and Eph 4:22, 24); 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Galatians 2:15–21; 3:23–29 and Philippians 3:3–9.

The relationship between justification, salvation and identity

Romans 3:20–31

In Romans 3:20–31, the noun δικαιοσύνη occurs in verses 21, 22, 25 and 26, and the verb δικαιόω in verses 20, 24 and 26. In verses 20 and 28, Paul states that people will not be justified on the basis of the “works of the law” (ἔργων νόμου), but by faith. Although the tendency in the NPP was to interpret the “works of the law” as pointing to the Judaeans marks of identity such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance (e.g., Dunn 1988:153–160; Wright 2002:460–461), many NPP proponents now agree that in contexts such as Romans 3, in which the total depravity and sinfulness of all people are accentuated, the “works of the law” cannot be confined to the marks of identity or “ethnocentrism”, but point to the stipulations of the Torah in general, which includes the moral commandments by implication (e.g., Dunn 2009:475; see Moo 2018:216–220).³ The connection between justification, the “works of the law” and sin is especially clear in verse 20. After stating that by the “works of the law” no one will be justified, Paul adds: “for through the law [is] the knowledge of sin” (διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας). Here, the law in general is identified with the “works of the law” and the “works of the law” are associated with that which is *morally right in opposition to sin*. Instead of being justified by the (works of the) law, the knowledge of sin is obtained. Paul seems to imply that law-works, which are always imperfect, *cannot deal with sin itself or counter its effects*; they can only *reveal* sin. It further implies that justification, which is a divine act, indeed *deals with sin*. The idea that justified Judaeans believers could continue to adhere to all the works of the law, which would include specific marks of identity such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbaths, *in distinction*

³ Moo (2018:216–218) describes a shift in Dunn's view in this regard over the years.

from gentile believers, is at odds with the *close connection* between the “works of the law” and the knowledge of sin, as it is presented in this passage. In fact, justification precisely addresses the general inability of all people to adhere to the “works of the law”.

The notion that justification deals with sin also comes to the fore in the next verses. “Now” (νυνί, v. 21), in the new eschatological age in Christ (Esler 2003:156, 267; Longenecker 2016:402, 446, 449; Moo 2018:241–242), God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the law, the righteousness of God through faith in Christ (v. 22).⁴ In verse 22 to 23, Paul continues that “there is thus no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν διαστολή, πάντες γὰρ ἤμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ). God’s righteousness that has been revealed in Christ thus addresses the sin and total depravity of all human beings across the board. People are justified by God’s grace as a gift (v. 24). The notion of setting people right before God in respect of sin, which is inherent to the concept of justification, prompts many scholars to see justification as placing people in a right standing or relationship with God (e.g., Jewett 2006:280; Moo 2018:78, 248; Schreiner 2018:197). Yet, to be in a right relationship with God can also be described as involving one’s *renewed status or identity* before God (see Du Toit 2024a:5).

The notion of “no distinction” (οὐ διαστολή, v. 22) specifically lies on the level of identity. The idea of “no distinction” undoubtedly involves the equal inherent *social* value or status that Judaeans and non-Judaeans enjoy, an aspect that is clear from verse 27, where Paul suggests via rhetorical questions that God is the God of both Judaeans and gentiles.⁵ But the other noteworthy referent here is their relationship with God. Since the reality of sin and depravity primarily alienate people from God and result in condemnation (v. 8), justification reconciles people into an equal status before God. In other words, in justification people’s *identity* is restored relative to *God and other people*. Although social identity theories may accommodate the idea of people’s relationship with God, they do not account for a theological, supernaturalistic aspect as intrinsically being part of (the formation of) identity. They rather tend to see the totality of one’s identity as a social (human-made) construction. According to Paul’s logic, however, the two levels on which believers’ new found identity plays out, namely, their relationship to God and other people, are inextricably linked. In fact, in Pauline terms, a believer’s identity is not so much *socially negotiated* as it is *supernaturally endowed* (see Du Toit 2024a; cf. Lim 2014:299–300).

Romans 6:6–8 (and Ephesians 4:22, 24)

In Romans 6:6–8, the “old self” or “old person” (παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος) of believers is presented as being crucified with Christ to cause them not be enslaved to sin anymore (v. 6). In verse 7, the verb δικαίωω is used in relation to sin: such a person “has been justified from sin” (δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας). Similar to that of Romans 3:20, 24–

⁴ Although many NPP proponents see πίστεως ὁ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as the faith (fulness) of Christ (subjective genitive), mainly on the basis of the apparent redundancy of the phrase εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας that follows right after (e.g., Hays 2000:239–240; Wright 2013:838–39; Longenecker 2016:409–13), Paul never unambiguously assigns faith or faithfulness to Christ amidst many unambiguous references to human faith as human quality (objective genitive). “Faith in Christ” is thus the preferred reading (Moo 2018:244–246; Schreiner 2018b:190–194; Thielman 2018:204–05).

⁵ Similarly, in Romans 10:12, Paul indicates that there is no distinction (διαστολή) between Judaeans and Greeks, for the same Lord is Lord over all, bestowing riches on all who call upon him.

25, the idea that justification deals with sin is confirmed. As a result, people now believe that they will also live with Christ (v. 8). The “old self” that has been crucified with Christ is specifically on the level of identity. A person dies to an old existence (Schreiner 2018:316–317) and an *old identity* (Esler 2003:213).

Similar language is found in Ephesians 4:22 and 24⁶, in which believers are encouraged to “unclothe” (ἀποτίθημι) themselves⁷ of the “old self/person” (παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον, v. 22) and “clothe” (ἐνδύω) themselves with the “new self/person” (καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, v. 24; cf. also Gl 3:27; Col 3:9–10), created in God’s likeness “in true righteousness and holiness” (ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ ὁσιότητι τῆς ἀληθείας). Apart from the association of clothing with identity in society (cf. Matthews 2006:692–693; Neyrey & Stewart 2008:86), the connection between identity and righteousness is evident here. In Christ, believers lay down their *old identity* and take on a *new identity* (Esler 2003:213; Lincoln 1990:287). Earlier, in Ephesians 2:14–16, this new identity is pictured as “the one new person” (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον) that God created, in which “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν) has been abolished and the dividing wall of hostility between God and people has thereby been eradicated. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the focus is especially on laws that involve purity and separation from other nations (Myers 2012). The relationship between the abolishment of the law and the new identity that God bestows on believers can clearly be detected.

One is thus hard pressed to disassociate justification and believers’ salvific status with their social identity in Christ as such. The idea that Judaeon believers would continue to fully observe the law *in distinction from* gentile believers, would run contrary to the idea that the wall of hostility (the law) has been removed. Justification thus not only reconciles people with God, but also reconciles people with one another, which necessarily involves the removal of the dividing force of the law itself.

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

In 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, Paul’s statements about the newly created in-Christ identity are more about believers’ relationship with God than their relationship with other people, especially because of the references to people being reconciled (καταλλάσσω/καταλλαγῆ) to Christ and God (vv. 18–20). The “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) that Christ became for believers is framed within the idea that Christ “became sin” (ἀμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν) for believers’ sake, even though he knew no sin (v. 21). The connection between righteousness and sin is again confirmed. The notion that God “reconciled the world to himself” (κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ) signifies a corporate dimension to the new identity, which implies that those being reconciled are also being reconciled to one another. The corporate dimension of the new status in Christ is also conveyed by the idea that believers no longer “regard/know no one according to the flesh” (οὐδένα οἶδαμεν κατὰ σάρκα) (v. 16). It is unclear what σάρξ is referring to in

⁶ Although the affirmation of Pauline authorship is not crucial for the argument at hand, it can be noted that there has been a bit of a resurgence in the affirmation of the letter’s authenticity (e.g., Baugh 2016; Köstenberger, Kellum & Quarles 2016; Bock 2019; Wright and Bird 2019). Even if Ephesians is considered as emanating from a Pauline school, its inclusion here is arguably warranted.

⁷ The reflexive nature of the metaphor is especially indicated by the medium form in which the clothing metaphors occur in the Pauline corpus (see Wallace 1996:415–416). See also Gal 3:27.

this context. According to Bauer et al. (2021:814, §5), it points to “a human point of view”. For Guthrie (2015:306) and Harris (2005:426), it involves knowledge “from a worldly perspective”. Knowing “according to the flesh” thus has to do with a natural or human way of knowing or judging others, which arguably includes “fleshly” discrimination between different people groups such as Judaeans and Greeks on the basis of their ethnicity or cultural heritage.

Galatians 2:15–21

In Galatians 2:15–21, Paul uses the first-person plural (“we”) and thereby includes himself in being a Judaeans by “birth” (φύσις, v. 15, Bauer et al. 2021:951, §1), arguing that in spite of such a heritage, people are not justified by the “works of the law” but through faith in Christ (v. 16).⁸ He specifically states that “we also have believed in Christ Jesus” (καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν) in order to be justified (v. 16). In verses 17 to 18, Paul rhetorically contrasts justification in Christ with being found to be sinners (v. 17). The link between justification and sin is yet again established. He continues that if he rebuilds what he has torn down, presumably referring to the law (Moo 2013:166), he would be found a transgressor (v. 18). But then, in verse 19, he states that through the law he has died to the law so that he might live to God. It is noteworthy that Paul here synonymises the “works of the law” (v. 16, cf. Moo 2013:158) with the law in general (v. 19). With Paul’s general reference to the law (v. 19) and the contrast of justification with *sin* (vv. 17–18), it is reasonably clear that the *moral law is included* in his reference to the “works of the law”.

Paul then continues with pertinent statements about his new identity (Hays 2000:244), reasoning that he has been crucified with Christ and that it is no longer he that lives but Christ who lives in him (v. 20). He further states that the life that he now lives “in the flesh” (ἐν σαρκί), which here refers to natural, bodily life (Moo 2013:171; cf. Das 2014:271; Keener 2019:196), he lives by faith in the Son of God. By implication, Paul’s identity is now solely defined in reference to Christ. Rather than merely continuing his Judaeans way of life and adding faith in Christ to the equation, he perceives himself to have completely died to the law and to have been justified through faith in Christ only. The fact that he is a Judaeans by birth thus does not contribute anything to his new identity. The idea that Paul would continue to mark off his identity by observing the whole law, including circumcision, food-laws and Sabbaths, in distinction from gentiles, would run contrary to the whole point he is trying to make in this passage (cf. Das 2014:270; Hays 2000:244).

Galatians 3:23–29

In Galatians 3:23–29, Paul presents the law as a temporal guardian or pedagogue (παιδαγωγός, vv. 24, 25) until Christ came, in whom believers are justified (δικαιώω) by faith (v. 24). Faith is presented as a new principle of justification that “came” (ἔλθεῖν, v. 23; ἐλθούσης, v. 25) eschatologically, succeeding the era under the law (cf. Moo 2013:241). All people, regardless of ethnic or cultural heritage are now “sons of God”

⁸ The phrase πίστewος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ has been the source of much dispute. While many NPP proponents see the phrase as pointing to Christ’s faith(fulness) and thus read it as a subjective genitive, taking it as an objective genitive is preferable, especially in Paul’s pertinent reference to human believing (see Moo 2013:160–161 for a fairly comprehensive discussion).

(*ὑποὶ θεοῦ*) through faith (v. 26). In other words, Paul seems to argue that faith has become the new means of justification, which has been inaugurated with Christ (Du Toit 2018). In verse 27, Paul uses the clothing metaphor. Apart from the notion of identity that is inherent to the clothing metaphor, it describes the way in which the *new identity* in Christ has been taken on (Das 2014:388; De Boer 2011:243; Jervis 1999:106; Keener 2019:294–296; Martyn 1997:374): believers have “clothed themselves”⁹ with Christ. Christ himself is being put on in baptism, which means that the new in-Christ identity is defined by Christ himself and that he is the *sole point of reference* for this new identity. Then, in verse 28, the construction οὐκ ἔνι (“there is no”) is used repetitively to *denounce the constitutive value* of the various social and ethnic identities (Judaean, Greek, slave, free, male, female) within the in-Christ identity. In other words, these natural, human identities became irrelevant in demarcating the new identity in Christ (Du Toit 2018). In fact, in verse 29, Paul implies that *only if you are in Christ* can you claim being offspring of Abraham and inheritors of the promise (cf. De Boer 2011:247–248). According to DeSilva (2018:339) “the differentiating marks that belong to the prebaptismal self no longer appear or have value”. He further associates the “elementary principles of the world” (Gl 4:3, 9) with “lines of differentiation to serve as barriers to and boundaries on human interaction and potential” (DeSilva 2018:339). By implication, in Pauline terms, identity is now solely demarcated by *divine* action in contrast to (fallible) *human* possibility.

While the various social and ethnic identities are not presented as constitutive of the new identity in Christ, it does not mean that Paul denied these differences either (cf. Das 2014:388; Keener 2018:311). While he probably challenged social stratification (Keener 2018:311), he also practiced leniency in terms of different cultural traditions, which can especially be detected in his treatment of cultural perceptions of certain foods in Romans 14. Yet, cultural and societal elements are not presented as contributing to the demarcation of the in-Christ identity as such. It could be asked, however, if things like circumcision and even food-laws could totally be separated from one’s identity in Christ or if everything cultural can be seen as spiritually neutral. These questions will be addressed shortly.

Philippians 3:3–9

In Philippians 3:3–9, Paul makes the statement the “we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory/boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3). Bauer et al. (2021:814, §5) interpret ἐν σαρκί (“in the flesh”, vv. 3, 4) as “earthly things or physical advantages”. As a specific identity marker of Judaeans, Paul recasts the concept of circumcision within another, figurative or spiritual context. In doing so, Paul both denies the constitutive value of “fleshly” circumcision within the new identity in Christ and pictures the new identity as being based on “non-fleshly” identity markers such as worshiping by God’s Spirit and boasting in Christ (cf. Holloway 2017:154; Hansen 2009:220–222). He then elaborates on what he considers to be constituting these “fleshly” identity markers, which also include certain accomplishments that are considered Judaeans (Holloway 2017:158): being circumcised, being of the people of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a

⁹ The medium form of the verb is used here too.

Pharisee according to the law, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church and as to righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) in/under the law, blameless (vv. 5–6). All of these identity markers and accomplishments pertain to Paul’s identity as a Judaeen, before he came to the knowledge of Christ (cf. Keown 2017:118). However, he now considers all of these as a loss (ζημία, vv. 7, 8) and even as rubbish/excrement (σκύβαλον, v. 8) in light of Christ, who became everything for him (vv. 7-8). He states that he is now “found in him” (εὑρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ), not having a righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) of his own that is derived from the law but that comes through faith in Christ (v. 9). The implication is that righteousness derived from the law (v. 6) was indeed based on his own human (“fleshly”) effort.

For Paul, Christ and the righteousness found in him have become the sole constituting markers of identity, whereas his earlier credentials have become redundant (cf. Keown 2017:116), and if the pejorative terms are considered, even as seeming to count against his identity in Christ. The righteousness that Paul now has in Christ thus directly pertains to his new identity, which he formulates *in distinction* from his former Judaeen identity markers and accomplishments. The righteousness in Christ also involves a right relationship with God (Fee 1995:324). The idea that Paul would envision believers to retain their Judaeen identity markers, including circumcision, alongside belief in Christ and reliance on God’s righteousness would run contrary to the thrust of his argument here, for that would mean that the “fleshly” markers of identity would continue to have relevance in marking off identity and could not be considered as a loss.

Do the Judaeen marks of identity pertain only to cultural or ethnic identity?

An important question to ask at this point is whether the unique marks of the Judaeen identity such as circumcision, food-laws and Sabbath observance pertain only to cultural or ethnic identity or if they also pertain to spiritual identity, the covenant and/or (righteous) status before God. For if these identity markers are merely cultural in nature and have no spiritual or theological value, then it would be conceivable that one can fully retain one’s ethnic and cultural identity amidst being a believer in Christ while relying on God’s righteousness in Christ for salvation, which seems to be Collins’ (2017:172) line of argument. Another related question that can be asked is whether in Pauline terms, everything that pertains to culture can be seen as spiritually or morally neutral, or whether some cultural practices are in tension with the in-Christ identity.

Regarding circumcision, which can be considered as the main mark of Judaeen identity, an important Pauline notion is that circumcision positions one under the law and requires one to observe the whole law. This notion is particularly clear in Galatians 5:2–3 in which Paul argues that if “you” (ὁμῖν) accept circumcision, Christ is of no advantage to “you” (ὁμᾶς, v. 2). In verse 3, he switches to more general terms, stating that “every person” (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ) who accepts circumcision is under the obligation (ὀφειλέτης) to keep the whole law (see also Gl 6:13). Pointedly, in verse 4, he continues that whosoever would (want/attempt to) be justified by the law (οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε) is severed (καταργέω) from Christ. Apart from juxtaposing justification by law and justification by grace (Das 2014:526), Paul *links* circumcision itself with an attempt to be *justified* by observing the law. Since Paul writes to a predominantly gentile audience, he probably primarily reacts against the demand that his opponents would lay

on the gentiles to circumcise, but it is likely that Paul indeed has “every person” in mind, including Judaeans (v. 3).

Under some Judaeans there existed the perception that circumcision itself was a passport to salvation (Barrett 1991:55), or at least necessary for a place in the world to come (Keener 2019:446). According to Paul’s logic here, circumcision cannot be disassociated from justification itself, unless Paul intends to argue that if gentiles want to circumcise themselves it would be an attempt at justification whereas if Judaeans would circumcise it would not. But such an idea is highly unlikely in view of the general terms in which Paul casts this scenario with his reference to “every person” in verse 3, as well as the two contradictory meanings that it would lend to circumcision itself. But more importantly, within the context of the letter to the Galatians, Paul consistently includes himself as a Judaeans believer within his discourse by using the first-person plural “we” in reference to justification apart from the law (see esp. Gl 3:13, 23–25; 4:2, 4, 5; 5:1, 5). As discussed already, in 2:17–21, Paul specifically includes himself as Judaeans by birth, and also as having to come to faith in order to be justified. To imply that *different conditions would apply for justification* for Judaeans and gentile believers, which involves circumcision, would go against the grain of Paul’s arguments about justification by faith only, as well as his statements about the equality of social and ethnic identities in Christ in 3:28. Rather, the close relationship of circumcision with the observance of the whole law and justification point in the direction of circumcision not merely belonging to the domain of the cultural or ethnic.¹⁰

The notion that circumcision obliges one to adhere to the whole law is also present in Romans 2:25–29. In a separate discussion, I have argued that the whole of Romans 2:25–29 can be interpreted within the sphere of the Judaeans identity, for even the circumcision of the heart of verse 29 can be linked to actual adherence to the law, and by implication to the ideal under the old covenant to be inwardly capable to fully observe the law.¹¹ According to Paul’s reasoning here, especially in verse 2:13, full observance of the law would be the requirement for a circumcised person in order to be justified. This, in turn, creates a plight, for no one can perfectly adhere to the law, and all people are inherently sinful (Rm 3:9–20), necessitating the revelation of justification by faith in the new era in Christ (Rm 3:21–30, Du Toit 2019:60–63).

According to Romans 4:11, Paul argues for circumcision to be a sign and seal of Abrahams’ righteousness, which he received on the basis of his faith while he was still uncircumcised. Abraham’s faith is presented as the means by which his righteousness is secured, not circumcision itself. Abraham’s circumcision was merely an outward sign that confirmed the inward reality of Paul’s faith and righteousness (cf. Moo 2018:294; Schreiner 2018:233–235). Essentially, Paul thus “relativizes the importance of circumcision” (Schriener 2018:234). In Paul’s reasoning, other than what might be a connotation that some Judaeans might attach to circumcision, circumcision itself could not secure or even contribute to justification itself. It can be asked, however, how this perspective on circumcision relates to the notion in Paul that circumcision obliges one to adhere to the whole law, as already discussed. To relate these different notions about

¹⁰ I have contested the idea of ethnic reasoning in Paul elsewhere (see Du Toit 2020).

¹¹ Such a connection can be derived from texts in the OT that concern the circumcision of the heart (Lev 26:41; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jr 4:4; 9:13–14, 25–26).

the meaning of circumcision to one another, it has to be noted that Paul has different rhetorical objectives in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. In Romans 4, Paul presents circumcision as a seal of Abraham's faith-based righteousness in order to picture him as the father of and as paradigmatic of both Judaeans and Gentiles who believe in Christ (see Du Toit 2019:77–86). Since Paul in Galatians 3 argues that the law was added later (Gl 3:17), he seems to imply that circumcision became part of the law itself (Gl 3:2–5),¹² which was added because of the people's transgressions (Gl 3:19) and thus called people to a law-abiding life. In his reasoning in Galatians 3, the law served as a guardian that imprisoned the people until faith "came" (Gl 3:23–25). By implication, when faith "came", people were relieved from the "slavery" that the law brought about (Gl 4). If the rhetorical contexts of both Romans 4 and Galatians 3 are accounted for, it can be inferred that in Paul's logic, although circumcision was originally given to Abraham as a seal of his faith unto righteousness, it later became part of the law and placed people under the obligation to fulfill the whole law in order to be justified, which in turn necessitated the revelation of God's righteousness in Christ (Rm 3). Other theological or covenantal connotations that Paul attaches to circumcision include the idea that God's oracles are entrusted to circumcised persons (Rm 3:1), and that it confirms God's truthfulness and confirms the promises to the patriarchs (Rm 15:8). The idea that circumcision itself would be understood as representing the covenant to Abraham, as stated in Acts 7:8, can be understood in the same vein.¹³

With respect to food purity laws, Paul specifically addresses them in Romans 14, in which he presents those who do not want to eat everything as "weak" (vv. 1–2). Yet, Paul does not condemn these people and advises leniency in the congregation with respect to convictions about food. The "strong" (15:1) would be those who are informed by faith in Christ, in which, as Paul clearly states, *everything is considered as pure* (14:14, 20), which follows Jesus' teachings (Mk. 7:15–23; Mt. 15:11–20; Moo 2018:869) or Peter's vision about the sheet with various kinds of animals, reptiles and birds that are now considered pure (Ac 10:15; 11:9; Middendorf 2016:1420), which in turn implies that there is no distinction in terms of purity between Judaeans and gentiles (Ac 11:18). The original context in which the food purity laws were given is significant. God wanted the people of Israel to be holy and separated from other nations, as God is holy. Before the specific food laws are listed in Leviticus 11:2–47, in Leviticus 10:3, we read that Moses addressed Aaron, saying that the Lord will be sanctified and glorified before all people. In 10:10, the people are instructed to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the clean and the unclean. And then in 11:44, the motivation behind the purity laws is provided: God says: "I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy". Even more to the point, in Leviticus 20:25–26, after instructing the people to separate the clean from the unclean, God's words are presented as follows: "You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have *separated you from the other peoples* to be mine" (v. 25, NRSV, emphasis added).

¹² This notion can be derived from Paul's contrast between beginning in the Spirit and ending up in perfection of the "flesh" (v. 3), which hints at circumcision itself (cf. De Boer 2011:179–180; Martyn 1997:290–294) and is associated with the "works of the law" (vv. 2, 5).

¹³ I have argued that even 1 Corinthians 7:19 can be understood as a passing reference to the notion that circumcision requires one to keep the whole law under the old covenant, rather than pointing to the idea that Judaeans should still keep the whole law in distinction from gentile believers (Du Toit 2015).

Similarly, right before a similar list of food purity laws in Deuteronomy 14:4–20, we read the words: “you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has *chosen out of all the peoples on earth* to be his people, his treasured possession” (v. 2., NRSV). The original motivation for the food laws is thus theological and not merely cultural. The idea that Judaeans believers should perpetuate the food purity laws in distinction from gentiles, as is implied in the RNPP, would imply that they would remain separated from other people before God, at least in terms of the original intention behind the food laws, which would again go against the grain of the way in which Paul maintains that there is no distinction between Judaeans and gentiles in light of the Christ event (Rm 3:22; 10:12).

References or allusions to Sabbath-keeping are less pronounced in the Pauline corpus. In Galatians 4:10, there is a reference to the Galatians keeping days, months, seasons and years, which, arguably includes both pagan days and Judaeans days such as feasts, new moons and Sabbaths as counting among the elementary principles (DeSilva 2018:366–367; Keener 2019:364).¹⁴ Paul contemplates that he has laboured in vain, implying that the congregants are still too much under the influence of his Torah-orientated opponents. Within Paul’s discussion of food purity laws, in Romans 14:5, he includes the notion of considering one day more important than another, implying that Judaeans believers might still want to observe the Sabbath, among observing other holy days (Moo 2018:859; Schreiner 2018:694). Colossians 2:16–17 should also be considered here,¹⁵ which specifically mentions the Sabbath as forming part of a shadow of things to come. The Sabbath itself can also be considered as an identity marker and as a sign that indicates separation of God’s people from other nations and as dedicating themselves to the Lord (Ex 31:13–14; Ezek 20:12, 20), and thus not as a mere cultural or ethnic marker. It had deep theological significance. The underlying idea in Paul is arguably that Sabbath-keeping, as is the case with circumcision and food purity laws, forms part of that which belongs to the *eschatologically old era* under the law in which God’s people were confined to the nation of Israel in distinction from other nations. Now, in Christ, there is no distinction between nations, and God’s people are no longer under the law. It is thus not so much the case that Paul is rejecting these practices *per se* or questions their original inherent value, but rather that he understands them as belonging to an old era under the law, which was completed in Christ. Paul’s reaction against his opponents is thus related to the *eschatological tension* in which continued practices such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbaths stand with his understanding of the gospel. In other words, continued adherence to these practices impinges on the all-sufficient work of Christ and unavoidably carry along with them covenantal connotations about justification that have become obsolete in Christ. Given the theological and covenantal connotations to circumcision, food purity laws and Sabbath-observance, if Judaeans believers could perpetuate circumcision, food purity laws and Sabbath-observance in distinction from gentiles, it would inevitably imply that God entertains *two separate and eschatologically conflicting sets of covenantal conditions or laws that are definitive in*

¹⁴ Keener (2019:364) draws attention in this regard to the book of *Jubilees* 1:10; 23:19, in which festivals, new moons, Sabbaths and Jubilees would exemplify the violation of God’s commandments.

¹⁵ Recent interpreters that see Colossians as authentic include McKnight (2018), Beale (2019), Wright and Bird (2019).

determining one's status before God for Judaeans and gentile believers, which would go against the very core of Paul's gospel.

Regarding the question if everything that pertains to culture is morally or spiritually neutral, it can be noted that gentiles could not merely perpetuate all of their cultural practices and thus maintain their full former identity. Heathen practices such as idolatry, sorcery and sexual immorality at feasts were part of their culture, but according to Paul, these had to cease in Christ (e.g. Rm 1:23; Gl 5:19; 1 Cor 5:1; 1 Cor 6:12–20). Cultural practices such as eating meat that had been offered to idols could be retained under certain circumstances, especially if no enquiry is made to its origin and if it would not offend fellow believers (1 Cor 8). But if any cultural practice would impinge on the moral and ethical values that are exemplified by living through the Spirit, they had to cease in Christ. There are no clear-cut lines of demarcation or set-out principles in the Pauline corpus of which cultural practices are considered morally or ethically neutral versus those that are not. We have to read between the lines in order to attempt to construe such lines of demarcation. In terms of Paul's discourse, there seems to be an overlap between mere cultural practices that are morally or ethically neutral and cultural practices that are not. At the very least, with respect to gentile believers, it can be derived from Paul's argumentation that not everything that pertains to culture could be regarded as morally or spiritually neutral. That might in fact have been true for Judaeans too if they retained cultural elements that had been adopted via pagan influence under exile.

Conclusion

The idea that the laws that pertain to the unique Judaeans identity such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath, could be disassociated from justification itself, runs contrary to Paul's lines of argumentation about justification by faith. In Pauline terms, there exists an intricate relationship between the "works of the law", the whole law, sin and justification (esp. Rm 3:20–31; Gl 2:15–21; Phil 3:3–9). Although the unique Judaeans identity markers are often implied under the term "works of the law", they are not presented in isolation from *the whole law*, which also includes the moral commandments. Paul's juxtaposition between the "works of the law" and justification thus implies that reliance on any law in claiming justification or a right relationship with God would go against the principle of justification by faith only. The way in which Paul presents the "works of the law", which is used interchangeably with general references to the law, in relation to *sin*, further implies that the (works of the) law cannot be confined to the markers of identity but includes moral demands, for sin itself stands in contrast to that which is morally right.

In the Pauline corpus, the new identity in Christ is presented as a divine act that brings one into a right relationship with God and other people, implying that God's righteousness, which is embodied in the *in-Christ identity*, consists of both vertical and horizontal dimensions. On a vertical level, the new identity involves being put right with God. On a horizontal level, God's righteousness involves removing the wall of hostility, the law, which constituted a distinction between Judaeans and gentile. A scenario in which the law or part of the law would still be in place, such as is argued in the RNPP, would *perpetuate a distinction* of sorts between Judaeans and gentile believers.

Paul rather portrays the identity in Christ as being based on *God's righteousness and trust in Christ only* and in fact seems to *contrast* the in-Christ identity with the unique

Judaean identity markers such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance (esp. Phil 3). These identity markers are not presented as merely belonging to someone's cultural identity, but as being in a close theological relationship with God's covenant with his people. They especially point to God having chosen a specific nation to be holy and separate from other nations. Further, circumcision itself cannot be disassociated from justification itself, or at least the desire to be justified, and neither can it be separated from adherence to the whole law, which in itself is presented as a means of justification under the old covenant (Rm 2:13), which necessitated the revelation of God's righteousness in Christ (Rm 3:20–31). To imply that the unique Judaean identity markers should be perpetuated for Judaean believers in distinction from gentiles would imply that God entertains two separate sets of conditions for identity and even justification, which would go against the core of Paul's gospel. In Pauline terms, Judaeans could not merely continue to observe their traditional marks of identity, especially circumcision, for circumcision obliges one to adhere to the whole law, including the moral law, which in turn is inextricably linked with justification itself. Judaean believers' "traditional customs" can thus not be disassociated from justification (and salvation) itself, as Collins (2017:172) argues. This does not imply that Paul does not acknowledge cultural or ethnic identities any more, but in light of the new eschatological reality in Christ in which justification is solely constituted by faith in Christ, he relativises these identities in that he presents them as no longer having any constitutive value in demarcating covenant identity. While Paul acknowledges his heritage as a "Judaean by birth" (Gl 2:15), the way in which he theologically portrays the new identity in Christ suggests that he no longer sees his Judaean heritage as constitutive of his or his fellow Judaean believers' new identity in Christ. Neither does Paul portray the observance of circumcision, food laws or Sabbaths as constitutive of the new identity in Christ but rather as unnecessary and as belonging to an old era under the law and thus as obsolete in defining or contributing to one's righteous status before God. While Paul still acknowledges Judaean ethnicity or cultural identity to some extent, although he does not pertinently advise Judaean practices to cease, he does not encourage them either. Since Paul no longer sees himself as being under the law (1 Cor 9:20) or under the old era (Rm 7:5–6; 2 Cor 3:7; Gl 4:3–6), he arguably no longer adheres to these practices himself either, unless he deems them necessary in order to "win" people for the gospel (1 Cor 9:19–23).

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